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HIZBALLAH AND THE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTHERN LEBANON

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON

Using as its starting point the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, this article traces Hizballah's development from a radical resistance group known especially for suicide bombings and kidnappings to a highly professional guerrilla force and a political party with a broad constituency and pragmatic leadership. The author examines Hizballah's entry into politics in the early 1990s; its evolving relations with state actors, especially Syria and Iran; its conduct during and following the withdrawal; and its future prospects.

ON 24 MAY 2000, some quarter century after Israel became entangled in Lebanon and fifteen years after it declared a "security zone" covering 10 percent of the territory, the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon finally came to an end. Although Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak has been at pains to emphasize that the Israel Defense Force (IDF) was not defeated and had left as a result of a calculated government decision, there is no confusing the fact that were it not for the activities of the Lebanese resistance, particularly Hizballah (the Party of God), Israel would have tarried far longer. The scent of defeat hung in the air for months preceding the hurried unilateral withdrawal.

The last months of occupation were also marked by dire predictions from virtually all quarters that the IDF withdrawal would only spark disorder and mayhem. Most of the speculation focused on Hizballah. Arguments were voiced that it was essentially a terrorist group (indeed, it continues to be listed as such by the U.S. State Department); that it was but a pliant instrument in the hands of Syria; and that, lacking real support among the population, it would resist ending its armed militancy so as not to be consigned to marginality on the Lebanese scene. These arguments often led to a single conclusion: that Hizballah would continue attacking Israel.

In fact, of course, this did not happen. Although tension along the Israeli-Lebanese border persists, the summer of 2000 is the first extended period since the days preceding the 1967 war that Lebanese civilians and Palestinian refugees in southern Lebanon have not been living in the cross fire.

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Hizballah's behavior confounded would-be Cassandras precisely because it is not the same organization that it was in the early 1980s. What the doom-sayers had missed was that since its creation as a rigidly ideological organization known especially for kidnappings and suicide bombings of Western targets, Hizballah has developed not only into a highly professional guerrilla force, but also into an impressive political organization with a broad and varied constituency, a pragmatic leadership, and a clearheaded strategy. All of these elements, as well as its ability to adapt to a changing political and social context, have been essential to Hizballah's success.

FORGED IN WAR

Hizballah emerged in the wake of Israel's all-out invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The invasion was a follow-up to the 1978 Litani Operation, which had left Israel in possession of areas adjacent to the border through proxy Lebanese militiamen (eventually named the South Lebanese Army—the SLA). The operation also led to UN Security Council Resolution 425 calling on Israel to “withdraw forthwith its forces” and the deployment of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). From that time forward, the IDF moved freely back and forth across the border, and at any one time Israel deployed at least 1,000 soldiers in Lebanon, not including intelligence operatives, staff officers, and advisers.

But Israel's 1978 invasion failed in its goal of driving the PLO forces north of the Litani River. The massive 1982 invasion sought to finish the job by destroying the PLO as a coherent political and military force. After a two-month siege of Beirut, the PLO agreed under pressure to withdraw from the city. This placed Israel in control of Lebanon from Beirut southward. The 1982 invasion's second objective of installing a pro-Israeli government in Beirut foundered with the assassination of President Bashir Gemayel in September 1992. Within months, however, the United States applied itself to brokering an agreement between Israel and the Lebanese government of President Amin Gemayel. The lopsided 17 May 1983 agreement virtually ceded southern Lebanon to Israel and all but guaranteed relentless Syrian and local opposition. Meanwhile, Multinational Forces (MNF)—primarily American and French—had been rushed to the country following the September 1982 massacre by Christian militiamen of more than 1,000 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila camps surrounded by the IDF. Before long, the MNF lost all semblance of neutrality and came to be seen as accomplices to an unpopular regime, and just another militia—the “international militia,” in the vernacular of the period.

It was against this background that Hizballah emerged during the summer of 1982, in the midst of the Israeli invasion, though its existence was not formally declared until 1983. At the time Hizballah came into being, the most dynamic Shi'i force in Lebanon was the reformist Amal movement, founded by the charismatic Iranian-born cleric Musa al-Sadr in the early 1970s and led

primarily by Nabih Birri after Sadr's mysterious disappearance in Libya in 1978. But by the summer of 1982, Amal, having crossed swords with the PLO in southern Lebanon, was seeking a *modus vivendi* with Israel and the United States. The movement's constituency was especially the battered people of the south, many of whom had welcomed the Israeli invaders (expecting, incorrectly, that the IDF would expel the PLO and then leave). Inevitably, Amal's stance came under fire from more radical elements inspired by the Iranian revolution.

There is little doubt that Iran and Syria were deeply involved in the creation of Hizballah. For Iran, the creation of Hizballah was part of its campaign to spread the message of the "Islamic revolution," whereas for Syria the new group was a fortuitous instrument for preserving its interests in Lebanon at a time when, militarily defeated by Israel, it faced the disastrous prospect of sharing its long western border with a state dominated not only by the United States but by Israel as well. Syria's alliance with Iran presented it with the means to strike indirectly at both Israel and the United States as well as at their presumed or real Lebanese allies, including at the time Amal, which, as noted, had been flirting with *pax Americana* but was eventually put off by Washington's churlish diplomacy in Lebanon. It was thus that in the summer of 1982, Syria acceded to the introduction of a contingent of Pasdaran, Iran's revolutionary guards, in the Biqa' Valley of eastern Lebanon. The contingent, initially 1,000-strong, eventually numbered as many as 1,500 and became the nodal point for the Iranian training, supply, and support of Hizballah under the watchful eye of Iran's ambassador to Syria, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi (today considered a member of the reformist pro-Khatami camp in Iran).

Hizballah began as a coterie of clerics and lay Shi'a inspired by the Iranian revolution of 1978-79. In contrast to Amal, whose new leaders had aspirations to join the Shi'i bourgeoisie, most of the Hizballah leaders were trained in the Shi'i seminaries of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq. If Hizballah's founders were inspired by Iran, their roots in the Hizb al-Da'wa should also be noted. The Shi'i Islamist group al-Da'wa is best known for its opposition to the Ba'thist regime in Iraq and its links to the leading Arab Shi'i jurists of the 1970s, Muhsin al-Hakim and Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, and the group had branches in Lebanon as well as in other parts of the Shi'i world. Nevertheless, at the beginning, Hizballah was hardly a popular movement, but a conspiracy of a handful of men funded by the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran.

But with Israel showing no intention of withdrawing from Lebanon, and a central government in Beirut whose actions belied its claim to represent all Lebanese, Hizballah soon began attracting large numbers of followers. Secular groups had originally spearheaded the resistance, but by 1984 the "Islamic resistance," led by Hizballah and its rival Amal, clearly dominated the campaign to end the occupation. Hizballah, in particular, shrewdly deployed the perception of its followers as men in search of martyrdom. The use of suicide bombers, especially in the 1980s, unnerved the IDF and provoked reactions that served to further enflame resistance.

Of course, Hizballah has no monopoly on martyrs (many secular resistance fighters died fighting the occupation, some in suicide missions), yet it is true that martyrdom in the service of jihad (resistance struggle) enjoys a particular resonance for Shi'i Muslims. The martyrdom in 680 C.E. of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at Karbala in present-day Iraq, has always been the single most important symbolic referent for Shi'i Muslims. Since the Iranian revolution, however, it has acquired new political meaning and been transformed from an exemplary act of suffering and sacrifice into an inspiring model for revolution and action. Husayn's determined struggle against injustice and his sacrifice is ritually and dramatically recreated in annual Muharram ceremonies (Muharram being the Islamic lunar month during which Husayn and his companions were killed by the forces of the Sunni Caliph Yazid). Significantly, the annual rituals commemorating Imam Husayn's martyrdom—revived in Lebanon by leading Shi'i clerics, including Imam Musa al-Sadr—became massive affairs over the course of Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon. Reference to the Israeli occupiers as "Yazidis" equates them to the oppressors of Imam Husayn and thereby invokes the living memory of his death and inspires courage in those who revere him. (It should be noted that the popular religion aspects of Muharram, which include bloody self-flagellation rituals, are proscribed by virtually all Shi'i clerics. Interestingly, while Amal participates enthusiastically in these rituals, Hizballahis tend to adhere to the more doctrinaire interpretations of Shi'ism and limit themselves to orderly marching in the festivals.)

IDEOLOGICAL BORROWINGS FROM IRAN

Throughout the 1980s, Hizballah's actions very much reflected the radicalization of the Shi'i scene under the impact of the Israeli occupation and Iran's implacable opposition to U.S. policies in Israel and Lebanon. During this period, Hizballah moved aggressively to strike at western influence and westerners in Lebanon. Either Hizballah itself or groups linked to it abducted dozens of foreigners and held them hostage for as long as seven years, posing such demands as the freeing of Lebanese prisoners held in Germany, Israel, and Kuwait. During the same period, Hizballah carried out suicide bombings at the U.S. embassy, U.S. embassy annex, Israeli intelligence headquarters in then-occupied Tyre, U.S. marine barracks at the Beirut airport, and French embassy. It is fair to say that the emergence of Hizballah changed the whole tenor of the conflict in Lebanon, and it played a major role in provoking the departure of the American marines from Lebanon and the scuttling of the U.S.-brokered 17 May 1983 agreement between Lebanon and Israel.

While Hizballah pursued its own local agendas in these acts, Iran's early hand in coordinating, if not always controlling, Hizballah was not difficult to discern. Indeed, during the 1980s Hizballah hewed closely to the Iranian line. Iran's influence is particularly clear in Hizballah's remarkable open let-

ter to "The Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World." The document bears a distinctive made-in-Tehran coloration and, in fact, is reliably reported to have been written by an Iranian who is today very much in the pro-Khatami reform movement. The letter, released in February 1985 to mark the one-year anniversary of the assassination, no doubt by Israel, of a rising young cleric from southern Lebanon, declared the world to be divided between the oppressed and the oppressors, chief among the latter being the United States and its regional ally, Israel. This perspective not only enjoyed resonance among the Shi'a, many of whom had first hand experience with Israeli oppression, but it also legitimized and commended the use of violence against the enemies of Islam, particularly the West.

In 1983, Israel pulled back from the Shouf Mountains overlooking Beirut but continued to occupy all of Lebanon from the 'Awali River southward, including Sidon, Lebanon's fourth largest city. Israeli losses continued to mount, and attempts to create village militias in southern Lebanon foundered (the same scheme had failed in the West Bank). Despite widespread arrests of young and middle-aged men, the momentum of the resistance was increasing. (On a personal note, it was during this period, in December 1984, that Yitzhak Rabin initiated a meeting with me and a few other scholars during which he asked what Israel should do. I told him that Israel must leave Lebanon and that to remain would only further radicalize the population. He replied that, as a politician, he could not risk attacks on Israeli towns.)

At all events, Israel redeployed its forces in Lebanon in January 1985 and officially declared the "security zone." As the IDF redeployed, the "Iron Fist" policy left ruined villages and broken bodies as a calculated lesson to those who would dare resist the occupation. The occupied area, more aptly described as an (in)security zone, predictably became a magnet for yet more resistance attacks.

HIZBALLAH'S SOCIAL BASE

While Hizballah's operations in the south were coordinated with Syria (Hizballah officials freely admitted as much) and substantial Iranian and Syrian support facilitated its development (as did the tacit and increasingly explicit support of the Lebanese government), there is no doubt that Hizballah is very much an indigenous organization. Its fighters—no more than 1,500, of whom two-thirds are part-timers—are local men. They have family ties, jobs if not professions, homes, networks of social support, and hopes and aspirations for Lebanon. In contrast to the Palestinian fedayeen, who were ascendant in parts of the country from 1970 to 1982, Hizballah fighters are totally *integrated into Lebanese society*. This was brought home to me when I was the guest of a wealthy factory owner in the Biqa' Valley, whose lovely home would have fit nicely in Thousand Oaks, California, or Burke, Virginia. My host and his wife were more interested in discussing issues like education and their children than politics, and the beautifully bound books by promi-

ment Muslim thinkers, such as Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, seemed more ornamental than well thumbed. Only later did I learn that one of their sons was an active member of the resistance and that as we dined, he had been out on operations. My point is that this young man, like so many others, did not choose the resistance because he had no alternative, but because it suited his ideals.

Similarly, if Hizballah had acted as a cat's paw of complementary Syrian and Iranian interests in Lebanon, its primary agenda was very much its own:

ridging Lebanon of the Israeli occupation. Since the late 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have been repeatedly displaced from their homes in the south as a result of Israeli military action. In April 1996 alone, hundreds of thousands of civilians were driven north by IDF bombing, sometimes in response to warnings of only two hours. Israeli strikes on Lebanese power plants darkened much of Lebanon in 1996, 1999, and twice in 2000, causing damages estimated at \$300 million. Israel calculated that by punishing the Lebanese in general and destroying national infrastructure, the government (or the Syrian government) would be motivated to trim the sails of the resistance. Israel consistently miscalculated. Israeli attacks had the opposite effect. Every time Beirut was blacked out as a result of Israeli bombing, support for the resistance surged among non-Shi'i Lebanese, especially for its steadfast response to punitive Israeli attacks.

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The Grapes of Wrath operation in early 1996 only intensified the perception of Israel as evil incarnate. The 1996 massacre by shelling of more than 100 Muslim and Christian civilians who had taken refuge in the UN base in Qana, an ancient village cited in the Bible as the place where Jesus turned water to wine, became a rallying cry against the occupation and the Zionist state. Close to the UN base, the memorial cemetery where the victims are buried has become a point of pilgrimage for Lebanese of all religious persuasions. The site is festooned with banners accusing Israel of terrorism and genocide and invoking sayings by central figures in Shi'ism (such as Imam Husayn). Many of the banners emphasize the loss of innocent blood and demand vengeance. One sign read, "Qana is the Karbala of the twentieth century; it is a land made holy by the Lord Jesus and contaminated by the Zionist Satan (enemy of God)."

It is in this sense that Hizballah officials agree privately that the movement was in large measure "created" by Israel. Without the *raison d'être* of opposing the occupation, Hizballah would not have been able to build a broad Shi'i constituency. Hizballah officials frequently observed that if Israel's presence in the south were not resisted, Israel would have little incentive even to consider withdrawing its forces. The untested converse proposition—that by ceasing resistance activities Israel would be induced to withdraw—was widely dismissed as laughably improbable.

LAYING THE GROUND FOR A POLITICAL FUTURE

Throughout the 1980s, nothing in Hizballah's actions or statements hinted at any possibility that the party would adapt to the Lebanese political game, particularly running for election and sitting in the National Assembly. To the contrary, the Lebanese political system was condemned by Hizballah as "rotten to the core" and "unreformable." By the early 1990s, however, things began to change. Several factors explain Hizballah's new approach: the end of the cold war, change in Iran, and the end of the civil war in Lebanon.

Not only did the end of the cold war facilitate the formation in 1990 of a U.S.-dominated war coalition, including Syria, but it also permitted people at least to imagine an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. If Syria were to sign a peace agreement with Israel, the Hizballahis knew that disarming the resistance would be part of the package. Meanwhile, the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989 signaled the beginning of Iran's Thermidor or postrevolutionary phase. Indeed, even before his death, the internecine fighting between Amal and Hizballah had provoked an attitude shift in Tehran, where the bloodletting was viewed with disgust. President Rafsanjani did not hide his impatience with Hizballah as a militia and publicly declared his intention to shift Iran's orientation in Lebanon to state-to-state relations and the Shi'i community as a whole. Finally, the civil war in Lebanon officially ended with the 1989 Ta'if accord, though the war in effect went on until October 1990, when General Michel Aoun (who objected that Ta'if did not address Syria's preponderant role in Lebanon) was forced to end his so-called uprising by the pressure of Syrian arms.

All of these factors provided the context for a debate that took place in 1992 over whether or not to field candidates in that year's parliamentary elections. A minority led by Hizballah's first secretary-general, Shaykh Subhi Tufayli (expelled from the party in January 1998 for his vehement criticism of his successors), staunchly opposed participation, arguing that Hizballah would be co-opted and sacrifice its ideals. The vast majority supported participation, accurately reflecting the aspirations of Hizballah's constituency, which wanted a more effective voice in the political system. A senior Hizballah official told me in May 2000 that the 1992 decision to participate in the Lebanese elections was one of the two watersheds in Hizballah's history (the other being the April 1996 Understanding discussed below).

The upshot was that Hizballah took part in the 1992 elections and came away with eight seats, the largest single bloc in the 128-member parliament (its allies from other sects won an additional four). From this time forward, Hizballah began to develop a reputation as a serious political party adept at pragmatic parliamentary alliances and tactics, even while intensifying its guerrilla warfare against the occupier.

THE “RULE BOX”

In southern Lebanon, warfare has been defined by tacit rules that, over time, have been formalized. Early in the 1980s, Daoud Suleiman Daoud, then a leading Amal figure, publicly elaborated the view that Israel should be attacked *in Lebanon*, not Israel. Hizballah excoriated Daoud at the time for respecting Israel’s “illegal boundaries,” but later the leadership came to appreciate the value of such limits in warfare, as did Israel. Thus, despite Syria’s support for the resistance, Israel generally took care to avoid targeting Syrian forces and to apologize when it happened unintentionally. Hizballah did the same when unauthorized Katyushas hit Israel in 1998.

One of the most obvious distinctions in war is the difference between soldiers and civilians. When either side fired at civilians, retaliation in kind generally followed. After Israel assassinated Hizballah Secretary-General ‘Abbas Musawi in 1992, his successor, Hasan Nasrallah, enunciated a tit-for-tat policy: If Israel hits Lebanese civilian targets, then Hizballah hits Israel. Although the action-reaction cycle was not always transparent, generally the cycle started with an Israeli attack on a civilian target, intentional or otherwise. Hizballah crossed the line as well, for example, in 1995 it shelled Israel in retribution for the killing of a top military official, Rida’ Yassin.

After Israel’s punitive Operation Accountability and Grapes of Wrath campaigns in 1993 and 1996, the rules of war in southern Lebanon were drawn with increasing specificity. The first formalization of the rules came in an unwritten 1993 understanding. These were further nailed down in a *written* but unsigned understanding between Israel and Lebanon (in fact, Hizballah) in April 1996, following Israel’s Grapes of Wrath operation, during which the resistance fired more than 600 Katyushas into Israel, while Israel fired an estimated 25,000 shells at Lebanese targets and flew about 600 combat air sorties. The gist of the April Understanding, reached thanks to intense efforts by France, Iran, Israel, Syria, and the United States, was simple: Israel would not target civilians or civilian targets (e.g., power stations), and Hizballah would not target Israel per se. In principle, each side reserved the right of self-defense within the confines of the rules, though in fact both violated them. The April Understanding also produced an innovation; a monitoring group based in the UNIFIL headquarters in Naqura with American, French, Israeli, Lebanese, and Syrian participation. The monitoring group operated on the basis of unanimity and had no enforcement mechanism, but its very existence helped lend solidity to the rules of the game.

There have been many violations of the understandings, but both sides were highly conscious of their existence, to the extent that Israeli spokespersons sometimes referred to killings of Israeli soldiers in Lebanon as having been “within the rules.” With its increasing professionalism and intense motivation, the resistance was more effective operating within the “rule box” than the IDF or the SLA. Indeed, the tempo of “routine” fighting was often broken when Israel, frustrated at its impotence in the face of mounting casu-

alties, intentionally attacked Lebanon's civilian infrastructure. Action and reaction were usually so predictable that Israel was clearly stymied in February 2000, when the resistance wisely chose not to respond to its destruction of three Lebanese power plants and thereby denied the IDF an excuse for continuing to attack Lebanese infrastructure. Whether Hizballah's restraint reflected Syrian or Iranian advice or the party's own calculation is debatable, but the decision lent credibility to the party and furthered the momentum toward withdrawal (withdrawal advocates were able to underline the futility of Israel's occupation and the rationality of the opponent).

Hizballah, even while remaining within the "rule box," had become increasingly effective in keeping its enemies on the defensive. In marked contrast to the late 1980s, when its attacks often involved large losses, the ratio of Hizballah casualties to IDF/SLA casualties dropped from more than 5:1 in 1995 to less than 2:1. Suicide bombers were superseded by coordinated military attacks that benefited from excellent planning and intelligence. Using relatively simple weapons, such as cleverly camouflaged remote control roadside bombs, the resistance impeded the enemy's mobility. Weapons were for the most part standard fare, though in January 2000 Hizballah began using wire-guided antitank missiles (reportedly American TOWs originally supplied in the 1980s to Iran by Israel as part of the Iran-Contra deal), which could literally be guided through the observation ports of heavily fortified and otherwise impregnable positions. Most of the seven Israeli soldiers felled during January and February of this year were killed by TOWs.

As part of Israel's efforts to minimize its losses, the IDF in the last years of occupation largely hunkered down in southern Lebanese strong points, venturing out on occasion on patrol, but mostly sitting captive in sandbag prisons. Even the tour of duty had to be extended to reduce the vulnerabilities inherent in changing over from one unit to another. By 1999, only eight of fifty occupation positions were actually manned by IDF soldiers, the SLA being left to man the remaining forty-two. Hizballah continued to pursue a strategy of relentlessly pummeling the most exposed positions. The extent of their success came home to me in March 2000, when I encountered, while traveling in the south, two "self-service" SLA checkpoints. In both cases, motorists would stop at a barricade, move it, drive a few meters to the next barricade, repeat the process, and then drive on. In transiting the heavily sandbagged position, one could observe the top of the helmeted head of an SLA militiaman who waved warily at the traveler but had no interest in exposing himself to more danger than necessary.

It is noteworthy that up until the eleventh hour, Israel never challenged Hizballah's right to attack its soldiers in Lebanon. Thus, Israel tacitly conceded that the IDF was an occupation force in Lebanon. Only in early 2000, as seven IDF soldiers were killed in Lebanon, were the rules of the game vigorously challenged by Israel under the impact of a public that saw its enemies as terrorists and villains. The shock was as much that the "bad guys" played by rules as that the IDF was being outplayed.

THE OCCUPATION ENDS AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

Certainly, the momentum for getting out of Lebanon very much came from Israeli society, which was increasingly intolerant of Israeli losses and rattled by Hizballah's brilliant campaign of psychological warfare begun in the late 1990s. The signal for al-Manar (the Beacon), the Hizballah flag station, was strong enough to reach Israel, offering viewers vivid images of dead and wounded IDF soldiers that were otherwise muted on Israeli television. Videotapes of martyrs in action and successful resistance assaults on SLA positions were conveniently made available to feed public anxiety in Israel.

It was to honor his campaign promises that Israeli prime minister Barak, shortly after his electoral victory, announced, "by July 2000, the army will withdraw to the international border, and it is from the international border that we will defend the north of the country. I don't advise anyone to test us when we draw back and are sitting on the border." Of course, it was clear that unilateral withdrawal was a *default strategy*. Israel clearly preferred to reach an agreement with Syria that would contain a Lebanese component.

But with the resounding failure of the Clinton-Asad summit in Geneva in March 2000, prospects of a Syrian-Israeli agreement in time to forestall a unilateral withdrawal came abruptly to an end. Remarkably, the idea that Israel would withdraw unilaterally was met with skepticism in official Lebanese and Syrian circles. In both countries, the political elite assumed that Israel, given its security preoccupations, would exit the south only in conjunction with a deal between Israel and Syria, and it was only well after Geneva that it seemed to dawn on the leaderships that Israel was serious about leaving. The months that followed were incredible political theater in both Beirut and Damascus, with the players constantly searching for a script and frequently forgetting their parts altogether. If government officials, presidents, and heads of internal security were flustered, the Hizballah leaders kept their cool. They had a clear sense of the problems Israel was facing in the south and were confident about the outcome.

Barak set the calendar by announcing that the IDF would leave by July, but once the withdrawal timetable was underway, there was no reason to linger. Armies are not mechanical toys in which one simply changes the batteries and an army set on coming home is not easily pumped up for battle. As the month of May progressed, the IDF set about consolidating its lines, destroying positions and preparing for the order to leave. Worries persisted in Israel about the proxy force and its viability. Nominally a force of 2,500, the SLA was demoralized by heavy casualties even before Barak's announced intention to leave. Desertions began to mount, and SLA coherence became suspect. The commander, Antoine Lahd, more a figurehead than an operational leader, spent a lot of time in Israel and France. When the SLA's most important operational leader, 'Aql Hashim, was assassinated in January 2000, there were real doubts that the leadership was up to the challenge.

Israel withdrew its forces on 23–24 May 2000, while the SLA simply crumbled. As the IDF hurriedly exited, thousands of Lebanese rushed by foot, donkey, and car to reclaim their villages. By the evening of 24 May, Israel's self-declared "security zone" was no more.

Meanwhile, in the final days of the occupation, anxiety had been mounting in the south. People feared not only a continuing cycle of violence, but that the victorious resistance fighters would wreak vengeance against those who lent support to Israel. I know from conversations in March, April, and May that the Hizballah leadership was very sensitive to these concerns. The last thing that they wanted was to see their anticipated victory stained by vengeance killings and especially intersectarian clashes. Thus, even as the Israeli forces were withdrawing, they sent reassurances to local community leaders, and in the days that followed they held meetings in key locales in the formerly occupied areas. Shaykh Nabil Qaouk (who headed the resistance forces), Nasrallah, and other leading Hizballah leaders held extensive

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meetings with Christian clerics to reassure them this was a national victory, not a victory by one sect or militia. And, notwithstanding several unfortunate incidents, especially looting in Marja'uyun, the former SLA headquarters, Hizballah forces displayed impressive discipline. Even the ritual pelting of Israel with stones at Fatima Gate, the crossing point just across the border from the Israeli town of Metulla, exemplifies

order, not chaos. Hizballah conveniently provides stones in piles, discreetly delineating the throwing areas. By permitting the ritual as an outlet, Hizballah may be reducing the prospects for maverick acts of violence.

Another lingering concern in the south was the fate of the several thousand men and women who had collaborated with Israel, or merely worked in Israel or traveled there for medical care. This issue was the subject of intense discussion in Hizballah's Political Bureau, which argued that the judicial system is the only mechanism for dealing with collaborators. As the trials of collaborators proceeded, Hizballah officials loudly criticized the "light" sentences and successfully pressured for an addendum to some sentences, forbidding convicted collaborators to return to their native villages for a set period. Aside from these criticisms, they basically allowed the system to work. Information compiled by the capable journalist Nicholas Blanford shows a pattern of light and medium sentences, with the typical sentence being one year in jail for militia participation. Rank and file SLA members received sentences ranging from six to eighteen months, and some were forbidden to return to their villages, usually for two years. (After the SLA withdrew from Jazzin the previous year, former militia members received similarly light sentences, and most have now been released from prison.) Individuals who entered Israel were usually sentenced to two months in jail and a fine, but all women in this category were acquitted. In absentia trials imposed harsher sentences of fifteen years and up on SLA leaders, but the

big fish had already fled to Israel or wherever a visa would carry them. The only senior official in custody is Major Emile Nasr, who had been an agent for Hizballah for many months preceding Israel's withdrawal. He is now in jail serving concurrent terms that total 120 years imprisonment but is widely expected to be released within five years, if not much sooner.

Throughout the painstaking process of confirming the Israeli withdrawal, Hizballah was at pains to declare its commitment to recovering the last millimeter of Lebanese territory, but it also acknowledged that it would not act hastily to reinitiate violence. In sum, Hizballah's behavior and deference to state authority have worked to its political advantage. It reaped recognition in an unprecedented meeting between Nasrallah and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who praised Hizballah's restraint and its promise of cooperation. The meeting with Annan offers a remarkable contrast with Hizballah's earlier days, when it was hostile to the UN and especially to the UN force in the south.

Without an agreement between Syria and Israel, there will be little pressure on Hizballah to disarm. Syria's calculated strategy is to allow Hizballah to serve as a constant reminder of the consequences of continuing to occupy the Golan Heights. This is a role that Hizballah is happy to play, given its enmity toward Israel. At the same time, it remains profoundly aware of the political costs of bringing destruction down on the heads of its supporters, and this further reduces the prospect that Hizballah will initiate attacks on Israel.

POLITICAL LIFE AFTER RESISTANCE

Hizballah defers to Syrian influence in Lebanon, but there is no neat overlap between their interests. Hizballah will continue to take Syria's interests to heart, but only insofar as they do not jeopardize the party's political support in Lebanon. This implies clear limits on Syria's influence, which both sides no doubt appreciate. At the same time, Hizballah's leaders understand that the party's role in Damascus's eyes is utilitarian and transient, and they are ever aware that alliances of convenience may eventually become inconvenient. As for Iran, President Mohamed Khatami, like his predecessor Rafsanjani, favors broader cultural and social ties to Lebanon rather than privileged support for Hizballah. Such circumstances only reinforce Hizballah's demonstrated commitment to plant its feet firmly in Lebanon.

Though Hizballah has garnered praise throughout Lebanon for its role in ending the occupation and is widely admired for its corruption-free politics, it still inspires foreboding among those Lebanese who see in the party's militancy and armaments a threatening force. Certainly, its conduct following the withdrawal has gone a long way toward allaying concerns. In the months leading up to the Israeli exit, Beirut bon vivants who would no more travel to the south than join Hizballah became rapt television viewers when Secretary-General Nasrallah held forth with rigorously analytical assessments of the situation that were frequently contrasted, both in daily conversation and

in the press, with the contorted logic and whistling-in-the-dark bluster of Lebanese government officials. Nasrallah and others have made it a point to emphasize that despite Hizballah's enduring rejection of Israel's legitimacy, the organization will choose its actions pragmatically, not dogmatically. It was in this vein that, despite expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians, Hizballah's leaders have pointedly emphasized that the liberation of Palestine is up to them. As elections approached in August 2000, Hizballah politicians focused less on Israel or regional issues and more on Lebanon's corruption-ridden political system.

Such attitudes are not confined to the leadership, but also reflect the outlook of Hizballah's rank and file and especially the population of the south. It is noteworthy that at this year's Muharram commemoration in April, even as speculation on the possibility of Israeli withdrawal was on every tongue, I did not encounter a single person who expressed any desire to invade Israel or conquer Jerusalem. These are the people on the receiving end of the occupation, and they have had quite enough. A Trotskyite project of permanent revolution does not sit well with this constituency, and the Hizballah leadership is nothing if not sensitive to its support base.

But despite Hizballah's moderated views and whatever aspirations it may have for a broader constituency, it is bound to remain a quintessentially Shi'i Muslim party. Confessional politics continues to rule in Lebanon, despite the 1989 Ta'if accord that was supposed to mark a transition from the old system. The hoped-for economic boom has not materialized, and in the absence of dynamic growth the government remains the major source of patronage, which is allocated along confessional lines. Syria also prefers to play the confessional game well suited to the divide-and-rule strategy it has followed in the country for a quarter century. Given this context, Hizballah will inevitably continue to derive its strength from its support base among the Shi'a, including among the fast growing and largely secular Shi'i middle class. Over the past decade, the Shi'i intelligentsia and middle class have increasingly deserted Amal, often out of contempt for its rampant corruption and the movement's domination by parliamentary Speaker Nabih Birri.

Amal remains Hizballah's main rival. The two groups fought vicious battles in the late 1980s for control of the south and the southern suburbs of the capital. In contrast to Hizballah, Amal has been marked by spotty discipline and a level of enthusiasm often unmatched by training or soldierly expertise, so its role in combating Israel and its allies has been secondary. Amal remains a force to be reckoned with, however, not least because of the patronage resources at the disposal of Birri. Amal also benefits from being Syria's closest ally in Lebanon (having patched up its differences with Damascus in the mid-1980s), and Syria is keen to make sure that Amal is not eclipsed by Hizballah. During the 1996 parliamentary elections, for example, Hizballah, with Syrian encouragement, agreed to run on a joint list with Amal, and hence won fewer seats than it had in the 1992 elections. Similarly, it was undoubtedly under Syrian encouragement that in March 2000 Amal

and Hizballah, in preparation for this year's elections, agreed to an electoral alliance that has the effect of guaranteeing parliamentary seats for Amal. Tensions at ground level between the two organizations erupted in violent clashes in July, leaving two Hizballahis dead. It would be surprising if this were the end of it. Of course, Amal's influence largely reflects the power of Birri, whose own fortunes rise and fall with the vicissitudes of Syrian politics and the state of Lebanese-Syrian relations. Though it would be naive to expect dramatic changes in those relations in the short term, the subtle process of redefinition clearly underway is likely to diminish Syrian leverage, which will somewhat erode the power of pro-Syrian politicians like Birri.

In parliament, Hizballahi deputies have earned a reputation for acumen and flexibility. They also have sustained a singular reputation for integrity. And while Hizballah, too, dispenses patronage, what is far more important is the support it has garnered because of its growing network of social institutions in areas where public services, including hospitals and support agencies for widows and the disabled, are notoriously lacking. Hizballah has competently filled this vacuum with high-quality social and health services, which have a reputation for being corruption free and nondiscriminatory. (It should be noted, however, that Hizballah is not the only distinctively Shi'i organization providing such services. Amal does as well, though often on a less impressive scale. The Musa al-Sadr Foundation in Tyre, led by Musa's dynamic sister, al-Sayyida Rabab al-Sadr, runs top-flight vocational programs and day schools. Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah leads an impressive foundation that offers an array of services, including a hospital, and the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council is similarly engaged.)

Given the afterglow of Israel's withdrawal, it is not surprising that all the candidates fielded by Hizballah won, bringing its representation in the parliament from nine to eleven seats (including one-third of the twenty-seven seats allocated to Shi'i Muslims). Indeed, even in the 1996 elections, Hizballah deftly exploited its resistance role to build political support: one widely distributed Hizballah campaign poster read, "They resist with their blood. Resist with your vote."

No doubt, gratitude for Hizballah's central role in ending the occupation will continue for some time, but this support is neither permanent nor unconditional. Actions by Hizballah that provoke new violence would undermine its base of support, and the party understands this. Many challenges lie ahead for Hizballah, not least sustaining its relations with Syria under circumstances when interests will not coincide nearly as neatly as in the past. The Hizballahis have proven, despite their beginnings, to be Lebanese nationalists par excellence, as illustrated by their enthusiastic support for the deployment of the Lebanese army to the south in August 2000. This implies interesting possible alliances and a future that will likely belie simple assumptions about Islamists and their politics. If nothing else, the party provides an important illustration that pluralist politics are experiential, and neither ideology nor religion is an unerring guide to behavior.