



PERSPECTIVES

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Hezbollah's Demographic Problem Explains Its Restraint

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hezbollah responded with restraint to Israel's three-pronged attacks over the past two weeks in Syria, Iraq, and, above all, a neighborhood in Dahiya, the vast Shiite area in Beirut where Hezbollah is headquartered. The organization's effort to avoid escalation reflects its demographic problem in Lebanon.

Israel's three-pronged attacks over the past two weeks in Syria, Iraq, and, above all, in Dahiya, the vast Shiite neighborhood in Beirut where Hezbollah is headquartered both above and below ground, were met with a very limited Hezbollah response. An IDF truck was struck by two missiles with the obvious objective of killing Israeli soldiers in retaliation for the killing of two Hezbollah soldiers in an Israeli attack on Syria. This limited response – against Israeli military personnel only – sent a clear signal, acknowledged by the Israeli side, that Hezbollah wants to avoid escalation that could lead to all-out war.

The object of the Israeli attacks was to destroy equipment that would have facilitated the local manufacture of precision-guided missiles that could target Israel's key strategic infrastructure of power plants, airbases, seaports, and airports. Israel has been taking this kind of action in Syria for nearly two years, and felt compelled to do the same in Lebanon as well.

There are several reasons why Hezbollah restrained its response. The most important is probably its demographic predicament.

Despite the pretense of being an all-encompassing Islamic resistance movement – Hezbollah rhetoric almost never directly refers to Shiites or Shiism and instead conjures pan-Islamic enemies, primarily Israel – the organization is perceived, both inside and outside Lebanon, in strict sectarian terms as almost exclusively Shiite.

Its promotional material features photos of Ayatollah Khomeini and present-day spiritual leader Ayatollah Khamenei. It supplies links to their speeches and carries detailed coverage of Sunni suppression of Shiites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. It runs articles that advocate the rule of Khomeini as supreme jurist, which arouses antagonism not only among Sunnis but also among a considerable segment of Shiites in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Hezbollah has also been at odds, often violently, with the Sunni community in Lebanon – especially in Tripoli, where since 1984 Hezbollah has sided with the small, Syrian-backed Alawite minority against the Sunni majority at the behest of the Syrian regime. The Hezbollah-Sunni rift widened to include suppression of Sunni fundamentalist organizations in the south, and later of mainstream Sunni political organizations. This culminated in the assassination of Sunni PM Rafik Hariri in 2005.

Relations are equally tense with most of the Christian and Druze communities, though Hezbollah has succeeded in allying with former Maronite general and president Michel Aoun and his supporters.

What all this means is that Hezbollah's recruitment pool is strictly limited to the Shiite community in Lebanon – and there's the rub.

Not only is the Shiite community relatively small (between 1 million and 1.5 million people), but it is suffering from a rapidly declining birthrate very similar to that of Iran, the only large country with a Shiite majority.

The Shiite birthrate has declined from five to six children per woman of child-bearing age in the 1980s to fewer than the 2.05 needed to maintain the existing population twenty-five years later. This has many implications.

By far the most important for Hezbollah is that small families are reluctant to sacrifice the person who is all too often their only son in a society where the two-child family is becoming the norm.

We see something similar in Israeli data. Every year, the IDF identifies the high schools with the highest percentages of male graduates who volunteer for fighting units. Five to seven of them are both religious and situated in the West Bank, and seven to nine of the ten belong to the national religious stream. The common denominator is that these recruits come from larger families than those found at secular schools.

Hezbollah has been sacrificing Shiites for 37 years, with only a brief hiatus of five short years between the second Lebanese war in 2006 and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

Ardor for sacrifice is hard to maintain. Iran has to work very hard to get non-Iranian Shiites to fight its battles after the loss of hundreds of thousands in the

prolonged war with Iraq over thirty years ago. That is a magnification, many times over, of what 1973 was to many Israelis.

Hezbollah is up against a similar problem, and it is not one the organization can easily counter. Declining birthrates are the result of urbanization. Most Lebanese Shiites live in the multi-storied apartment buildings of the Dahiya, not the small villages and towns of the past from which they were bused in on election day to vote for Hezbollah.

In the city, children are no longer helping on the family farm. They are consumers, not producers. Their parents want them educated and professional, and many would rather see them in Canada or Australia than fighting Iran's wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Sheik Hassan Nasrallah also knows that the declining reservoir of recruits will be needed on the domestic front.

The balance between Sunnis and Shiites has grown in favor of the former as hundreds of thousands of Syrian Sunnis have found refuge in Lebanon. Essentially, the Alawite regime has exported its problem to Lebanon, and more specifically to the Shiite areas on Lebanon's eastern border.

Hezbollah has not only paid in blood to prop up the Syrian regime. It faces a more uncertain future in Lebanon itself as a result of that support. Under such circumstances, restraint is a reasonable response.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) published in The Jerusalem Post on September 4, 2019.

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