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# Hizbollah and Today's Battle for Beirut

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In an impressive old building overlooking richly refurbished downtown Beirut, behind broad rolls of razor wire, Lebanon's Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, and his cabinet have been hunkered down for more than two months. Below the ramparts, filling public squares, and stretching along the broad esplanades, opposition forces are camped out in tents, conducting a peaceful siege that began on December 15, 2006, and shows no signs of lifting.

The moving force behind the coalition of parties and notables comprising the opposition is Hizbollah (the Party of God), the militant Shi'i group that recently bested the Israeli military in a 33-day war during the summer of 2006. Why is the Islamist organization now confronting its own government? What are its goals and how does it expect to achieve them? This paper attempts to answer these questions by first addressing the national and regional contexts that energize Hizbollah's present role as opposition leader in Lebanon. It then analyzes how Hizbollah's current political program has been affected by these environmental factors and explores the resources on which the party relies to secure its political objectives. The paper will also consider the implications of Hizbollah's current activities for local, regional, and international actors presently dueling in the Lebanese arena.

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## TRANSNATIONAL, INTERNAL, AND ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS OF THE PRESENT STAND-OFF

Lebanon's strategic location on the borders of Syria and Israel, front-line states in the ongoing Middle East conflict, makes it of great interest to those two countries. Lebanon is now, as it was in the 1970s, a "must win" or "must keep" prize in the Middle East, at the center of a struggle that features the United States and Israel on one side, and Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the other. At the moment, the Lebanese authorities receive strong support from France and Saudi Arabia. America, however, has a more important bone to pick with Syria and Iran than do the other actors on this small but crowded stage.

Until 2005, Lebanon was a prize won by Syria at the conclusion of the Lebanese civil war, which had begun in 1975. The war came to an end in 1989 when, at a meeting held in Taif, Saudi Arabia, an agreement between the warring factions that had been brokered by members of the Arab League effectively ended the hostilities. The Taif Accord provided Damascus, the power on the ground, with the legal means of extending its stay in Lebanon.

The linkage between local parties and transnational actors can be explained as the result of competing interests: the United States would like to

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keep Lebanon out of Damascus' sphere of influence—as would the Lebanese government, led by Siniora and Saadeddin Hariri—while Syria would like Lebanon back in its own orbit, a position encouraged by Hizbollah. Damascus views Hizbollah as an important asset in its own power struggle, a connection that can be explained by the nature of Hizbollah's origins.

Hizbollah's creation came about as the result of an alliance between Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad and Iran's Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini in 1980.<sup>1</sup> The alliance generally aimed at changing the strategic balance of the Middle East in its favor by focusing on three struggles in the region: the confrontation with Israel in southern Lebanon; the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation; and the Iran-Iraq War and the first and second Gulf Wars.

Over the years, Damascus and Tehran outlined individual goals for each of the three conflicts that required support by their countries for the surrogate forces involved, including Hizbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in

Palestine, and the insurgents in Saddam-era and post-Saddam Iraq. While these transnational actions were separately executed and carried out over different time periods by Syria and Iran, they nevertheless collectively served the overall objective of the alliance: confronting Israeli occupation and American hegemony in the region.

Asad's goals in forming this alliance were the reclamation of the Golan Heights, which were annexed by Israel after the 1967 war, and the elimination of any political inroads made by the Israelis or their American allies in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> Despite Asad's death in 2000 and the succession of his son Bashar, these goals have not changed today. Yet, lacking the military means necessary to confront the Israelis directly, Asad at the time sought a surrogate force that could do this job. He first tried to dominate Lebanon-based Palestinian forces and reap the political-military rewards of their cross-border attacks on Israel, but failed in his bid to sufficiently control that group.<sup>3</sup>

Asad's search for a surrogate military force to fill the gap left by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) after the 1982 Israeli invasion coincided with the goals of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who was seeking an opportunity to export the Islamic revolution as a means of projecting his country's influence.<sup>4</sup> At the time, the Lebanese Shi'i community offered a means of achieving the goals of both Iran and Syria, particularly regarding recruitment of members for a surrogate force. The community had already been mobilized to participate in resistance activities or to adopt jihadist attitudes—some had worked with the PLO against Israel in the south, while others were galvanized by the Israeli invasion, the Sabra-Chatila massacre, and the attacks on American military and political assets in 1983.<sup>5</sup> A handful of young mullahs were on hand to incorporate Khomeini's foreign policy goals and religious beliefs into terms acceptable to the Syrian regime.<sup>6</sup> Hizbollah was thus created and organized for one reason and one reason only: to confront Israel along the Israeli-Lebanese frontier for a lengthy period. This mission explains the organizational dynamics of Hizbollah's anti-government activities today.

The manner in which Damascus and Tehran shared the tasks of preparing and fielding the Islamist fighting force has been dealt with in several works and need not concern us here.<sup>7</sup> However, the salient point is that Hizbollah leaders, whose ideology coincided with that of Iran, found in this opportunity an ideal way to fulfill the religious obligation of jihad and to combine it with the national cause of liberating Israeli-occupied territory.<sup>8</sup> After its invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Israel's retention of a "security

zone" along the Lebanese side of the frontier in 1985 provided ample justification for Hizbollah's resistance.<sup>9</sup>

Hizbollah transformed itself into a political party in 1990, entering the political arena after Syria was given a green light by the international community and the Lebanese parliament to tie down what was then considered by many as the region's loose cannon. In one of the ironies of Lebanese history, both the United States and Saudi Arabia were favorable to the role provided Syria by the Taif Accord, yet now both countries are working energetically with the Siniora government to eliminate Hizbollah as part of their anti-Syrian campaign.<sup>10</sup>

By 1992, the *pax Syriana* was well on its way in Lebanon, with all important government positions related to foreign policy filled with pro-Syrian individuals.<sup>11</sup> Hizbollah easily won national assembly seats in the first post-war election, as it had achieved considerable popularity through its campaign against Israel and the social and public assistance it had extended to its Shi'i brethren with the help of Iran. These two activities have increased in importance over the years and are significant sources of Hizbollah's popular support in the political arena today. As such, they warrant a brief discussion here.

#### HIZBOLLAH AS PATRON AND FIGHTING FORCE

As the affluent half of the Syria-Iran partnership, Tehran increased its financial assistance to Hizbollah when its status as a mainstream political party elevated its legitimacy as a force in the national struggle against Israel. The money made available through Iranian charities began to flow into Hizbollah's coffers in the late 1980s and required an effective project assessment and distribution system on the part of Hizbollah administrators. To plan and operate projects to rehabilitate a battered society, Hizbollah formed both a central Bureau of Public and Social Services and the Jihad al-Binaa (Reconstruction Campaign). Fully operational by 1990, Jihad al-Binaa made it possible for Hizbollah to effectively perform most public works and welfare functions that are usually carried out by governmental agencies. These activities included repair and operation of electrical, water, and sewerage networks for the densely populated southern suburbs, as well as the reconstruction of worn or damaged schools, clinics, and water wells in other Shi'i areas. As time passed, more projects of all types were added to Jihad al-Binaa's roster, including the reconstruction of homes and businesses damaged by Israeli military operations in 1993 and 1996.<sup>12</sup>

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a means of enlarging its clientele beyond the core group of pious Shi'a that formed its most steadfast constituency. While services provide an important nexus among all politicians and partisans in Lebanon, and are therefore not unusual, the scale as well as the variety of the services provided by Hizbollah and the smooth functioning of the party's welfare bureaucracy is extraordinary, and cuts across class lines in the Shi'i community. For instance, between 1988 and 2003 all of the residents in Beirut's southern suburbs received water from cisterns filled twice daily by Hizbollah's circulating tanker trucks, and all of the residents benefited from garbage removal and repairs made to neglected water, electricity, and sewer-

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age disposal grids that were provided by the party's social and public services agency through Jihad al Binaa. Today, residents can also apply for medical, educational, housing, and small loan assistance from Hizbollah bureaus located in Beirut, Bekaa, and the south and take advantage of the party's primary and secondary school system, hospitals, clinics, agricultural stations, and cooperatives. The agency also manages a host of other developmental projects that provide jobs for the Shi'i disadvantaged and employment opportunities for professionals such as teachers, engineers, and doctors. Jihad al Binaa has also been responsible for quickly rebuilding homes and businesses destroyed or damaged as a result of Israeli air campaigns and artillery attacks against Hizbollah and Lebanese infrastructure in 1993 and 1996.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that, as part of the Bush administration's continuing efforts to undermine Hizbollah, the Jihad al Binaa—the agency that carried out reconstruction of war-damaged properties and is now addressing the ravages of Israeli aerial bombardments during the summer 2006 conflict—was declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. Treasury Department, and its assets were frozen on February 20, 2007.

The other major source of Hizbollah's popular support is the military proficiency its fighters have shown against one of the strongest and most experienced conventional armies in the world. Between 1985 and 2000, Hizbollah fighters using guerilla tactics slowly succeeded in eroding Israel's grip on its self-proclaimed "security zone" by using Katyusha short-range rockets, grenades, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Hizbollah cadres were able to take a toll on their enemy and also resist large-scale Israeli invasions in 1993 and 1996 that were aimed at eliminating it.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of mounting casualties and domestic pressure, in May 2000 Israeli Premier Ehud Barak finally withdrew his forces from Lebanon, making Hizbollah the first armed Arab group to regain by force land formerly occupied by the Jewish state. While this feat was an important source of Hizbollah's continuing popular support, as was the party's uninterrupted delivery of social services, these factors cannot fully explain the close bond that links the party to its following. One of the major reasons for the extraordinary relationship lies in the trust Hizbollah's leaders have inspired in their constituency through their capacity to constantly deliver on promises made.

### **THE EFFECTS OF REGIONAL CONFLICTS ON THE LEBANESE WAR THEATER**

According to the Lebanese authorities at the time, Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was not complete, as Israeli troops still occupied a large, water-rich area known as the Shebaa Farms.<sup>15</sup> Beirut's position on this issue prevented the Lebanese army's deployment along the border, and provided Hizbollah with further resistance opportunities along a frontier now completely under its control. This important strategic advantage was underlined by Israeli Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, who claimed that the decision to withdraw Israeli troops made by Israeli Premier Ehud Barak was "an unreasonable risk verging on a gamble."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in the fall of 2000, when the second Palestinian intifada broke out and quickly spun out of Israel's control, Hizbollah guerillas were in a position to help Hamas in its efforts against Israel. Assistance was formally announced a year later, on September 25, 2001, when Hizbollah General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah vowed his party would "directly interfere" in the intifada, as it was the duty of all Arabs to support their Palestinian brethren.<sup>17</sup> Through Hizbollah's position on Israel's border, Iran and Syria, using the good offices of their surrogate, had now acquired a further entrée into the Middle East conflict. Hizbollah units could now facilitate transfers of material and financial aid to Hamas and also "heat up" the border area to further perturb the Israeli military grappling with the Hamas-led insurgency.

The growing involvement of transnational actors and Hizbollah in what seemed to be an unmanageable crisis for Israel led to considerable U.S. pressure on all three parties when the Bush administration's campaign against global terrorism began after September 11, 2001.<sup>18</sup> It was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, that provided Damascus and Tehran

with their most important opportunity to undercut U.S. regional policy. The partners' sponsorship of anti-American Sunni and Shi'i forces played a considerable role in creating the chaos presently upsetting the Bush administration's plans for Iraq and led the United States to seek further means of pressuring Syria and Iran to cease their interference.

Aware of the gathering U.S. storm and mindful that Tel Aviv would not tolerate a two-front Hamas/Hizbollah threat for long, Iran and Syria made plans to protect Hizbollah by increasing and updating the organization's arsenal. The relative quiet along the Lebanese-Israeli frontier between 2001 and 2006, with only sporadic and rather

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er ritualistic shelling of Israeli positions in the Shebaa Farms area, facilitated Hizbollah's wide distribution of weapons caches and the digging of an extensive bunker system in preparation for the expected battle with Israel. This clandestine activity went on under the noses of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which was posted along the Lebanon/Israel frontier to keep the peace. During this period, daily Israeli surveillance flights also failed to pinpoint these activities or solve the puzzle of how Iranian and Syrian arms were reaching Hizbollah.

As the conflict in Iraq deepened, the Bush administration tried to shake the Iranian and Syrian regimes by turning up the heat on Iran's uranium enrichment program and Syria's grip on Lebanon. Today's political confrontation in Lebanon is a direct result of those policies.

#### AMERICA'S TUG-OF-WAR WITH SYRIA AND IRAN IN LEBANON

U.S. diplomatic efforts to remove Syria and Hizbollah as players in Lebanon focused on the application of sanctions against Damascus if the Asad regime did not comply with demands that it withdraw its troops from Lebanon and dismantle "all independent militias"—a reference to Hizbollah.<sup>19</sup> These actions and an increasingly vociferous anti-Syrian coalition in Lebanon spelled trouble for Damascus in 2004, and the Syrian regime began to take steps to guard its "protectorate." One of those steps was facilitating an illegal extension of staunch ally Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's term in office. Anti-Syrian factions in Lebanon took advantage of this move on the part of the Asad government and its Lebanese allies to

further hitch their growing protest movement to the Bush administration's democratization campaign in the Middle East.

When an attempt was made on the life of Marwan Hamadeh in October 2004, Druze leader Walid Jumblat's right-hand man and a key member of the anti-Syrian coalition, opposition leaders immediately claimed Syria's implication in the criminal act. They repeated this charge four months later when opposition chief and former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (a Sunni Muslim) was assassinated by a powerful car bomb on February 13, 2005.<sup>20</sup> The opposition group that formed a month later after an outburst of national grief and anger over Hariri's death was called the March 14th Movement. It was led by the former prime minister's son, Saadeddin Hariri, and by Jumblat and Maronite Christian leaders who had been marginalized during the period of Syrian tutelage.

Under intense local, American, and international pressure, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad began a full withdrawal of his troops in April. By September 2005, March 14th Movement leaders were victorious in the summer parliamentary elections and were forming a new Lebanese government. At that point the Movement had lost three other key members in car bombings, and two more had been grievously wounded in similar attacks. In the transnational struggle for Lebanon, Washington had won this round, yet the road ahead looked rocky.

#### COALITION POLITICS IN THE PRE-WAR PERIOD

Former General Michel Aoun, a Maronite Christian and perhaps Damascus' most adamant enemy during the civil war, remained distant from the pro-American coalition, claiming that he and his Free Patriot Movement (FPM) had been cheated out of their victory at the polls by unfair electoral procedures.<sup>21</sup> Aoun, who harbors presidential aspirations, had found it in his interest to join the pro-Syrian opposition being led by Hizbollah, where he could exploit the large Shi'i vote. A "Memorandum of Understanding" that covered various political issues of mutual concern was consequently signed by Hizbollah and Aoun. As the former general is considered capable of mustering about 65 percent of the total Christian vote, this alliance is extremely important for the opposition forces and particularly for Hizbollah. It challenged government leaders' insinuations that its opposition role was a façade for a planned Shi'i takeover or was a Shi'i conspiracy against the Sunnis programmed by Iran. Aoun's addition to the opposition coalition belied those rumors by contributing a large Christian following to the group's diverse ethnic composition.



Other factions involved in Hizbollah's campaign to neutralize the government's powers were northern Christians led by Suleiman Frangieh, Sunnis headed by former Prime Minister Omar Karami from Tripoli, and Druzes who answered to Jumblat's opponent, Talal Arslan. The grouping that formed was later labeled the "Rainbow Coalition" to emphasize its multi-sect composition and pan-Lebanese appeal.

When the new cabinet took office in the fall of 2005, Hizbollah leaders accepted the cabinet positions offered in the interest of preserving the organization. Those positions would allow Hizbollah to keep abreast of government plans to replace President Lahoud, to carry out Hizbollah's eventual disarmament as urged by UN Security Council Resolution 1559, and to promote the establishment of a UN-sponsored international tribunal demanded by Saad Hariri to try his father's assassins. The latter issue was important to Syria, because a UN investigation of the late premier's death was following a trail of evidence that seemed to indicate involvement by top Syrian officials. Four pro-Syrian Lebanese intelligence officers were later incarcerated on suspicion of masterminding the assassination, and these men remain in jail pending developments in the investigation.

Hizbollah and pro-Syrian groups saw the move to convene an international tribunal that had French and American backing as a political attempt to "railroad" the Syrian regime, and they rejected the court's international configuration. For his part, Saad Hariri claimed that if such a tribunal was held in Lebanon under purely Lebanese auspices, justice was unlikely to be done.

Political wrangling over these issues within the cabinet had produced a stalemate by July 2006. Hizbollah and its allies were demanding a "national unity cabinet" in which Aoun's participation and that of other opposition leaders would raise the opposition's share of the ministerial portfolios to one-third plus one of the total, or 11 out of 30. As this formula would allow opposition ministers to block any decision viewed as detrimental to their own or Syria's interests, the Siniora government did not budge.

## THE SUMMER WAR AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The summer 2006 military confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah was triggered by the latter's capture of two Israeli soldiers and the death of eight others on July 12. Israel's muscled reaction to this incident came two days later in the form of a massive aerial bombardment that had the support of the Bush administration as well as the international community. For its part, the U.S. government likely viewed the Israeli campaign to

destroy Hizbollah as an opportunity to achieve its own foreign policy goals in Lebanon. With the Hizbollah “terrorists” eliminated from the Middle East peace equation by the Israeli invasion and the Siniora government thus relieved of Hizbollah’s weight in the opposition movement, a blow against three U.S. adversaries—Hizbollah, Syria, and Iran—could be affected with little, if any, cost to America.

With U.S. encouragement and an anti-Syrian government in Beirut to assist the military campaign against Hizbollah in any way it could, Israeli strategists appeared to reason that an attack on Hizbollah immediately following their soldiers’ capture would be widely considered as legitimate self-defense by the Israeli public and the international community. Tel Aviv would therefore enter its anticipated final battle with Hizbollah with unprecedented backing. The strategists reasoned correctly; Hizbollah’s attack was criticized by Arab states, the international community, the Lebanese government, and by many Lebanese citizens as well.<sup>22</sup>

The critical questions for Hizbollah and its allies at this juncture were whether the battlefield preparations made in advance would be adequate to avoid military defeat and whether, in the face of the hardships to be imposed by the forthcoming war, the Shi’i community would extend Hizbollah leaders the cooperation and support needed to fight and withstand both the looming military battle and the political one that would resume after hostilities ended.

Israeli strategists’ apparent battle plan was to unleash massive air strikes on Hizbollah positions along the frontier and against its command and control systems all over Lebanon. A second phase of the plan seems to have focused on weakening popular support for Hizbollah. Specifically, Israel drew upon the strategy of “cumulative deterrence” that had been attempted unsuccessfully in previous wars with Hizbollah to try to eliminate its grassroots support.

“Cumulative deterrence” was described by Israeli military theorist Major General Doron Almog as a strategy that relies on repeated applications of punishment in the form of unacceptable costs to the recalcitrant party (such as a state).<sup>23</sup> The assumption underlying this strategy is that these costs—heavy infrastructure damage, for instance—would eventually prove too great for a government to bear, resulting in its compliance with the perpetrator’s demands.

When this strategy was applied to Lebanon in 1993 and 1996 with the objective of forcing the Lebanese government to rein in Hizbollah, officials were powerless. The difference this time around was that since an anti-Syrian government was in charge, the chances of the Lebanese authorities

complying with this demand were far more likely. Yet it appears that Israeli planners believed that to assure the success of this strategy the aerial bombardment of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure would have to achieve a far greater scale of destruction than previous assaults in order to galvanize public support behind the government to stop Hizbollah.

Evidence suggests that this time the “cumulative deterrence” strategy was also applied to the Shi’i community as a means of stripping away Hizbollah’s grassroots support. The carpet-bombing of Shi’i hamlets, villages, urban residential districts, and sectors of divided villages, or of a Shi’i home in a Christian village, makes little sense otherwise. Israeli strategists may have chosen this tactic based on the premise that Hizbollah and its supporters had become so interconnected during the years of resistance against Israel that one could not be destroyed without the destruction of—or at least serious damage to—the other.

Hizbollah’s aim in the war was to resist annihilation, making any invading troops fight for every inch of land they tried to take, and attempting to cause them as much pain as possible. Against the impending full-scale assault, Hizbollah tacticians counted on guerilla tactics that had been altered to encompass the use of advanced weapons systems provided by Iran and Syria. In addition, Hizbollah would launch an air war of its own design in the form of a more sustained, lethal, and broader rocket bombardment of Israeli areas than had previously been carried out. Although incapable of inflicting the kind of damage on Israel that would be meted out by the Israeli air force on Lebanon, Hizbollah apparently hoped that medium- and long-range missile attacks would cause the displacement of millions of Israelis who had previously not borne the brunt of Israel’s activities in Lebanon.

As each side applied the above strategies and tactics, the United States did as much as it could to aid its ally. Four days after the summer 2006 war began, the U.S. Senate passed Resolution 534 condemning Hizbollah and “state sponsors of terrorism” and supporting Israel’s right to defend itself.<sup>24</sup> Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did her best to encourage the Siniora government to hold the agreed political line against Hizbollah while his country was being pummeled by the Israeli air force. In a surprise visit to Beirut on July 19, Secretary Rice announced that her goal was “to praise Prime Minister Siniora’s courage and steadfastness” and “to show U.S. support for the Lebanese people.”<sup>25</sup> But the Israeli air war was proving to be ineffective in terms of its political objectives, and Israeli ground troops and cavalry began to get bogged down in Lebanon. U.S. concern grew over whether its ally could deliver on their mutual political objectives, and Rice

returned to Beirut on July 24 in a different frame of mind. According to local media reports, Rice reportedly upbraided the helpless Siniora for not doing enough to stop Hizbollah.<sup>26</sup> This incident was later commemorated by the opposition in the form of a giant poster in the tent area of downtown Beirut that was widely distributed in the Bekaa Valley. The poster portrays a tiny Siniora cowering in a highchair and a large and threatening Rice shaking a finger at him as if warning him not to misbehave.

Rice's next scheduled visit to Lebanon was canceled by the Lebanese government due to national outrage over an Israeli bombing raid that had killed 50 civilians in Qana, south Lebanon. The U.S. secretary of state may have been considered *persona non grata* at that time by the anti-Syrian Lebanese government.

Rice's reluctance to work for the ceasefire demanded by the international community as a result of Israel's disproportionate use of force was widely viewed in Lebanon as providing Israel more time in which to

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achieve some political benefit from its military's poor performance. In this respect U.S. policy appeared to directly undermine the very government the Americans wished to firmly support. Many Lebanese now found themselves placed in Israel's corner as a result of their government's acceptance of U.S.

support and were enraged at Rice's behavior and critical of Prime Minister Siniora's pro-American stance. At the same time, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert's mismanagement of the air and ground war was blasted by the Israeli public and media for its ineptitude as having wasted a prime opportunity to destroy Hizbollah.<sup>27</sup> After a formal investigation of the causes of Israel's poor military performance, Israeli Chief of Staff Dan Halutz was forced to resign in January 2007.

On the other hand, Hizbollah's "superior military prowess" was acknowledged by military analysts.<sup>28</sup> Hizbollah guerilla units, for instance, received particular praise for their capacity to fight effectively without instructions from the higher command or re-supply of weapons, and for mastering and adapting complex weapons systems to the local war theater.<sup>29</sup>

Through the summer 2006 war, Syria and Iran had also been able to further project their own power to influence events in the Middle East. The best the United States and Israel could wring out of the war was an enlarged UN peacekeeping force and 15,000 Lebanese troops deployed on Lebanon's side of the frontier. According to A.R. Norton, Hizbollah expert

and former U.S. military officer, the enlarged international force freezes a situation that remains volatile.<sup>30</sup>

### **HIZBOLLAH'S POST-WAR SUPPORT**

The fact that 3,000 elite Hizbollah fighters, plus another 5,000 regular cadres backed up by the local population, had forced the withdrawal of a conventional army of 30,000 troops supported by armor, sea, and air power generated considerable local impact. This reality appeared to trump any criticism of Hizbollah's ill-advised capture of the Israeli soldiers, the act that precipitated the war. On September 23, Hassan Nasrallah exploited Shi'i jubilation over his party's feat by hosting a celebration of Hizbollah's "divine, historic, and strategic victory over Israel" amidst the ruins of the capital's southern suburb.<sup>31</sup> The celebration venue was probably chosen to emphasize the Shi'i resilience despite the devastating attacks the community had endured. The celebration drew crowds estimated at 800,000 by CNN and between 1 and 1.5 million by wire services and local media.<sup>32</sup>

The giant rally was also politically significant for the number and variety of religious dignitaries, political notables, and party leaders that appeared on the dais with Hizbollah leaders. These included all opposition leaders and their followers, as well as almost all of the parties that had fought on or supported the opposition in the Lebanese civil war. The presence of these organizations and notables at the rally indicated their solidarity with Hizbollah and boded ill for the Siniora government in the days to come. As displaced and war-battered families were being compensated for their losses and assisted in their search for immediate shelter by large cash donations from Iran that were distributed by Jihad al-Binaa, Hizbollah leaders returned to the political task at hand—to either convince the Siniora government to yield to the demands made prior to the war, or to take steps to force the government's collapse.

### **HIZBOLLAH'S TACTICS IN THE PRESENT POLITICAL IMPASSE**

Before mobilizing its ground support to undertake protest activities, Hizbollah leaders first tried to move the government's position off-center by initiating carefully calibrated pressure tactics that did not involve the greater Shi'i community. After weeks of futile wrangling over an expanded cabinet, Hizbollah cabinet members tendered their resignations on November 11. This tactic was meant to cripple the government's legitimacy by removing representation of the country's largest community. In spite

of this, the Siniora cabinet retained the numbers required by the Lebanese constitution for its continued function and consequently remained in place. However, pro-Syrian President Lahoud and Shi'i Speaker of the House Nabeh Birri then refused to recognize the cabinet's competence and forewent any further participation in the decision-making process. The parliament shut down and the president no longer attended cabinet sessions as called for by the Lebanese constitution. This made any action on the impending international tribunal legislation that was to empower the trial of suspected Hariri assassins impossible to achieve by constitutional means. The cabinet nevertheless proceeded to endorse the UN plan although the investigation of the crime being carried out under UN auspices had yet to be completed.

By November, it was clear that the application of pressure tactics widely considered as acceptable measures of civil disobedience were not having the intended effect. Opposition leaders threatened to take the struggle to the streets if the government did not yield to their demands. In his speech on November 18, 2006, Nasrallah advised partisans to be prepared to go to the streets at any moment because "we cannot trust this 'Feltman' government that responds to the decisions and interests of the American administration instead of Lebanese interests."<sup>33</sup> The Shi'i leader was referring to U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman's highly visible relationship with the Siniora government and the March 14th Movement over the past two years. Several days later the UN Security Council unanimously approved the international tribunal that had previously been endorsed by the Lebanese cabinet by adopting Resolution 1664 on November 20, 2006. Minister of Industry Pierre Amin Gemayel, son of the former president, was assassinated by gunmen during that same eventful week. The brazen murder was the main reason cabinet members, fearing for their lives, confined themselves within the government building in central Beirut.

On November 24, Damascus announced that it would not cooperate with the international tribunal, although the Asad regime apparently had assisted the UN investigation of the assassination as requested. Jordan, Israel, France, and the United States, on the other hand, had declined to cooperate with the investigation, according to the investigators.<sup>34</sup> Several days later, opposition forces again increased pressure on the government with an announcement by Michel Aoun that the large center city protest would begin the following day; this protest became a prolonged opposition encampment sustained into 2007. The protest began as planned and was confirmed by Nasrallah, who said on December 1, "all attempts at dialogue have failed and that is why, taking into account constitutional provisions

as well as democratic principles, we have no other recourse but to resort to public pressure.”<sup>35</sup>

By December 10 the protest had assumed the nature of a permanent “camp-in” and crowds estimated at well over a million by international and local media had flocked to the campground to take part in raucous demonstrations of solidarity. Taking advantage of Beirut’s sunny late fall weather, many partisans dropped by the protest area as often as possible to join programmed activities and hear speeches by the opposition leaders.

In one such speech, Nasrallah blamed Prime Minister Siniora for an order given to the army to seize Hizbollah weapons destined for the battle-front while the war was in progress. The prime minister tried to refute this accusation but was contradicted by the military command’s explanation of the incident. The report carried by the local media indicated that the troops involved in the seizure were not acting independently, but were, rather, following orders issued to them by the government.<sup>36</sup> For their part, government loyalists like Walid Jumblat and Samir Geagea impugned Hizbollah’s patriotism for pushing Syrian and Iranian aims in Lebanon. These accusations continue, with each side in the political confrontation trying to vilify the other while refuting charges made against them.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

After the December holidays, a series of strikes and sit-ins by trade syndicate members escalated the pressure that Hizbollah and its Lebanese allies were exerting on the Lebanese state. By emphasizing bread and butter issues, these protests appeared to focus on the government’s incompetence rather than on its perceived political obtuseness and were meant to highlight the rejection of the government by major social groups as well as by political forces. On January 23, 2007, the protest movement further escalated when Hizbollah called a sudden general strike. Partisans and opposition forces responded in large numbers to the summons by blocking major roads, including the one leading to Beirut International Airport, an act loaded with psychological impact for the Lebanese that dates from the civil war years, when airport closures sometimes occurred due to fighting or lack of security.

For the most part, this single-day demonstration of well-prepared and coordinated street power went off peacefully; however, clashes between Aoun’s partisans and those of Samir Geagea broke out during the day, leaving four of Aoun’s partisans dead and 150 injured. For many, this seemed like a reprise of the last days of the civil war, when these two leaders fought each other to a bloody standstill with heavy artillery.

Two days later, a scuffle between Hizbollah and Amal (another Shi'i party) on one side, and Hariri Future Current partisans on the other, occurred at Arab University and later turned into a riot that spilled out of the campus into the surrounding predominantly Sunni area. Four Shi'i youths were killed and more than 200 were wounded. Even more ominously, snipers on rooftops in the area of the skirmish were caught by TV cameras firing their weapons into the crowds.

The army and internal security forces tried to separate the combatants at both of these clashes, but due to their lack of elementary riot control equipment, such as shields, helmets, and tear gas, soldiers often had to retreat to the sidelines as a result of stone throwing between the rioters. Ironically, while the fighting was at its apex in the Arab University area on January 25, international donors were pledging millions to the Siniora government for reconstruction purposes at the Paris 3 Conference, a gathering hosted by Jacques Chirac to assist Lebanon.<sup>37</sup>

Hizbollah leaders and Aoun were blamed by President Bush and President Chirac for instigating the use of force that, according to Chirac, "tarnished the general strike and emptied it of any vestige of democratic content."<sup>38</sup> For their part, anti-Syrian politicians and militia leaders Jumblat and Geagea joined the chorus of accusations by claiming that the strike's violence indicated Hizbollah's move toward a coup d'etat against the government.<sup>39</sup> Scoffing at these accusations which "emanated from government militias," a reference to the ferocious clashes between two men's militias during the civil war, Nasrallah rejoined that "if we wanted to use force to dislodge the Feltman government, we could have done so from day one."<sup>40</sup>

Hizbollah's reticence to use anything more than the force of numbers as an instrument of protest is based on the probability of its loss of legitimacy as a national resistance movement if its partisans or sympathizers attack compatriots for any reason. The party has always made a strong point of its clean hands in the civil war, and contrasts its record with that of all other political forces presently operating in the political arena. Furthermore, opposition interests are not considered to be served by any activity that might be branded by their opponents as a premeditated or organized use of force. Consequently, Nasrallah and Aoun have sternly warned their supporters of the pitfalls involved in physical confrontation and ordered them to avoid any trap set by government partisans by refraining from the use of any violence no matter how great the provocation might be. However, the January riots indicate that the implementation of these formal opposition "rules" may be difficult.



At this writing there are no signs of any position changes at the local level, although talks recently held between Iranian and Saudi officials indicate that Iran might be willing to accept a change in the composition of the cabinet proposed by the Saudis and their Lebanese government allies. A quick end was put to that notion, however, when the suggested compromise was immediately shot down by Bashar al-Asad. The Syrian leader apparently will take no chances in his drive to repossess Lebanon.

Yet while central Beirut remained under siege at the beginning of February 2007, there was a significant reminder of where Hizbollah's main interest and major activity resides. On February 2, the day after Prime Minister Olmert's testimony on the summer 2006 war in which he expressed satisfaction over UNIFIL's presence at the border and Hizbollah's alleged withdrawal, Hizbollah militants took the occasion to remind the Israeli premier of their presence by placing some 30 party flags on metal stanchions a yard or so away from the fence, from one end of the Lebanese-Israeli demarcation line to the other. When Israeli border security complained to UNIFIL that the wind was pushing the banners over Israeli territory, they were all immediately moved back one foot.<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how a strategy designed in 1980 by Syrian and Iranian leaders to achieve their regional objectives has been updated to fit today's version of the struggle for Lebanon. Following the plan's guidelines and with considerable improvisation on the part of its leaders, Hizbollah slowly evolved from a guerilla band to its present status as a modern Arab army, and from a fledgling political party into the spearhead of the anti-government coalition. While there is no doubt that the consistent support of Syria and Iran over the years has helped to develop Hizbollah and bring it to the important position it enjoys in the Lebanese political arena today, much credit is due to its leadership for its managerial and organizational skills, as well as to the organization's respectable performance on the battlefield and in the area of social and public service delivery.

Hizbollah's progress in these areas was shown to have encouraged a parallel evolution within the Shi'i community that moved from some initial skepticism over the party's goals and staying power to the community-wide and intense support witnessed in rallies and demonstrations in the aftermath of the recent confrontation with Israel. Unlike Lebanon's other fragmented sectarian communities, the Shi'a appear to have incorporated the hopes and aspirations of the Hizbollah leadership as their own. This

has led them to form a bond with the Islamic organization that has been sustained despite the efforts of the United States, Israel, and other members of the international community to sever it. As demonstrated in this paper, members of the Shi'i community appear to be as ready to participate in the massive but peaceful street protests that have been unfolding in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon as they were to assist Hizbollah combatants in the summer of 2006. It is this communal solidarity that underlies Hizbollah leaders' capacity to besiege the Siniora government in all regards, and in so doing, to retain its image of a non-belligerent, democratic participant in Lebanese affairs—a national resistance. An untoward use of force against the government or any citizen would therefore seriously undermine this image, jeopardizing Hizbollah's continuing mission of militant jihad against the Israeli state and encouraging further internal and external efforts to disarm it as a "terrorist" organization.

The outcome of this restriction on the use of force is that the pressure tactics already initiated by Hizbollah and its allies will continue, although they may be applied in varying ways and degrees at locales that will affect the operation of the government rather than disrupt vital public services. Ironically, the perpetration of violent clashes may be a tactic that best serves the government's interests. By "proving" that a coup d'état or a second civil war is being planned by Hizbollah "terrorists" and their sponsors, the Lebanese government's requests for further U.S. or international support might buy them additional time to work their way out of the prevailing dangerous situation. However, it seems doubtful that any Western country would want to be involved in another—and probably worse—"Battle of Beirut" if such support transcended diplomatic initiatives.

Thus, the present political standoff in Beirut has serious implications

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for U.S. policy in Lebanon, because Syria's behavior today in the competition for Lebanon appears to be every bit as adamant as it was in the days preceding the disastrous 17-year civil war. With the stakes the same or even higher now, Damascus, assisted by its ally Iran, can be expected to continue to

dig in its heels with regard to any solution of the present Lebanese impasse that is not amenable to long-standing local and regional goals previously described in this paper. With further leverage in the Palestinian-Israeli war theater and in the Iraqi morass, Syria is better equipped now than before to confront U.S. designs in Lebanon. Thus, removal of Syrian influence

in Lebanon as the United States and its local allies would like to do will be an arduous task with considerable risks in terms of inciting yet another uncontrollable Middle East conflagration. Would the United States be prepared to fill the role in Lebanon that the Israelis were forced by Syria and its Lebanese allies to forfeit in the 1980s?

As things stand today, Washington cannot count on Israel to play a heavy role of assistance in its foreign policy dilemmas. Opening an additional war front against a Syria that is at least as well armed as Hizbollah and that has recently signed a mutual defense treaty with Iran is a road the Jewish state will most likely not wish to travel. Nor is it likely that any international organization such as NATO or the Arab League would wish to pit its forces against Hizbollah and try to disarm it after witnessing what recently happened to the powerful Israeli Defense Forces.

In light of an apparent paucity of palatable and workable alternatives, the best course of action for the United States at this point might be to take a page from the Baker-Hamilton report and engage Syria, the local chess master, in serious talks on a solution to the present Lebanon crisis. This solution might include a package deal of some sort in which land-for-peace negotiations between Lebanon, Syria, and Israel could lead to disarmament of Hizbollah by Damascus—the only actor that has a chance of doing so. While adopting this course of action to defuse the Lebanese situation would mean foregoing the Bush administration's refusal to talk with "state sponsors of terrorism," doing so could signal Washington's willingness to take a more pragmatic approach to the shifting strategic balance in the Middle East in the wake of its ill-fated invasion of Iraq. ■

## ENDNOTES

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- 8 Martin Kramer analyzes the ideological connections between Iran and its ally in "Redeeming Jerusalem: The Pan-Islamic Premise of Hizbollah," in David Mehashri, ed., *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), 105-30.
- 9 See Kramer, "Hezbollah: The Calculus of Jihad," 539-56; and Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, 26-27.
- 10 According to the Taif Accord, Syrian troops in Lebanon would help in the reconstitution of Lebanon's fragmented military and security organizations. The 30,000-odd Syrian troops in Lebanon were to withdraw to the Bekaa Valley within two years and eventually, by agreement between the Lebanese and Syrian authorities, leave Lebanon. Damascus made sure, however, that Beirut saw eye-to-eye with its open-ended "security" role.
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- 13 See Harik, "Between Islam and the System: Sources and Implications of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hizbullah," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40 (1) (March 1996): 41-67.

- 14 See Harik, "Syrian Foreign Policy and State/Resistance Dynamics in Lebanon," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 20 (1997): 249-65, for information on the Israel-Hizbollah wars of 1993 and 1996 and analysis of Syria's manipulation of the Lebanese actors.
- 15 Shebaa Farms, an area 25 kilometers long and eight kilometers wide, constitutes about 2 percent of Lebanon's total area and is underlain by an important water reservoir. Landowners' property deeds are registered in the Sidon registry under the names of Lebanese families. The UN position on the Shebaa issue is based on the fact that the area had to be treated differently from the rest of the "security zone" since it was under UN jurisdiction initiated by the agreement between Syria and Israel to disengage in 1973. Syrian troops had been operating freely in the unmarked Syrian/Lebanese border area. Israeli occupation of Shebaa prevents an accurate delineation of the boundary lines at the present time.
- 16 Shaul Mofaz, interview by Yakov Erez, *Maariv*, September 20, 1998, 16. See also Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt, eds., *The Lost Battlefield? Implications of Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000). In the speech delivered on May 23, 2000, and repeated almost verbatim on May 23, 2006, Hassan Nasrallah also implied that Israelis living in northern Israel now faced danger, noting that "our presence in South Lebanon contiguous to the northern part of Occupied Palestine is our most important stronghold." Both speeches were broadcast by al-Manar Television.
- 17 Hassan Nasrallah, broadcast on al-Manar Television, September 29, 2001. This was the first anniversary of the second intifada.
- 18 See *U.S. State Department Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001 and 2002* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2002 and 2003), including Richard I. Armitage's testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on October 28, 2003. Armitage devoted considerable space to Hizbollah and its sponsors. See also Gary C. Gambill, "The U.S.-Syrian Crisis and the End of Constructive Engagement," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 5 (4) (April 2003).
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- 25 *Ibid.*, July 20, 2006, 2.
- 26 *Ibid.*, July 25, 2006, 2.
- 27 See issues of Israeli daily newspapers *Haaretz*, *Yediot Aharonot*, and the *Jerusalem Post* from August 9 to August 30, 2006, and Amir Kulick, "Hizbullah vs. the IDF: The Operational Dimension," *Strategic Assessment* 9 (3) (November 2006), <[www.tau.ac.il/jcss/sal/v9n3p7Kulick.html](http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/sal/v9n3p7Kulick.html)> (accessed April 22, 2007).

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- 29 Exum, *Hizbullah at War*, 3-5.
- 30 U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Professor Augustus Richard Norton of Boston University, speaking on *Lebanon: Securing a Lasting Cease-Fire*, 109th Cong., 2nd sess., September 13, 2006.
- 31 *As-Safir*, September 25, 2006, 1.
- 32 CNN and Reuters ran news reports on this celebratory event on September 23, 2006; coverage also appeared in *L'Orient-le Jour*, *As-Safir*, and other local media on September 25, 2007.
- 33 Broadcast on Al-Manar Television, November 18, 2006.
- 34 There is some indication that the Russians and Chinese may be reluctant to back implementation of the international tribunal as they fear future legal and political repercussions if the trial is not held under Lebanese jurisdiction and in accordance with Lebanese law.
- 35 Broadcast on Al-Manar Television, November 30, 2006. Government loyalists held counter-demonstrations in the Bekaa Valley town of Chtaura, in Tripoli, and in other locales during December.
- 36 Military communiqué appearing in *L'Orient-le Jour*, December 8, 2006, 3.
- 37 At the Paris 3 conference, donors pledged more than \$7 billion to aid post-war reconstruction in return for the government's promise to carry out a comprehensive program of fiscal reforms and privatization. In declaring her country's \$770 million pledge above the amount already voted by Congress for Lebanon, U.S. Secretary of State Rice reminded the Lebanese government that "SC Resolution 1701 would have to continue to be pursued although the road would be long."
- 38 *Agence France Press*, as reported in the *Daily Star*, January 26, 2007, 2.
- 39 Deputy Wael Bou Faour, broadcast on Lebanese Broadcasting Company television, January 24, 2007. On the same day, opposition forces made complaints about the "violent reactions of government militias," with reference to the sniper activities in the Arab University area.
- 40 Broadcast on Al-Manar Television, January 24, 2007.
- 41 This incident was reported to the author on February 7, 2007, in Beirut by UNIFIL intelligence officers who wish to remain anonymous. The incident was also mentioned in *L'Orient-le Jour*, February 5, 2007, 4.