**Iran’s Proxy Powder Keg**

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July 12, 2010 marked the fourth anniversary of Israel’s Second Lebanon War. In the intervening years, Hezbollah has made significant political and military gains in Lebanon. The rise in the paramilitary terrorist organization is likely due to three key factors: to Israel’s failure in 2006 to completely destroy Hezbollah’s infrastructure, the perceived weakness of the Obama administration as a result of its appeasement of Iran and Syria, and the failure of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to implement UN resolution 1701.

The war came about as a result of continuous provocations against Israel by Hezbollah, which culminated on July 12, 2006 when a squad of Lebanese-Shiite Hezbollah terrorists, funded and directed by Iran, crossed the Israeli border and ambushed two Israeli Defense Force patrol jeeps. Amidst the fray, roadside explosives were detonated and eight Israeli soldiers were killed. During that same raid, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli reservists: Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, whom they either murdered or denied medical care. Simultaneously, Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets at northern Israel communities.

Iran continues to use the Lebanese arena as a military lever against Israel, one which threatens to explode in a third war — albeit, a more all-engulfing regional conflict.

To divert attention from the Iranian Islamic Republic’s rejection of Western demands that Iran negotiate an alternative to its uranium enrichment [1], Iran ordered Hezbollah terrorists to attack Israeli soldiers. CNN reported on June 5, 2006 that, “In a move aimed at ending the diplomatic standoff (over Iran’s nuclear program) the five veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council, along with Germany, agreed to a ’set of far reaching proposals’ that will form the foundation for resuming talks with Iran.” The war that began in earnest six days later in Lebanon between Hezbollah – an Iranian proxy also supported by Syria – and Israel did indeed shift attention away from Iran’s disregard of the proposals made by the UN Security Council permanent members.

In the aftermath of the 2006 Second Lebanon War, UN Security Council Resolution 1701 was passed. It prohibited [2] Hezbollah from rearming, and called for the Lebanese army to deploy 15,000 troops in South Lebanon. It charged the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) with the responsibility to implement the resolution.

In the ensuing years, Iran has shipped thousands of advanced missiles to Hezbollah – with the transfers being carried out by Syria. While UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is on the record as having said that Hezbollah’s existing stockpile of rockets was in violation of Security Council resolutions, Agence France Presse reported on July 2, 2010 that the UN warned of renewed violence between Hezbollah and Israel following accusations that the Shiite militant party had received sophisticated missiles. “Amidst allegations of continued arms transfers to Hezbollah… a perceptible increase in tension between the parties was noticeable said the UN Secretary General in a report, a copy of which was obtained by AFP in Beirut.” No course of action by the UN, however, was announced.

In April 2010, Syria delivered truckloads of long-range Scud missiles to Hezbollah in clear violation of UN Resolution 1701. These Scud missiles can reach deep into Israel – as far south as Beersheba. While this delivery may not have changed the strategic balance between Israel and Hezbollah, according to some Israeli military experts, it has certainly raised the tension level. No course of action was announced by Ban Ki-Moon at this time either.

Earlier this month, Southern Lebanese villagers, controlled by Hezbollah, disarmed and attacked French UNIFIL soldiers. According toFrance 24, reporting on July 3, 2010 [3], “Residents of the village of Tuline as well as some villagers from nearby Kabrikha attacked a patrol with sticks and threw stones and eggs,” a military spokesman told AFP. “The citizens disarmed the soldiers and briefly took control of their vehicle before the [Lebanese] army intervened and made them move away from the patrol.”

At present, a verbal confrontation is taking place between Israel, France, the UN, Hezbollah, and the Lebanese army. At issue is whether Hezbollah — with its 20,000 fighters, 160 bases erected in South Lebanon (its border with Israel), and their stockpile of 40,000-80,000 missiles– will forcefully and permanently replace the Lebanese army, or will the U.N. and the Europeans apply enough pressure on the Lebanese government to compel Hezbollah to move from the border and allow the Lebanese army to take control?

Odds are that it is far more likely that Hezbollah will prevail. The 2008 Arab-brokered deal to end the fighting in Beirut following Hezbollah’s takeover of West Beirut, gave Hezbollah a veto power in the Lebanese Parliament. And last May, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman said that Lebanon “cannot and must not tell Hezbollah to disarm [4] before reaching a deal on a defense strategy that would also address any future Israeli attacks.” The June 2009 elections reduced Hezbollah’s political representation in parliament but not its power. In the current Saad Hariri government there are 30 cabinet ministers, 15 are from Hariri’s coalition of Sunni-Muslims and Christians, and 10 are from the opposition, including two ministers from Hezbollah. President, Michel Suleiman (a Maronite Christian) appointed 5 ministers, one of whom is Ali al-Shami, a close associate of Nabih Berry, Speaker of Parliament, and the Shiite leader of Amal and close Hezbollah ally. In December 2009, the Lebanese Parliament voted to allow Hezbollah to retain its arms.

Since becoming Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu has done little more than rely on the UN, UNIFIL and France to reduce the threat of Hezbollah’s heavily armed forces to the 1.5 million Israeli civilians living on its northern border. The lukewarm rebuke of Hezbollah (mentioned above) by the UN has done little to deter Hezbollah. On the contrary, Hezbollah has recently revealed that it plans various operations to kill or kidnap Israeli citizens throughout the world, apparently in retaliation for the alleged 2008 Israeli liquidation of Hezbollah’s chief-of-operation Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus.

As the Iranian opposition increases pressure on the repressive Islamic theocracy in Tehran, and Western sanctions begin to impact heavily on the Iranian economy, the Islamic Republic of Iran is more likely to engineer a diversion much like that of 2006, that precipitated the Second Lebanon War between Hezbollah and Israel. The questions are: When will the next Hezbollah-Israeli confrontation occur? And where it will take place? Will it be in the region or in a terror attack against Israelis overseas?

Clearly, neither the Obama administration’s Middle East policies (which have failed), nor UNIFIL are positioned to tackle these precarious possibilities. Israel has increased its troop presence on the Lebanese border in recent weeks, but is that enough to propel the Lebanese government to act or deter the Hezbollah? Only time will tell.