

Hizballah:

Learning to Live with Resolution 1559

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On June 21, 2006, Nicholas Blanford and David Schenker addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Nicholas Blanford, Beirut-based correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor and Time, is the author of the forthcoming *Killing Mr. Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and Its Impact on the Middle East*. David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at The Washington Institute; he served until 2005 as Levant country director in the office of the Secretary of Defense. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

NICHOLAS BLANFORD

Hizballah has been deployed along the blue line, the internationally accepted border between Lebanon and Israel, since May 2000 when the Israeli army left southern Lebanon. Hizballah's fulltime strength is 500–600 well trained, combat experienced fighters, but in an emergency the organization can also call upon thousands of other fighters with elementary training. Training continues in the eastern Bekaa valley, although at a much reduced rate compared to the 1990s. At present, Hizballah uses Shebaa Farms to justify its military operations and continued weapons possession, a rationale based on the claim that the Shebaa Farms are Lebanese territory occupied by Israel, even as the United Nations considers this territory to be Syrian.

Hizballah's overriding goal within Lebanon has been to safeguard its resistance, in particular its weapons and military capability. In response to the call for its disarmament in UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (and the pressures to that end after the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri), Hizballah made tactical political alliances to shift discussion away from disarmament. Hizballah's confidence grew in December 2005 with the emergence of an anti-Western axis centered on Damascus and Tehran. This axis prefers defiance to accommodation. Syria is a geostrategic linchpin connecting Tehran to Hizballah; Damascus facilitates the transfer of Iranian weapons to Hizballah.

Although Hizballah has admitted to possessing more than 13,000 short-range katyusha rockets, it remains tightlipped about the presence of longer range missiles. Although no clear evidence has emerged to back Israeli claims that Hizballah has long-range rockets, these missiles almost certainly exist. Most of them will be dispersed

throughout south Lebanon in small batches close to their firing positions, rather than in large ammunition dumps, enabling quick launches in the event of hostilities with Israel.

Hizballah struggles to balance two conflicting agendas: one that serves a pan-Arab and pan-Islamic audience based on anti-Israel resistance; and another that consists of Hizballah's obligations as a Lebanese political player. Hizballah is no monolith, but rather is a diverse organization with broad ranging worldviews. The organization's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, adroitly balances diverging views within Hizballah to maintain party unity. On paper, Hizballah, adheres to its core ideological pillars including the destruction of Israel, the liberation of Jerusalem, and the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon, but the party has been "Lebanized" by its important domestic political role. At the same time, non-Shiite Lebanese see a militarized Hizballah as providing unfair leverage for Shiites in Lebanese politics.

Hizballah's long-range rockets tacitly serve as part of Iran's deterrence against a U.S. or Israeli strike against Tehran's nascent nuclear weapons project. In fact, though, Hizballah would lose domestic Lebanese support if it intervened militarily on behalf of Iran and dragged Lebanon into war with Israel. Israel may be considering a preemptive strike on Hizballah to degrade Iran's retaliatory options, but were Israel to take such a step, it would justify Hizballah's claim that its militia protects Lebanese sovereignty and strengthen Hizballah's position in Lebanese politics.

The domestic debate over Hizballah's arms has broadly pit Lebanon's Shiites against the rest of society and has contributed to a large degree of sectarian polarization. The worsening relations between Sunnis and Shiites—fueled by the situation in the broader Middle East and especially the insurgency in Iraq—has led to some militarization of Sunni groups in poor areas in northern Lebanon, Beirut, and Sidon. These tensions only complicate the process of disarming Hizballah.

DAVID SCHENKER

The headline in An Nahar last week read, "Muqawama lildawla or dawla muqwama?"—which roughly translates as, "Resistance for the country or resistance country?" The question highlights the ongoing debate in Lebanon concerning the disposition of Hizballah's weapons, a topic that dominates much of the political discussion in Lebanon today. In part the focus on Hizballah is so sharp because two if not three of the four provisions of Resolution 1559 concern Hizballah: the disbanding of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias; the extension of government control over all Lebanese territory; and respect for Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence.

During the recently completed eighth round of the Lebanese National Dialogue, two topics were on the table. The first topic was the Pact of Honor, in which leaders of Lebanon's various sectarian groups vowed to adhere to a more civil public discourse following the airing of a television program on June 2 that satirized Nasrallah. The second issue on the table was a "national defense strategy"—a code word for Hizballah weapons. During the Dialogue, the March 14 coalition—those who rallied after Rafiq Hariri's assassination to demand Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon—proposed that international forces deploy to south Lebanon to defend the border with Israel. Nasrallah rejected the proposal as unrealistic.

Even though Hizballah seems to be in the driver's seat with its preponderance of weapons and political influence, the organization has lately been on the defensive because of the intense international and domestic focus on disarmament. Some examples of this focus include:

Television satire. The June 2 episode of LBC's Basmat al-Watan program parodied Nasrallah, focusing on Hizballah's unwillingness to disarm under any circumstance.

Resolution 1559. The UN issues periodic reports on the progress of the resolution's implementation. The April 19

update contained a detailed section on Hizballah that said, among other things, “a group engaged in the democratic political process of opinion formation and decisionmaking cannot simultaneously possess an autonomous armed operational capacity outside the authority of the state.”

The March 2006 Arab Summit in Khartoum. Syrian appointed Lebanese president Emile Lahoud attended the summit and pressed for an article in the concluding communiqué supporting “the resistance.” Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora attended the summit as well and tried to block the article. Though Siniora failed to prevent the summit from adopting Lahoud’s article, the move focused attention on disarmament.

Hizballah’s November 2005 walkout from the government. Hizballah ministers went on strike for a few months in November 2005 to protest the government’s discussion of the formation of an international tribunal for the Hariri assassination trial. Hizballah ministers only returned to the cabinet after Siniora affirmed that Hizballah was a “legitimate resistance” organization.

Hizballah is loath to dispense with its military capability. In part, the rationale is ideological—Hizballah needs the weapons to continue its war with Israel. On another level, though, Hizballah likely sees these weapons as necessary to protect itself against the Sunnis. Indeed, the National Dialogue has consented to allow Palestinian Sunni militias to retain their weapons in their camps. And so long as the Palestinians remain armed, Hizballah has little reason even to consider disarmament.

This dynamic highlights a larger issue, namely the increasing tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon. Sectarian tensions have been palpable for some time, but there are on the increase. Sunni fundamentalism is on the rise, especially in the north, in places like Tripoli and Akkar, where it appears that al-Qaeda is taking root. Likewise, the Lebanese government’s recent decision to legalize the Sunni fundamentalist pro-Caliphate organization Hizb ut-Tahrir is also no doubt a source of concern for Lebanese Shiites.

It appears that the Sunnis in Lebanon—consciously or otherwise—are preparing for an eventual conflict with Lebanese Shiites. There are many reasons why Hizballah opposes disarmament, including Iranian opposition, fears of diminished political influence, and loss of stature in Lebanon. As a minority among a sea of Sunnis, a perceived need for protection may also fit into Hizballah’s calculations. ❖

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