

A
CLOSERLOOK

ANALYZING THE NEWS THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

NATIONAL & WORLD NEWS

BY YOSSI KRAUSZ



The State of Hezbollah, After the Explosion

LEBANON TRIES TO PUT ITSELF
BACK TOGETHER—AGAIN



There's nothing like a massive explosion to make political change necessary. That may be the motto of Lebanon, a country in which massive explosions are often an intentional way of effecting political change.

But the recent explosion in Beirut, which left much of the city in shambles, was an unintentional blow to the government and has caused several weeks of political turmoil. The old government stepped down, and it was only announced this weekend that the new prime minister may be the current ambassador to Germany, Mustapha Adib, who received the support of four previous prime ministers and senior Sunni clerics.

In every discussion of Lebanese politics, the position of Hezbollah—which functions as a political party, a terrorist group, and an army—has to be reckoned with. In a speech on Sunday, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said that his group would support a government that would put

in reforms and improve the economic situation of the country.

The financial crisis in the country has put successive governments on the defensive, but Hezbollah is feeling pressure because of more than just money problems. They are being blamed for the stockpiling of chemicals that led to the Beirut explosion.

How has that affected Hezbollah? That question might be of importance to Israel, which has had an elevated level of conflict on its northern border recently. A group of Hezbollah fighters attempted to infiltrate northern Israel last month, and this month Hezbollah claimed that it shot down an Israeli drone that had crossed over the border. The Israelis retaliated in those cases. Do the political problems that Hezbollah is having mean that it will turn its focus away from the border?

To understand how the aftermath of the explosion has affected Hezbollah's power in Lebanon, we spoke with two experts on the region.



YORAM SCHWEITZER

SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AT INSS AND THE HEAD OF THE INSS PROGRAM ON TERRORISM AND LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

Have you seen any change in Hezbollah's military capability due to the political upheaval after this disaster?

No, I don't think it has affected them directly. The problem for Hezbollah is that it is struggling in a context of Lebanese military, political and economic crises. The explosion in Beirut added another blow to the economic and political crisis of

Lebanon. It didn't affect Hezbollah's capabilities.

It removed the immediacy of Hezbollah's determination to respond to what it sees as Israel's violation of the power equation that it tried to impose on Israel, including the deaths of combatants in Syria. But beyond the tactical hurdle—that it was not logical to respond promptly to Israel after it failed the first time [in the recent border clash]—nothing changed.

It just emphasized the need of Hezbollah to focus more on the internal issues in Lebanon.

And if you look at [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah's speech today, he basically admitted it. He said, "We are still determined to retaliate against Israel, to maintain the new enlarged deterrent equation," but he said that Hezbollah will do it at its own time.

Even before the explosion in the port, Nasrallah said that Hezbollah was viewing the internal crises in Lebanon as its major challenge, and the issues of the border were on the margins. They were important but not acute. Now he'll take his time and do what he wants to do in the future, when the time arises.

Is Hezbollah vulnerable at all when there are political upheavals?

I think that their main strengths are the weaknesses of their opponents. That's the main issue. There is no organized, relatively well-funded, well-consolidated opposition with a steady constituency like Hezbollah—which has the backing of Iran, of course, and Syria.

The weakness of its adversaries and the diversity and lack of leadership among its adversaries, I think, explain the arrogance and smugness of Nasrallah, because he knows that there is no one to take a dominant position in the next government.

Is there anything you're looking for in regard to the future of Hezbollah's behavior?

I think that Israel has to be very prudent not to pay the price that Hezbollah is looking for. And I think that Israel should realize that Nasrallah is not very sharp. He is not very realistic in understanding the capabilities of Israel to retaliate very harshly towards him.

I think that Nasrallah is misunderstanding the Israeli determination to maintain the balance of power in contradiction to what Hezbollah is aiming for. And I think that Hezbollah did not get the message of the Israeli reaction to the Hezbollah team that almost penetrated Israel's border to attack the military post. Israel sent a signal, but it was not interested in igniting the border. But Nasrallah didn't understand the Israeli determination not to allow any attack on soldiers or the *kibbutzim*.

The signals were meant to pacify the situation. But this may have led to ambiguity if Hezbollah did not understand that, and maybe the Israeli policy should be more clear and more understandable, rather than ambiguous.

I think that despite the fact that Nasrallah thinks he understands Israel and Israelis, he may have interpreted them in the wrong way. He doesn't understand signals. And this may lead to an escalation, based on what he is saying.

"Israel has to be very prudent not to pay the price that Hezbollah is looking for."



PROF. EFRAIM INBAR

PRESIDENT OF THE JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGY AND SECURITY

How is Hezbollah's situation, militarily or politically, after this explosion?

They are under pressure, because they are being blamed for the explosion in the port. But they were never popular among Christians and Sunnis, so the situation has not really changed. It does not affect their power.

Are they vulnerable?

They are vulnerable, because the country is under major economic stress, and they are part of the government. But they have the guns. They have a stronger military than the Lebanese government. So they can suppress any opposition if they want to, by force.

Does political instability change anything for them militarily?

They get their money from Iran, of course. Although Iran has lowered their subsidy because of their own economic problems. And Hezbollah still gets money from smuggling and other such activities.

Are they focusing back on Lebanon rather than looking at Israel?

They have an open account on Israel, and they don't like Israel. So border tensions are going to continue. And in some ways that conflict helps draw attention away from domestic problems. They're hoping that some attention will be diverted from the domestic problems.

You cannot really satisfy them. There will be oscillating levels of tension. ●