

# 'Trust Allah, Not Nasrallah':

## The Hizballah Crisis Reshapes Lebanese Politics

by [Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](/experts/robert-rabil-0)

Aug 2, 2006

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](/experts/robert-rabil-0)

Robert Rabil is the LLS Distinguished Professor of Current Affairs in Florida Atlantic University's Department of Political Science.



### Brief Analysis

**W**ith the ongoing clashes between Israel and Hizballah raging without respite and Lebanon sustaining significant human and material losses, the sociopolitical scene in Beirut is bursting with both centrifugal and centripetal forces. While these forces threaten the country with implosion, they are sparking a national debate on Lebanese national identity that may prevent Lebanon from disintegrating as a sovereign state. While many Western observers see the civilian deaths in Qana as galvanizing Lebanese support for Hizballah, national solidarity against Israeli attacks should not be mistaken for a widespread embrace of Hizballah.

### Crisis Deepens Lebanese Divisions

From the moment Hizballah sparked hostilities with Israel on July 12 with a crossborder raid, Lebanon's multicommunal society has been torn by divergent views on Hizballah. The conflict has deepened the divides between Lebanon's political factions and communities. Central to this has been the question of how a nonstate entity, Hizballah, could monopolize the decision of war and peace for the whole country. Significantly, the majority of the March 14 coalition, which sparked the Cedar Revolution, has regretted its inability to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for Hizballah's disarmament. Many Lebanese believe that their country has become an arena for settling regional scores between Israel and the United States on one side and Iran on the other, with Hizballah fighting Iran's war.

As the fighting continued and Lebanese infrastructure was targeted, criticism of Hizballah receded but did not dissipate. Druze leader Walid Jumblat questioned Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah's talk of victory by asking, "To whom are you going to give the victory?" Echoing some of his colleagues in the March 14 coalition, Dory Chamoun of the Christian Liberal National Party criticized Nasrallah's "uplifting talk of dignity" while the country suffers under Israel's air raids to degrade Hizballah's power.

But as the level of destruction and internal displacement from the south of Lebanon reached a crisis level, the government of Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora, came close to collapsing, potentially plunging the country into a dangerous political vacuum. Torn by its inability to bring about a ceasefire and sidelined politically by Hizballah's independent actions, Siniora's government was further crippled by infighting among cabinet members.

Siniora could communicate with Nasrallah only through parliamentary speaker Nebih Berri. But as the ministers grasped the danger of the government's collapse, they rallied around Siniora in a show of unity. This was made possible by the flurry of international activity that took Siniora to Rome to present his plan for a ceasefire, and most importantly by Hizballah's agreement to the plan. The plan has four essential points: returning the disputed territory Shebaa Farms to Lebanon, extending Lebanese authority throughout the country, confining arms and authority to the Lebanese state, and increasing the responsibilities of UN force in south Lebanon.

#### Hizballah's Domestic Position Slips

Hizballah's speedy agreement to Siniora's plan came as a surprise to analysts and politicians. Yet Hizballah's ministers, Trad Hamadeh and Muhammad Fneish, expressed reservations only about the mission of the UN force. Hizballah, like Syria, does not want to see a powerful international force guarding Lebanon's borders. Despite Hizballah's uplifting talk of "steadfastness, dignity, and victory," the organization has suffered significantly from Israeli strikes and has come under criticism from within the Shiite community. Saddened by the level of destruction wrought on Lebanon, the prominent Shiite political columnist Jihad al-Zein published a letter addressed to Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei in the Lebanese daily An-Nahar last week. The crux of al-Zein's letter questioned Iran's use of Shiite groups in the Middle East to advance Tehran's political interests without regard for the consequences local Shiite groups may face. Al-Zein also emphasized that although communities in Lebanon have connections with foreign powers, only Hizballah has a military relationship with a foreign state.

The letter sparked an immediate debate within the Shiite community. Participants in a forum organized in Beirut stressed that the Shiite community is first and foremost Lebanese. They recalled the statement issued by Imam Mahdi Shams al-Din in 1976 during the Lebanese Civil War, which was embraced by the Higher Shia Islamic Council in 1977. The statement asserts, "Lebanon is a final country for all its children," implying Shiite allegiance to Lebanon and readiness to coexist with all other communities. The participants contrasted the Lebanese Shiite community's tradition of relying on various sources of religious emulation with Iran's concept of direct rule by clerics. They also faulted Hizballah for pursuing a flawed policy in the aftermath of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. This, no doubt, was an attempt to loosen Hizballah's grip on the Shiite community.

On the other end of the political spectrum, Samir Jaja of the Christian Lebanese Forces reflected the opinion of many of his colleagues in the March 14 coalition by calling for intervention by a powerful international force and for Hizballah's disarmament. In contrast, the Aounist Christian leader Michel Aoun announced a position close to Hizballah, questioning the utility of an international force. He called for resolving of what he considers the root of the problem—a return of the disputed Shebaa Farms and an exchange of prisoners—before dealing with the question of disarming Hizballah. Despite the polarization of these political positions, Lebanon's major political forces decided to support Siniora's political agenda rather than let the government collapse.

#### Apparent Unity Masks Increasing Polarization

The unfortunate civilian deaths in a July 30 Israeli air raid on Qana further polarized Lebanon. Coming under immense pressure from the public responses to the Qana attack, Siniora cancelled a meeting with U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and called for an "immediate and unconditional" ceasefire. Internal political dynamics following the raid apparently forced the prime minister to bypass some of the arguments over an international force and to call for a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds. Members of the international community that had not already done so, including the United States, also came under pressure to call for an immediate ceasefire. This played into Hizballah's hands, and many in the Arab world hailed the organization as the only Arab force to withstand Israel's military power. Consequently, the regional and international media, driven by raw emotions and some signs of support for Hizballah, confused Lebanon's show of unity in the face of the deepening humanitarian crisis with solidarity with Hizballah.

In fact, Lebanon is threatened by implosion no less by the divergence of views on Hizballah than by the internal sectarian dynamics brought about and deepened by the ongoing hostilities. As Lebanese took to the street and ransacked the UN headquarters in response to the Qana raid, units of the army and groups from Christian areas guarded the entrances of their towns from demonstrators bent on instigating sectarian strife (Christian neighborhoods have been ransacked in the recent past, such as during protests against Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad and a television satire of Nasrallah).

Meanwhile, under the veneer of unity, the political positions of Lebanon's political parties have hardened. Senior political figures have been frantically whispering their concerns about a civil war while publicly expressing Lebanon's unity. A senior Christian political figure even sent an urgent message to Lebanese Americans to help bring about an immediate ceasefire. Christians, Druze, and some Sunnis are extremely worried that the large number of Shiites who have moved to their neighborhoods in Mount Lebanon and the Shouf might unleash their anger at them because they cannot direct it either at Israel or Hizballah.

A hopeful sign that has gone unnoticed is that some independent Shiites are now trying to reclaim a voice in their community. Although Hizballah appears to have won the day, the reality is that the organization's power has been degraded. Hizballah is exploiting the hardship of the Lebanese people and the miscalculation of the international community to win the hearts and minds of the Arab world. This reality has not gone unnoticed by the silent majority of Lebanon. As one Druze told my wife before we were evacuated from Lebanon, "Trust Allah, not Nasrallah."

Robert Rabil, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is an assistant professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of Political Science at Florida Atlantic University. ❖

Policy #1134

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

### TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)