



Hamas and Hizbullah kidnappings: the political and strategic implications

Dr. Maria Alvanou
Ph.D University of Trento
Terrorism Expert

Over the past two weeks, Israel has taken arms against two fronts, in the north and south, precipitated by kidnappings of its soldiers. The military operations of the Israeli army have resulted in an escalated war that brought again international attention to the sensitive area of the Middle East. Understanding the objectives and goals both on political and strategic level of the kidnapping organizations and state-actors behind them may help to comprehend essential parameters of the conflict and its importance in the international scene.

On June 25, a group of Palestinians came through a tunnel and attacked an IDF outpost just outside the Gaza Strip, killing two soldiers and kidnapping one, Gilad Shalit. Seeing through this kidnapping one can detect the instability and turbulence of the Palestinian political scene. The organization Hamas since it was elected to form the government of the Palestinian Authority, has been exposed to massive pressure by Israel- which refuses to recognize its legitimacy- and by important international actors who support the Israeli position. At the same time, Hamas faces Palestinian domestic rivals, especially Fatah. This secular Palestinian organization denies to come to terms with the electoral victory of Hamas, hopes for and even works to promote its failure, by proving that Hamas is unable to fulfill its pre- election promises, thus govern or assure security, economic wellbeing and liberation from Israel.

The abduction of the Israeli soldier was planned to benefit Hamas in two ways: For the military wing of the organization it meant to obtain a touchable and pragmatic gain- the release of Palestinian prisoners. On political level, it would establish an image of the Palestinian government as a pragmatic, de jure and de facto actor on the international scene, with whom Israel would have no other choice than to negotiate. The talks and processes taking place to release the captured soldier would enhance the stature of the Palestinian PM, Ismail Haniyya as a leader and legitimate interlocutor in the Palestinian settings.

On the northern front, on July 12 Hizbullah attacked two IDF jeeps patrolling along the Lebanese border, killing three soldiers and taking two as hostages. Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah declared: "No military operation will return them... The prisoners will not be returned except through one way: indirect negotiations and a trade." To understand this move, one has to bear in mind that the "Party of God" -since the withdrawal of Israel from south Lebanon in May 2000- has lost much of its international legitimacy and domestic base of support for continuing its military struggle against Israel. The last prisoner exchange, which arose with the "Tannenbaum case" (the abduction of an Israeli businessman) and entailed the return to Lebanon of Hizbullah's prisoners, left the release of Samir Kuntar (the Lebanese who took part in a 1979 attack on Naharia by Palestinian terrorists, who entered an apartment and murdered three members of the Haran family and an Israeli police officer) as the "national" justification for Hizbullah to continue kidnapping Israelis. Additionally, the organization claims to preserve its military strength in order to defend Lebanese sovereignty against Israeli aggression and to liberate the area of the Shab'a Farms.

The above justifications failed to elicit much response and sympathy in the broader Lebanese public and the organization was accused that it might drag Lebanon into a direct confrontation with Israel over marginal issues. For Hizbullah, the abduction of the Israeli soldiers provided also double gains: It proves Hassan Nasrallah's credibility as a leader, plus it stands by the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel. Nasrallah, also, aspires to

emerge as a Muslim-Arab leader and religious guide who wants to unite and show Muslims around the world how to defeat and humiliate Israel. All these under the bigger goal of establishing in Lebanon a Shi'ite Islamic republic that would become an active revolutionary model for other Muslim peoples.

Despite the present united Hamas-Hizbullah front, based on shared and mutual interests, there are thorns in this collaboration. For example, Hamas, despite its close links with Iran and Hizbullah, does not accept their authority and refuses to subordinate itself to foreign interests contrary to its own. Palestinians surely do not ignore that Nasrallah with his actions may be presuming to take the lead in negotiations with Israel on their behalf, overshadowing any gains that Hamas itself expected from the release of prisoners, especially its recognition as a legitimate political actor after the fighting in the south eases. Thus, preventing any gain or reward for Hizbullah with respect to Palestinians prisoners might well be an interest that Israel and Hamas have in common.

Another crucial dimension in this war that cannot be overlooked is the implication of Iran in the backstage of Hizbullah moves. High-level Iranian official recently emphasized to Western diplomats in London the organization's importance to his country: "Hezbollah is one of the pillars of our security strategy, and forms Iran's first line of defense against Israel."ⁱ Walid Jumblatt, the Lebanese Druze leader, shares this perspective: "The war is no longer Lebanon's...it is an Iranian war. Iran is telling the United States: You want to fight me in the Gulf and destroy my nuclear program? I will hit you at home, in Israel"ⁱⁱ. Furthermore, Iran's Revolutionary Guards provide the majority of Hizbullah's weaponry (including the Zalzal missile that can reach as far as Tel Aviv, 150 kilometers from Israel's northern border), financing, instruction, and strategic command and control. Hizbullah's short- and medium-range missiles are manufactured in Iran and exported to Lebanon via the Damascus International Airport. Iranian officers from the Revolutionary Guards are on the ground in Lebanon, playing active roles in supervising terror actions and training Hezbollah operatives to launch rockets against Israel. On July 14, Hezbollah fired an Iranian copy of a Chinese C-802 Kowthar missile at an Israeli warship, killing four crew members. These rockets have been in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' arsenal for four or five years.

Israel's response to all has been especially severe. The IDF first started heavy military operations in Gaza against the infrastructure of the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad and later declared war in Lebanon against the Hezbollah. In Gaza, the aims were twofold: to pressure the Hamas government to release the hostage soldier Gilad Shalit, and to stop the launch of Qassam missiles on Israel. The central goal invading Lebanon is to transmit the message that the Lebanese public will pay a very high and perhaps intolerable price for the glory and prestige that Nasrallah wishes to gain by kidnapping Israeli soldiers. A severe blow to Hizbullah's infrastructure, the enforced withdrawal of its troops from south Lebanon, the eventual disarmament of its militia (or at least a possible incorporation of its men into the Lebanese Army) are the main strategic gains Israel is seeking for.

Taking into account the involvement of Iran in the whole issue as well as the reaction of Al Qaida declaring a massive Muslim war against Israel and its Crusader allies, the recent Middle East conflict takes indeed an international turn. Ayman Zawahiri vowed his terror group will help Muslim fighters in Gaza and Lebanon who are confronting the "Zionist-Crusade war" and will make "all countries participating in the crime against our brethren pay the price."ⁱⁱⁱ An Iranian editorial noting that "America's collaboration with the Zionists in murdering the Palestinian people, destroying Lebanon, and [hurling] baseless accusations against Iran [regarding] nuclear activity - which is now coming to a head - is a new phase in America's crusade against the Muslims. This is exactly the point at which the leadership of the Islamic nation must play a role" shows again the danger of an escalating Jihad against the western world that could lead in terrible terrorist attacks, like the ones of 9/11, the Madrid and London bombings. It is a primary therefore interest of the international

community that the united Muslim front Hizbullah seems to express at the moment is fully neutralized. If this is not attained, we will surely enter a new fase of terror.

ⁱMiddle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), on line <http://memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=SD120406>

ⁱⁱ Anton La Guardia, "Israel Fights West's Cause Against Radical Islam," Telegraph (UK), July 17, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱUnited Press International, July 27, <http://www.upi.com/InternationalIntelligence/view.php?StoryID=20060727-112900-4996r>