

The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics

Augustus Richard Norton

Hezbollah is the product of a quarter century of history.¹ The organisation began as a cat's paw of Iran, a righteous, violently militant collection of young revolutionaries who had no time for mundane politics. With time's passage, and the generosity of its Iranian patron, it has built an array of institutions, some military, mostly to provide for the quotidian needs of a growing number of constituents. Its ideology has evolved and adapted to the realities of Lebanon, but it remains virulently anti-Israel and hostile to the American hegemony which it sees as a fundamental threat to the future of the Middle East and its cultural integrity. Hezbollah espouses a model of modernity and empowerment that has attracted a broad following in Lebanon's large Shia community, which accounts for about 1.4 million of the county's 4 million citizens. Many other Lebanese see it as an existential threat and no doubt hoped for its defeat in the 2006 war. Although it was infamous for blatant acts of terrorism in the 1980s and early 1990s, it fought an ultimately successful campaign of resistance against Israel's occupation of Lebanon while respecting non-combatant immunities and other key norms of warfare. In short, this deeply embedded political party, which is now very much an integral part of the political system, usually confounds simple stereotypes and classifications.

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¹The most reliable sources on Hezbollah are: Alagha, *Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology*; Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*; Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face*; Norton, *Hezbollah: Short History*, and Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*. There are a variety of spellings of "Hezbollah" as reflected in these book titles. While a standard spelling is used in the text, in referenced sources the original spelling is retained.

This article offers an overview of Hezbollah's emergence, political evolution, calculations in instigating the 2006 war, and its place in postwar Lebanon.

The crucible of invasion

In 1982, mid-way through Lebanon's civil war, Israel invaded Lebanon with the intention of destroying the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO),² and installing a friendly government in Beirut that would be ready to make peace with Israel.³ Utterly preoccupied with the PLO when it invaded, Israel paid little attention to the Lebanese Shia community, which predominates in southern Lebanon, the northern Biqa valley and Beirut's southern suburbs. Hezbollah (the "Party of God"), did not even exist before 1982. The group that was gaining in popularity in the early eighties was Amal (literally meaning "Hope," but also an acronym for the "Lebanese Resistance Detachments"). Amal was the progeny of a dynamic reform movement created in 1974 by al-Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian cleric of Lebanese descent, who devoted two decades to raising the political and religious consciousness and the quality of life of Lebanon's long under-privileged Shia community.⁴ Although al-Sadr had presumably been murdered in Libya in 1978, Amal was enjoying a resurgence in 1982 when it battled several Palestinian guerrilla groups and insisted that Palestinian fighters stop their brutish treatment of Lebanese civilians. Amal supporters had tired of living in the Israeli-Palestinian crossfire, and tended to direct their blame at the Palestinians for provoking Israeli attacks that victimised Lebanese civilians. Amal enjoyed substantial support from Damascus, where the movement was seen as a check on the PLO, but after Syria's defeat by Israel in 1982 Amal momentarily embraced a *pax americana* and the notion that Lebanon's civil war had ended.

But the Israeli invasion only opened a new chapter in the civil war. As the Israeli army streamed northward in 1982 to lay siege to Beirut, they ran into stiff resistance not only around the Palestinian camps, but also on the southern approaches to the capital where Lebanese Shia fighters put up stiff resistance. Many of these fighters, inspired by the Iranian revolution that had toppled the Shah three years before, would migrate away from Amal and eventually join Hezbollah. The Israeli army would remain in Lebanon for eighteen more years, although it withdrew to a border occupation "security" zone – accounting for more than ten percent of Lebanese territory – in 1985. Israel finally withdrew unilaterally

² After challenging the regime in Jordan in 1970, the PLO lost its footing in that country and established itself as the dominant militia force in southern Lebanon where it found ready support, especially in the Palestinian refugee camps that stemmed from the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948–49. Brynen's *Sanctuary and Survival* provides rich and informed detail on the PLO's role in Lebanon.

³ The seminal account is by Schiff and Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War*.

⁴ The primary reference on Amal is Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a*.

in May 2000, but by then its occupation had had a profound impact on Lebanese politics.

Hezbollah emerges

While the formation of Hezbollah began in 1982, it would be two more years before it came into shape as a coherent organisation. For Iran, the creation of Hezbollah represented the realisation of the revolutionary state's zealous campaign to spread the message of the self-styled "Islamic revolution", whereas for Syria the Shia party was a fortuitous instrument for preserving its interests: Syria's alliance with Iran presented it with the means to strike indirectly at both Israel and the United States, as well to keep Lebanese allies, including the Amal movement, in line. Nonetheless, Syria viewed Hezbollah with considerable suspicion and there were several celebrated clashes, including one in 1987 when Syria killed 23 Hezbollah members in retaliation for the killing of one of its soldiers.

From its first moments, Hezbollah defined itself in contrast to Amal. Whereas Amal was decidedly reformist and secular, Hezbollah embraced Iran's revolutionary model of clerical rule and judged Lebanon's *bakshish* (bribe)-lubricated political system to be unreformable. In 1985, when Amal launched its "war of the camps", with Syrian support, to prevent a resurgence of Palestinian forces, Hezbollah lent key support to the Palestinians and thwarted Syria and Amal. Since then Hezbollah has built a web of alliances with the Palestinians, and has often spoken on behalf of expanding their rights and allowing them access to the economy, even though the prevalent opinion in Lebanon opposes anything that smacks of *tawtin* (naturalisation) of the refugees.

There are now over 400,000 Palestinian refugees registered in Lebanon, most of whom live in twelve largely autonomous refugee camps. In the deprivation and isolation of the camps, a myriad of militant and jihadist Sunni Islamist groups have emerged, often drawing inspiration and anger from the chaos of Iraq. Most of these groups are opposed to the Palestinian nationalist current of Fatah now led by Mahmoud Abbas. As Bernard Rougier notes, they typically view Shias as apostates (*rafadis*) and are therefore fundamentally contemptuous of Hezbollah, but this has not prevented some alliances of convenience, especially against the US supported Beirut government of Fouad Siniora.⁵

As the civil war in Lebanon was drawing to a close, Hezbollah established itself as a force to be reckoned with. Hezbollah and Amal fought, in 1988–89, to contest the Shia heartland in the south and the teeming southern suburbs of Beirut, where fully half of the Shia population now resides. Divided by both ideology and practice, Hezbollah was busy creating efficient institutions, including an array

⁵ Rougier, *Everyday Jihad*.

of public services, such as clinics and construction companies, while Amal offered its members a familiar patronage system. In the southern suburbs Amal was badly defeated and lost its foothold in the capital, but Hezbollah's efforts to challenge Amal in the south were less successful, and Amal remains an important force there. Despite periodic minor clashes, the two groups have reached a political *modus vivendi*, often under the diktat of Syria.

Exiting the security zone

Israel's self-styled security zone provoked insecurity in Lebanon and served as an impetus for recruitment of young Shias intent on liberating Jabal Amil, the region of southern Lebanon that figures importantly in the early history of Shiism.⁶ Hezbollah's reputation benefited from its central role in the resistance to the occupation. In that sense former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's comment in 2006 is apt: "When we entered Lebanon . . . there was no Hizbullah. We were accepted with perfumed rice and flowers by the Shia in the south. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah."⁷

When Barak was elected prime minister in 1999, one of his campaign promises was to withdraw from Lebanon within twelve months of assuming office, either in conjunction with bilateral negotiations with Syria or unilaterally. After negotiations with the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad failed in March 2000, Israel began preparations for a unilateral withdrawal. In Beirut and Damascus, amidst much confusion and dire warnings of widespread chaos, officials seemed to be actors confused about their lines, and unsure even of their parts, so disconcerting was a voluntary Israeli exit from Lebanon. In contrast, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah revealed a cool demeanour. His statements stood out for the clarity of their analysis and his calm assurances of Hezbollah's careful preparations for the aftermath. He insisted that there would not be retaliatory killings and revenge attacks.⁸

The withdrawal finally came on 24 May 2000, inspiring an extraordinary celebration in Lebanon, especially in the south. Tens of thousands of displaced residents flooded in to take possession of their liberated homes and villages. There was very little violence and Nasrallah was the star of day. Many of the militia allies of Israel fled with their families. Those who remained were tried for collaboration by the state, typically being given sentences of four or five years. Overall, this will go down as a remarkably orderly period, especially when measured against the history of internecine violence that has scarred Lebanon for much of the past few decades.

⁶ See Norton, "(In)security Zones".

⁷ Peraino, "Barak's View".

⁸ Norton, "Hizballah and the Withdrawal from Lebanon", 32–3.

The Shebaa farms file

Though Israel's withdrawal was certified by the United Nations, Syria was not at all enchanted with losing Hezbollah's role as a willing device to pressure Israel. A few months before the Israeli withdrawal, pro-Syrian figures led by Amal's Nabih Berri began talking about the Shebaa farms.⁹ The farms are a 25 square kilometre patch of land owned by Lebanese but located in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (there are, in fact, about two dozen anomalies along the Lebanese-Syrian border – areas in which the border is either ambiguous or unsettled). While the prevailing international view has been that all of the Golan Heights are occupied Syrian territory, Lebanon – with Syrian support – now underlined its claim that the farms were, in fact, Lebanese territory. Unless Israel withdrew from the farms as well, its withdrawal from Lebanon would be incomplete. Up to early May 2000, senior officials in Hezbollah knew little about the area, but over the next six years the Shebaa farms would become notorious as a locale for periodic Hezbollah attacks on Israeli occupation forces. For Hezbollah, and for its ally Syria, the purported occupation of the Shebaa farms was very convenient because, under the banner of resistance, Hezbollah could periodically remind Israel that the Golan Heights remained unfinished business.

In the summer of 2000, there was a serious debate within Hezbollah about whether to turn their focus to the Lebanese political scene or to maintain their resistance posture in both Lebanon and the Middle East. Urged on by Iranian leader Ali Khamenei, Hezbollah's official legal authority, the party declared that the task of liberation was incomplete.¹⁰ But while many Lebanese Shias embraced Hezbollah's argument that its armed presence along the border was a deterrence to Israeli aggression, many other Lebanese refused to buy the claim, especially as the years passed.

From the Israeli withdrawal of May 2000 until the eruption of war in July 2006, there was aggressive patrolling, heated rhetoric and periodic episodes of violence by both sides. Most of the armed attacks were in the disputed Shebaa farms. By historical standards, however, this was a relatively quiet period. In general, clashes respected "rules of the game", which had been codified in writing in 1996 and specified that Israel would not attack civilians in Lebanon and Hezbollah would not attack Israel. As Daniel Sobelman notes, the rules were so well established that officials were sometimes quoted as saying that such and such skirmish was "within the rules".¹¹ The Hezbollah leadership was unanimously persuaded, as were most of the supporters, that its demonstrated military prowess,

⁹ See Karam, "Internal and External Determinants of a Crisis", 63–4.

¹⁰ While Khamenei is the official legal authority for Hezbollah, most Lebanese Shias – including most of the rank-and-file Hezbollah members – follow either Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq or Lebanon's Ayatollah Muhammad Husain Fadlallah.

¹¹ Sobelman, *New Rules of the Game*, 67–82.

and its accumulating military arsenal provided by Iran and Syria, was successfully deterring Israel from invading Lebanon again. In July 2006, this would be revealed as wishful thinking.

Playing politics

Lebanon has a curious electoral system that is intended to accommodate its *mélange* of confessional spirits, diverse regional interests and personal rivalries. The Lebanese state is weak at the centre, which makes it exceptional in the Middle East. Voters go to polls every four years (barring the years of the civil war, 1975–90) to vote for members of parliament. As a result of the Tæf Agreement of 1989, which marked the end of the civil war, seats are now divided equally between Christians and Muslims, in contrast to the prior distribution that favoured Christians by a six to five ratio. The 128 parliamentary seats are subdivided along confessional lines (for example, twenty-seven seats each for the three largest sects – Shias, Sunnis and Maronites), and most districts are confessionally mixed.¹² Voters cast ballots for each available seat in the district regardless of the seat's confessional label. Thus, a Maronite Christian living in Baabda (near Beirut) votes in a district where there are also Shia and Druze seats. Thus, when casting her ballot, she votes for every empty seat, including those allocated to other sects. Since candidates have to appeal across confessional lines, the system tends to promote local inter-sectarian electoral alliances.

In its early days, Hezbollah was contemptuous of Lebanese politics. The coterie of young clerics who comprised Hezbollah's cadre resented the non-clerical leadership of Amal, and the movement's accommodation with clientelism and corruption. Unlike the Amal politicians, who aspired to becoming the new Shia bourgeoisie, the cadre of Hezbollah – men in their twenties and thirties for the most part – had been trained in al-Najaf and Karbala, in Iraq, or Qum, in Iran, where they were ideologically inculcated by Ayatollahs Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Muhsin al-Hakim, and Ruhollah al-Musavi Khomeini, among others, and taught that there could be no accommodation with a corrupt political system.

The looming elections in 1992, the first since 1972, posed an intriguing question for Hezbollah: should the party adhere to its declared ideological position and reject participation in a confessional political system that it described as corrupt and unreformable, or should it seize the moment and compete in the election? Twelve leading members were deputised to take a decision. The debate, blessed by Iran, turned on several key questions, including whether participation in a “non-Islamic” government was legitimate, and where ideology should bend to practical interests. The crucial question was whether by participating Hezbollah

¹² Norton, “Lebanon after Al-Ta'if”.

would be co-opted and thereby desert its principles and its Islamic vision. In the end, ten of the twelve men embraced competing in elections.¹³

Overall, the decision to play Lebanese politics was widely popular in the Shia community where there is a deep-seated sense of political disenfranchisement. Winning seats in parliament also offers greater access to government resources (literally, allocations), which are typically distributed confessionally in Lebanon. There were also strategic benefits to winning elected office. Hezbollah would gain both official recognition as a political institution in Lebanon as well as a place at the table to be able to head off problematic initiatives.

In 1992, Hezbollah and its non-Shia electoral allies captured twelve seats, including eight Shia seats. With some modest variation from one election to another, it has maintained that pattern, thereby holding around ten percent of all parliamentary seats. As a result of local elections, Hezbollah controls about two-thirds of predominantly Shia municipalities, including the massive Beirut suburbs of Bourj al-Barajneh and Ghobeirre.¹⁴

In each election, the Hezbollah leadership has declared that its members are legally required, as though commanded by Allah (*taklif al-shari*), to support the party, leading its opponents to blast the party for exploiting religion. Lebanese Ayatollah Fadlallah has levelled his own criticism at the party for a “perverse practice” that might lead to the cheapening of religious principles, as the Lebanese scholar Joseph Alagha reports.¹⁵ Despite this problematic use of Islamic doctrine, what remains striking about Hezbollah’s political campaigns is the extent to which non-religious themes are habitually emphasized, including economic exploitation and underdevelopment, inequities in the political system, personal freedom and opportunity, and, of course, security.

Syria’s electoral engineering

The central preoccupation of the Shia community was for many years the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. In its campaign slogans, Hezbollah capitalised on its role in the resistance, as in 1996 when some of its posters read: “they resist with their blood, resist with your vote”. Particularly in 2000, the year of Israel’s unilateral withdrawal, Hezbollah might have won four or five more seats at the expense of Amal, had it not been for the *saqf al-suri* (“Syrian ceiling”), widely understood as an upper limit set by Syria on the number of Hezbollah candidates permitted

¹³ Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem, who like many Hezbollah members began his involvement in Lebanese politics as a member of Amal in the 1970s, offers the most detailed insider account of the “deep internal debate” that preceded the elections. Qassem, *Hizbullah*, 187–200.

¹⁴ Ghobeirre, the largest town in the suburbs, has been singled out by the UN Habitat “best practices” program, designed to highlight development success stories, for its low income housing. It is one of only three municipalities that have gained the same recognition in Lebanon.

¹⁵ Alagha, *Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology*, 212; and Sankari, *Fadlallah*, 241–7.

to compete. The ceiling reflected Syria's usual balancing game in Lebanese politics with the result that in 2000 an Amal-Hezbollah alliance – the Resistance and Development Bloc – won all 23 available seats in southern Lebanon and more than a quarter of all seats in parliament.

Indeed, Syria played a persistently intrusive role in all of Lebanon's elections from 1992 until 2005. Syrian manipulation included composing candidate lists and drawing electoral districts with a view to isolating opposition voices and ensuring the victory of allies. Syria's "pro-consuls" in Lebanon, General Ghazi Kanaan and later General Rustom Ghazzali, imposed periodic diktats, notably three-year extensions to the presidential terms of Elias Hrawi in 1995 and Emile Lahoud in 2004. In each case the Lebanese parliament compliantly approved the "one-time exceptions" to the constitutional provision that limits presidents to a single six-year term.

In the case of Lahoud, there was significant and vocal opposition. The most notable opponent was Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.¹⁶ The 2004 extension provoked a firm response by the United Nations Security Council, which passed Resolution 1559, which called for, among other things, the disarmament of militias (that is, Hezbollah) and the withdrawal of foreign forces (the Syrian army). In October 2004, after Lahoud's extension was approved, Hariri resigned from office. Four months later, on 14 February 2005, he was assassinated in a massive bomb attack that claimed his life and the lives of ten colleagues. The assassination of Hariri, widely attributed to Syria, prompted massive anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut that helped to loosen Syria's grip on the Lebanese political system. By April, facing concerted international pressure and angry Lebanese demonstrators, the Syrian army left Lebanon for the first time since it had intervened in the civil war nearly three decades before. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Omar Karami, known for his pro-Syrian loyalties, resigned from office as Lebanon prepared for fresh parliamentary elections.

Under significant pressure, particularly from the United States, the elections were held in May 2005. Calls for reform of the electoral law by opposition groups, including Hezbollah and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, were spurned.¹⁷ The result was a resounding victory by the "Cedar Revolution", a coalition of Sunni Muslims, Druze and some Christians, who captured a robust majority in the parliament. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt took the initiative to co-opt both Hezbollah and Amal as a device to prevent an electoral alignment

¹⁶ In Lebanon's confessional political system, the top positions are allocated to the three largest sects, hence the president is always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister always a Sunni and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. Hence, President Emile Lahoud is a Maronite, the late Rafic Hariri a Sunni and Nabih Berri a Shia. Under this system, members of Lebanon's remaining 15 sects, who account for less than 30 percent of the total population, may never fill the three top offices, so long as the confessional system persists.

¹⁷ The electoral law that had been imposed by Syria in 2000 was designed to fragment the Christian vote and to isolate and disadvantage opposition figures.

between the Shia and the most popular Christian politician, retired General Michel Aoun, who had returned to Lebanon from exile in France to compete in the elections.¹⁸ Hezbollah gained two ministerial posts in the new government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, a long-time confidante of Rafic Hariri, and in return received the government's acknowledgement of its role as a national resistance force.

The 2006 war

A "National Dialogue" bringing together top Shia, Sunni, Druze and Maronite political leaders, including Nasrallah, Aoun, Berri, Geagea, Siniora, Saad al-Din Hariri, the son of Rafic, and former president Amine Gemayel, began in March 2006 to address three issues, the UN-led enquiry into the assassination of Rafic Hariri, Lebanon's relations with Syria, and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarming of militias.¹⁹ The dialogue continued into June but it skirted the issue of disarming Hezbollah as increasing numbers of Lebanese were demanding. Hezbollah's argument continued to be that in the absence of any other credible instrument for defending Lebanon from Israel it would continue to protect the country. Moreover, there was the unfinished business of the still-occupied Shebaa farms. Nasrallah had pointedly secured Siniora's agreement, when it joined the cabinet following the May 2005 elections, that the group was a resistance movement (not a militia).

Finally, on 12 July 2006, despite Hezbollah's public and repeated insistence that it would do nothing to jeopardise the upcoming summer tourist season, it was to deliver on *al-wad al-sadiq* ("the faithful promise") to secure the release of the three or four remaining Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails that Hezbollah launched its operation²⁰ – presumably to demonstrate its tenacity and ability to strike and deter Israel. Hezbollah probably reckoned that Lebanese proponents of disarming the militia would be silenced by a dramatic success. These calculations were premised on measured and limited Israeli retaliation. As events would show, and as Nasrallah and others would later admit, Hezbollah had made a major miscalculation.

¹⁸ Despite the defective electoral law, Aoun won 21 seats (the total would have been substantially larger had it not been for the temporary alliance of convenience between the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Hezbollah), but was pointedly excluded from the government to deny him a platform for winning the presidency in 2007. The Maronite militia leader and presidential aspirant Samir Geagea, whose Lebanese Forces militia had fought bloody battles with the Aoun-led army in the late 1980s, was particularly vehement in demanding Aoun's exclusion. Nevertheless, the attempt to ostracize Aoun backfired and he later became Hezbollah's partner in the opposition.

¹⁹ See Karam, "Internal and External Determinants of a Crisis", 51–2.

²⁰ A motorised Israeli patrol was ambushed in an unpopulated area of Israel bordering with Lebanon, three Israeli soldiers were killed on the spot, and two others were initially captured. By the afternoon five Israeli soldiers fell, and a top-of-the-line Merkava tank was destroyed on Lebanese soil as the IDF attempted to pursue the captors.

Vowing to crush Hezbollah as a military force and to free its two captured soldiers, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert confounded Hezbollah's calculations and responded massively to the incident. Israel and its US ally viewed the conflict as a proxy war with Iran, and both countries were intent to see Hezbollah crushed. Israel enjoyed broad international support, including widespread condemnation of Hezbollah for violating Israel's border and snatching the soldiers, especially since Israel had unilaterally withdrawn from the country six years before. Key Arab states were quick to voice their disapproval of Hezbollah's action, including Saudi Arabia, which within a day criticised "uncalculated adventures". Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates followed suit.²¹

If Israel enjoyed international license for a relentless attack, which its Chief of Staff General Dan Halutz vowed would set the Lebanese recovery back by two decades,²² the license expired after a few weeks of mutual pummeling, and particularly as civilian losses mounted. By the time a ceasefire was finally in place by mid-August, Israel and the United States were forced to scale back their demands dramatically. Indeed, a "7 point plan" promulgated by the Lebanese government, and preserving the sovereign prerogatives of Lebanon would decisively shape the ceasefire. The centrepiece for the ending of the war was Security Council Resolution 1701 which provides for the enhancement of UNIFIL, deployed in Lebanon since 1978. Especially with heavy European involvement, the UN force would become stronger, or so it was hoped. In practice, the force would avoid taking any action to disarm Hezbollah without (unlikely) government approval. For its part, Hezbollah would avoid brandishing weapons in UNIFIL's area of operations.²³

No doubt, the presence of 15,000 soldiers and sailors exhibiting impressive levels of professionalism, and equipped with modern war machinery, such as main battle tanks, not to mention a naval component, poses a complication for any belligerent contemplating war. Nonetheless, even on steroids, UNIFIL is – like all UN peace-keeping forces – a collection of national contingents, each under UN command but also guided by the instructions of home governments. This characteristic was illustrated after a roadside bomb killed four Spanish and two Columbian soldiers in late June 2007. The perpetrators were linked with Fatah al-Islam, the al-Qaeda

²¹ Amidst the furies of war, Hasan Nasrallah was interviewed on al-Jazeera television on 21 July and referred to Arab disapproval as a "surprise". In addition to implying his failure to anticipate the immensity of the Israeli response, he said, "The Israeli reaction to the capture could have been harsh, but limited, if it were not for the international and Arab cover."

²² Halutz is quoted as saying, "If the soldiers are not returned, we will turn Lebanon's clock back 20 years." *CNN.com* (online) "Israel Authorizes 'Severe' Response to Abductions", 12 July 2006 <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/07/12/mideast/>

²³ See Norton, "The Peacekeeping Challenge"; Norton, "Misión Complicada"; and Göksel, "Unifil—Peacekeeping in the Line of Fire".

linked Salafi group that battled the Lebanese army in northern Lebanon throughout the summer of 2007.²⁴ The attack, which was encouraged and then applauded by al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, prompted national contingents to seek the cooperation of Hezbollah to help deter and detect further attacks despite the fact that such contacts contradicted the orders of General Claudio Graziano, the UNIFIL commander, and the intentions of the Security Council. Much like its predecessors in UNIFIL, which was first deployed in 1978, many of the contingents have also developed valuable ties with the local population, which can be an important source of mission and security-related intelligence. So long as UNIFIL sustains its neutral stance it will find a lot of support in the local population, but that suggests that UNIFIL will function as a buffer not the assertive force envisaged in some quarters in 2006.

Postwar Lebanon

Notwithstanding the celebration of Hezbollah's "victory" in the war in the wider Arab world, closer to home there was more questioning of the party's motives and the consequences, which included a reconstruction bill estimated at \$4–5 billion and a heavy toll in lives and personal property: 1,109 dead civilians, and 15,000 family homes destroyed. Much of the cross-confession solidarity that developed in the final weeks of the war, as Lebanon was being pounded by Israel, quickly faded. Just to facilitate internal transportation, 78 bridges would have to be rebuilt. The complete repair of infrastructure will take at least until late 2008. Tourism is crucial to the economy, and in 2006 alone about \$2 billion in income was lost. It may be years before the tourist sector recovers. Beirut is famous as a Mediterranean banking centre, and much of that business has found safer harbours. In short, the war was a disaster for Lebanon economically, especially considering that the national debt was already \$40 billion or twice the annual GDP, one of the highest levels of relative debt in the world.

The war has, in fact, split Lebanon in two politically. The first Lebanon is represented by a coalition of mainly Sunnis, Druze and Christians that coalesced following the assassination of Rafic Hariri. This is the so-called March 14 group, named after the extraordinary protest march of 14 March 2005, when as many as one million demonstrators gathered in Beirut in response to Hariri's murder to demand a full investigation into the assassination and to call for an exit of Syrian forces from Lebanon. This group, which won the parliamentary elections of May 2005 by capturing 72 of 128 seats, was in power during the 2006 war. It considers Hezbollah's provocative actions in the run-up to the war a *coup d'état* and accuses

²⁴ *An-Nahar*, 16 July 2007.

the organisation of being an agent of Syria and Iran with the ultimate aim of installing a theocratic Islamic Republic on the shores of the Mediterranean.

The second Lebanon is also a coalition, consisting mostly of the southern Lebanese Shia community (mainly Hezbollah and Amal) and large elements of the Christian community – especially the many followers of the magnetic Maronite politician and former General Michel Aoun. This group is somewhat confusingly called the March 8 group, in commemoration of the large demonstration mounted by Hezbollah and Amal on 8 March 2005 ostensibly to respect Hariri's memory but also to thank Syria for its supposed role in maintaining peace in the country.²⁵ The "Aounists" and Shia share a profound sense of victimisation in the face of what they see as a corrupt and unresponsive political system. The slow pace of government payments to those who lost their homes thanks to Israel's relentless bombing is widely viewed as an example of the latter, much in contrast to Hezbollah's speedy distribution of \$12,000 payments to each family made homeless by the war. The opposition alliance, formally sealed in a written compact on February 2006, has proven remarkably durable.²⁶ Most basically, the opposition is trying to expand its share of power in significant measure especially at the expense of the traditional Christian elite and the Sunni Muslims. It is the threat of a decline in Sunni prerogatives and power in Lebanon that has prompted Saudi Arabia to become key backers of the government.

Nasrallah rationalises the 2006 war by arguing that Israel was planning an attack anyway for the autumn, and that Israel was "forced" by the 12 July capture operation to launch its war earlier. Yet, in an hour-long, live interview on Lebanon's New TV on 27 August 2006, he argued: "if any of us [on the 15 member political-military council] had a one percent concern that Israel was going to reply in this savage manner we wouldn't have captured those soldiers". There is a key logical inconsistency in his argument, namely the notion that it was better to prompt the attack now, rather than later, since it was inevitable, but also claiming that Hezbollah would not have launched its operation if it had known what was coming. Another purpose of the interview, however, was to reassure his fellow Lebanese that Hezbollah's weapons were only for fighting the Israeli enemy and not "pointed" at fellow Lebanese, but this reassurance was coupled with a demand for a "national unity" government, including representatives of Hezbollah-ally the Free Patriotic Movement of General Michel Aoun – an attempt to pressure the current government out of power by insisting on a national unity government that would rule by consensus.

²⁵ Actually, hundreds of thousands of Aounists participated in the 14 March 2005 demonstrations, but when their leader General Aoun was shut out of the government after the elections in May, they moved to the opposition. Since doing so, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement has shown considerable strength in university student elections, and in the important professional associations of lawyers, doctors and engineers.

²⁶ The full translated text may be found at yalibnan.com/site/archives/2006/02/full_english_te.php

In Western circles and in the March 14 group, Hezbollah and the Aounists are perceived as trying to protect Syria by stifling efforts to authorise an international tribunal to try those accused of responsibility for the killing of Hariri and his associates (the Syrian regime is widely suspected of having directed the assassination). There is some truth in the charge, since a weakening of Syria would no doubt weaken its friends in Lebanon.

Yet, there are other games at play. The presidential term of the unpopular Emile Lahoud, also an ally of Syria, ends in November 2007. Michel Aoun, by far the most popular Maronite politician, has his eyes on the presidency, although Hezbollah has been coy in declaring whether it would support his candidacy. Aoun enjoys little support among Lebanon's political elite, but he does have a strong base of popular support in the Maronite community, as reflected in his broad success in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Given the sharp polarisation in Lebanese politics, the US and French commitment to support the government of Fouad Siniora and the deep enmity in both Paris and Washington for Hezbollah, Aoun's candidacy has been weakened despite his residual popularity among Lebanese Christians. Parliamentary speaker and Amal leader Nabih Berri has emphasized that a compromise candidate must prevail. Aoun is viewed as divisive and his alliance with Hezbollah is sufficient to disqualify him in Beirut pro-government circles as well as in leading Western capitals.

The opposition raises the ante

The autumn of 2006 was marked by an escalation of tension and demands, including a blatant ultimatum by Nasrallah on October 31 demanding that the government either agree to a national unity government, in which consensus prevails, or face widespread demonstrations and other forms of organised pressure such as blockades on the route to the national airport. In conjunction with these demands, all five Shia members of the government resigned in November, leaving even the legal status of the rump government in question. The opposition claimed that the 1989 Taëf Agreement requires that every major sect much be represented in government, prompting President Lahoud to assert that the government was no longer legitimate (*vis-à-vis* the question of an international tribune, notably). To block a vote on the tribunal, Speaker Nabih Berri refused to convene parliament, but in an end-run around the opposition, Prime Minister Siniora requested action by the UN Security Council to mandate an international tribunal. While Siniora's request is of doubtful legality, given the refusal of President Lahoud to agree to it, the tribunal was approved by the Security Council in May 2007 under the terms of Chapter Seven of the Charter, which permits the use of force to confront threats to international peace and security. As a result, the tribunal now is a sword of Damocles that swings over the heads of the opposition.

The postwar crisis took another turn on 21 November 2006 when 33-year old Pierre Gemayel, a minister in the government, son of a former president and namesake of the leader of the Phalange militia which led the “Christian” side in the civil war, was killed. The victim was a frequent critic of both Hezbollah and Syria, and is one of six prominent figures (and critics of Syria) assassinated since 2005. Many fingers understandably pointed at Syria.²⁷ But there are also suggestions that Gemayel was killed by Fatah al-Islam in retaliation for disparaging remarks he made about Muslims.²⁸

The stakes were raised even further on 1 December 2006, when opposition supporters erected 1,000 tents in Beirut’s Riyadh al-Sulh and Martyr’s Square, literally at the feet of the government, and announced that they would not budge until the government succumbed. Tension rose more or less steadily and dangerously throughout December and January, and in late January clashes broke out between Sunni gunmen and Shia demonstrators. Four people were killed. At that point, Hezbollah took a step back from the brink. On 25 January 2007, Nasrallah appeared on al-Manar television and declared that “anyone using a firearm against a Lebanese brother is working for Israeli” and the situation cooled down. In addition, the Lebanese army performed with a combination of admirable neutrality and firmness throughout this period. Since then neither side has budged very much from their political positions.

While the stalemate has been enormously costly to Lebanon’s economy, and while the risk of a new civil war is obvious, the demonstrations are now remarkably restrained and peaceful. Initially tens of thousands of opposition supporters occupied the tents, but after months of stalemate the tents often stand empty, quiet canvas testaments to the frozen political situation. In all, ten deaths may be attributed to the demonstrations, which by the autumn of 2007 had lasted ten months.

The risks of catalytic violence come from outside the government-opposition dyad. In northern Lebanon, from May to July 2007, the Lebanese army found itself in fierce battle with Fatah al-Islam, a group that includes a number of Iraq-honed jihadists as well as some homegrown Islamists inspired by al-Qaeda. For nearly a decade, the Lebanese army has periodically confronted violent Sunni Islamists, but Fatah al-Islam proved a much more formidable adversary and over 150 Lebanese soldiers perished subduing the group. In addition, 34,000 residents of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, where the fighting was concentrated, lost their homes. It is unclear whether Syria played a hand in supporting Fatah al-Islam, but the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General

²⁷ Syria is suspected of assassinating a number of leading Lebanese political figures, including two presidents – Bashir Gemayel in 1982 and Rene Mouawwad in 1989 – as well as the father of Walid Jumblatt, Kamal Jumblatt, in 1977. See Petran, *Struggle over Lebanon*, 219–20.

²⁸“Fatah al-Islam assassinated Lebanese minister Gemayel”, *yaLibnan* (online), 6 July 2007, http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2007/07/fatah_alislam_a.php

Command, a group aligned with Syria, allegedly did provide it with limited help.²⁹ The Lebanese stared into the abyss, and across the confessional and ideological spectrum voiced support for the army. Arguably, the army is the only national institution that is functioning well in Lebanon today.

The urgency of the crisis was demonstrated in June when, as mentioned earlier, six Spanish and Columbian soldiers serving in UNIFIL were killed in the south, following two calls by al-Qaeda's number two leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri for Muslims to confront the "Crusaders", meaning the international soldiers. Ironically, the attacks led to quiet security contacts between UNIFIL and Hezbollah, prompting al-Zawahiri to pointedly criticise Hezbollah.³⁰

Hezbollah's rivals fear that its ultimate aim is to transform Lebanon into an Islamic state in Lebanon and that the party is only feigning attachment to Lebanon as a pluralist society. Nasrallah and his colleagues have claimed frequently that the conditions for establishing a state based on Islamic rule will probably never exist in Lebanon, since such a state could only be established on the basis of broad consent, which is highly unlikely. Whatever dreams they might entertain, the conclusion that widespread support for an Islamic state is infeasible is a sound one.

Much turns on how true Hezbollah is to the positions that it has frequently espoused over the past decade and a half, particularly its commitment to the survival of Lebanon as a diverse, multicultural society. As Nasrallah told the late Rafic Hariri in 2000: "We don't possess second citizenship. We were born here, we will die here and we will be buried here. We starve here and satisfy our appetite here, so nobody may outbid us on our patriotism or on [our right] to belong."³¹

Conclusion

Lebanon will not be able to totter endlessly on the cusp of the maelstrom. The presidential elections, scheduled to be held in parliament by mid-November 2007, may offer an escape hatch from the continuing crisis. According to the Lebanese constitution (Article 49), the election of the president requires a quorum of two-thirds of the members, although only a simple majority of the parliament is required to elect a president. Obviously, without a dialogue between the government and the opposition, there is little prospect that a quorum will assemble. While some members of the government – notably Samir Geagea, the head of the predominantly Maronite Lebanese Forces – have dismissed the two-thirds quorum requirement, cooler heads on both sides understand that skirting the established electoral process will only exacerbate the crisis.

Since the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005, seven leading anti-Syrian figures have been murdered, including four

²⁹ *An-Nahar*, 16 July 2007.

³⁰ <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/07/07/26/10141939.html>

³¹ Norton, *Hezbollah: Short History*, 158.

pro-government MPs, most recently the Sunni member of parliament Walid Eido in June 2007 and Maronite Antoine Ghanem, who was felled along with nine others by a massive bomb in September 2007. Between the killings and a few defections, the government will barely be able to muster 50 percent for the vote. It is doubtful that the government would retain its majority in parliament if new elections were held. Many Lebanese view Fouad Siniora and his government as too much of an extension of American influence in Lebanon. The split in political sentiment was illustrated in early August 2007 in a by-election to fill the seat of the assassinated Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel. The father of the victim and former president of Lebanon, Amine Gemayel, was the pro-government candidate. Despite considerable sympathy for his loss, and some erosion of Michel Aoun's support among Christians, the pro-Aoun opposition candidate still narrowly won the seat.

Political crises are habitually resolved in Lebanon by following the dictum of "no victor, no vanquished". This suggests that there must be a dialogue between pro-government and opposition forces, but outside players, notably the Arab League, Saudi Arabia and France have at times worked energetically to undermine a compromise solution. The US, in particular, has been intent on seeing the opposition defeated, because it equates it with Iran-backed Hezbollah. Yet without a dialogue the Lebanon crisis is likely to become more dangerous and more explosive. Two decades ago, Lebanon failed to elect a president and two rival governments emerged and gave rise to a period of intense violence. Should history repeat itself, the situation would be even more dangerous this time around.

In the chaos of an unstable and partitioned Lebanon, there is no doubt that al-Qaeda clones, such as Fatah al-Islam, would move into the vacuum. Israel also might be tempted to exploit the opportunity to rebalance the books after its loss in the 2006 war, and there is little doubt that Syria would savour a chance to reassert its will in Beirut. In short, it is a potential invitation for mayhem to assume that the current stalemate may continue indefinitely.

In September 2007, the opposition pointedly stepped back from its earlier demands for a national unity government. Hezbollah, for its part, has signalled a readiness to compromise, provided that a bargain does not require it to disarm, and no credible compromise will require the disarming of Hezbollah in the immediate future.

Provided that a credible president is elected in November 2007 – and there is no absence of qualified candidates capable of straddling the government-opposition divide³² – the domestic political crisis will be attenuated, but it will not have

³² Three consensus candidates have been widely mentioned in Lebanon: Riyadh Salameh, the head of the Central Bank and a respected economist; Jean Ubaydh, a former foreign minister; and General Michel Sleiman, who has distinguished himself as the commander of the army. Sleiman is constitutionally disqualified because "Class A" public servants, which includes senior generals, are supposed to wait 24 months before running for public office. However, the parliament might waive that clause.

ended. Lebanon will remain a lightning rod for regional tensions and rivalries, and that ensures that internal differences will not soon be reconciled.

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