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The Cold Front



The Lebanese live on the edge. They expect war all the time, whether it spills over from Syria, or is provoked by a strike on Iran, or

is predicated by hot tempers reaching a boiling point and Sunnis and Shiites take their fight to the streets. One front, however, looks colder than usual. For the first time in decades, Lebanon's southern border is quiet, and neither Hezbollah nor Israel are interested in escalation.

UNSC Resolution 1701, which ended the war and now governs the peace, is flimsy on paper, but has proven durable on the ground, giving the region its second-longest stretch of calm with since the creation of Israel. Tel Aviv, therefore, has no interest in launching war against Hezbollah, preemptive or otherwise.

So for war to breakout, Hezbollah will have to open fire first, and many believe that because Hezbollah's decisions are inspired by its patrons in Tehran, it will only go to war when it is instructed to. But even for a regional proxy like Hezbollah, all politics is local.

In Lebanon, the Shiites support Hezbollah, but not unconditionally. The 2006 war jeopardized Hezbollah's standing among the Shiites who saw their villages razed. Iran came to Hezbollah's rescue by shipping bags of cash that were doled out to hard-hit families and individuals.

During the 14 weeks that followed the end of the war, Hezbollah tried to contain Shiite anger by dispersing cash. But Shiite frustration proved insurmountable even with Iran's petrodollars.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah thus understood that while most of his supporters were blindly following for benefits, the majority of Shiites were not particularly dedicated to liberating Palestine, historically a Sunni issue that Iran's Ruhollah Khomeini tried to exploit in order to spread his revolution to Sunni Arab countries.

Yet despite Khomeini's efforts, there is nothing Shiite about Palestine; no Shiite imams or their families ever set foot or are buried there, unlike in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Lebanon. Even the third-holiest site in Islam, Jerusalem's Omar's Mosque, carries a name the Shiites abhor and never give to their children.

Without links to Palestine and with the 2006 inferno, the Shiites found it counterintuitive to keep fighting Israel, a lesson that was not lost on Hezbollah.

During the 2006 war, an embattled Nasrallah became all-encompassing in his speeches, especially as Shiites took refuge in non-Shiite neighborhoods. His allies praised Sunni Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, calling his government a "resistance cabinet" for its

diplomatic role in shaping 1701.

But after the war, the Shiites had a change of heart, and Hezbollah had to follow.

In December, Hezbollah started a sit-in in downtown Beirut demanding Siniora's resignation, blaming him for the ills that had befallen the Shiites during the war and condemning what they called the corrupt and deliberately slow relief and reconstruction efforts. Hezbollah was looking for a scapegoat, and the Sunnis fit the bill in a way that resonated with the majority of the Shiites.

Until then, Lebanon's Sunnis had accused Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad of killing their leader Rafiq Hariri in 2005. But with the rise of Shiite anti-Sunnism, Hezbollah displaced the Assad regime as the Sunni's number one enemy.

Hezbollah's transformation from 'anti-Israel' to 'anti-Sunni' was complete, with the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011.

Even though Nasrallah argued that his support for Assad was because of the latter's alignment with the 'resistance axis,' Nasrallah never explained why the Shiite militia in Syria was called the Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas brigade, a reference to Imam Hussain's half-brother who was killed with him in Karbala in 680. If Hezbollah was fighting in Syria for resistance reasons, then why not call its fighting force after someone who had died fighting Israel, not the Sunnis?

Meanwhile from a logistics perspective, the Syrian conflict has strained Hezbollah resources to the extent that it makes sense for Nasrallah to favor extending the freeze on his southern border.

But Hezbollah's transformation does not mean it has given up on fighting Israel, only it won't be fighting Israel the 'Palestine usurper,' but Israel the partner in America's 'World Oppressors Inc,' which Iran and Hezbollah have been dedicated to fighting since 1979.

As such, Hezbollah's conflict with Israel is being transformed from direct confrontation to clandestine operations. The Borgas bombing and Hezbollah's foiled attempts in Cyprus, among other less-publicized attempts, are only the beginning.

Hezbollah's international network is not as formidable as its militia. But if history is any guide, the party learns fast. It might soon cultivate assets and form cells, around the world, to be used for attacks in due time.

Should such attacks invite Israeli reprisal across the border, like those against Palestinians in the 1960s and 70s, then engaging Israel in direct war could become justified in the eyes of the party's Shiite base.

But no such scenario seems in the making. The Lebanese-Israeli border will remain cold, at least for now.

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