

The Hizballah Conundrum

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

President George W. Bush's March 15 statement expressing hope that Hizballah would prove not to be a terrorist organization, "laying down arms and not threatening peace," suggests a conundrum for policymakers: how do you treat a chameleonic body that is simultaneously an important political party and an armed terror group? This is the case with at least two key Middle East groups—Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Authority. Focusing on Hizballah, the international community should exploit this organization's current domestic vulnerabilities and pressure it concerning terrorism and disarmament, rather than simply accepting the group's dangerous armed capabilities.

A Domestic and Regional Agenda

Hizballah simultaneously pursues a nationalist-domestic and an Islamist-regional agenda. On the one hand, it has become an integral and important part of domestic political life in Lebanon, garnering popularity on the basis of an uncorrupt image as well as a network of charities and social services that it maintains. On the other hand, Hizballah has developed an impressive armed structure and a global reach of terror, regularly employing terrorism against Western and Israeli targets. This armed, terrorist dimension represents Hizballah's Islamist ideology with regional aspirations, also serving the purposes of its sponsor, Iran. Currently, the group is focused on resisting prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace as well as the U.S. thrust for freedom and democracy in the Middle East.

Domestically, Hizballah is the strongest political force in the Shiite community, which is the largest sectarian community in Lebanon (roughly estimated at 35 to 40 percent of the population), but both are underrepresented in the existing Lebanese political system. For example, Hizballah currently occupies only 10 percent of the seats in parliament, while the Shiites themselves are also limited by the system—as brokered and manipulated by Syria—to approximately 20 percent of parliamentary seats. In the present Lebanese embroilment, Hizballah holds the key to any national agreement with the opposition that would enable the formation of a national-unity government and the subsequent holding of parliamentary elections currently scheduled for May. Hizballah will want to use this key to enhance its political power.

Hizballah has skillfully managed to navigate between its two agendas—domestic and regional—so that they enhance, rather than undercut, each other. It has therefore always been careful not to openly turn its arms against other Lebanese, and has capitalized domestically on its past successes of driving out the U.S.- and French-led Multi-

National Forces in the early 1980s and Israel in 2000.

The Dangers of Acquiescence

Hizballah sees both opportunities and dangers ahead. Feeling more vulnerable with an impending Syrian departure, it attaches value to Lebanese national unity but may also become more dependent on Iran. Fearing a conspiracy to destroy it, Hizballah vehemently rejects calls for disarmament and is likely to use its violent capabilities to dispel any international force tasked with disarming it. The group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, recently stated, "If they come again, they will be defeated again." Realizing that an internationally enforced disarmament is unrealistic, there are those who suggest that the international community let go of the disarmament issue. Instead, they believe that Hizballah should be encouraged to play a larger role in a Lebanese political system freed of the Syrian yoke, assuming that this will ultimately moderate the movement and create internal pressure to disarm.

However, this scenario is unlikely in the foreseeable future, especially in a political system that is prone to both external (Syrian and Iranian) and internal manipulations even after the removal of the Syrian physical presence. Hizballah is not using its arms to attack the political system but rather to harvest power through it. With a Syrian departure, Hizballah could also arm itself through direct shipments from Iran to Lebanon in the absence of the Syrian sieve, and it could further provoke Israel free of Syria's restraining hand. In any case, Hizballah will certainly continue its efforts to destroy prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace. If the internal scene slopes into violent strife, the group will stand ready as the only armed Lebanese militia. Moreover, Hizballah could employ its armed capabilities—including terrorism—in possible regional crises where external imperatives will override domestic considerations (such as a clash between Iran and international players or rising tensions with Israel).

What to Do

Hizballah's armed and terror capabilities must be addressed within the context of freeing and democratizing Lebanon. The best way to pressure the organization, which is highly sensitive to its domestic standing in Lebanon, is to maneuver it into making a choice between its domestic and regional agendas. If it chooses the domestic agenda, it will be restrained and pressured to disarm; if it chooses the regional, it will lose vital domestic support. Some practical policy recommendations follow:

- The removal of the armed Iranian presence, together with the heavy military equipment it shares with Hizballah (such as rockets and unmanned aerial vehicles), should be an integral part of the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559. With Israel and Syria out of Lebanon, Iran should not be permitted to remain as the only foreign armed presence. The next stage for implementing Resolution 1559 would be the disarmament of Hizballah's remaining substantial military capabilities, some of which were provided by the Syrians.
- Syria should be pressured to end any further arms shipments to Hizballah, either directly or through Syrian territory. Concurrently, the international community should consider placing international monitors at critical entry points to Lebanon (e.g., international air and sea ports and the main crossings from Syria) in order to monitor possible arms shipments to Hizballah.
- The European Union (EU) would do well to announce that unless Hizballah lays down its arms, the group will be added to the European terrorism list, and the EU will refrain from dealing with Hizballah politically. Presenting Hizballah with a stark choice—acceptance if it renounces violence, political shunning if it continues to engage in terrorism—will more likely enhance Hizballah's will to play a responsible role in Lebanese politics.
- While Hizballah is trying to fuel Palestinian terrorism below the international radar screen (acting behind the scenes and keeping a low public profile), it is important to shine the spotlight on any of its persistent terror activities (including the recruiting, funding, and launching of Palestinian terrorists) meant to destroy the current Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire (to which even Hamas has agreed).

- The international community must energize the Lebanese opposition on the issue of Hizballah's heavy military weapons. The opposition should be encouraged to place this issue on the agenda of a national dialogue, specifically at this moment critical to Lebanese national unity. To illustrate the price Lebanon is paying for Hizballah's dark side, the international community could present a substantial aid package to Lebanon conditioned on the advance of this front (U.S. assistance to Lebanon in 2004 amounted to approximately \$35 million).
- The international community could tie an additional assistance program to the Lebanese army's deployment in southern Lebanon. This kind of package, designed to strengthen the Lebanese army, would substantiate international pressure to deploy the army in the south with the task of asserting Lebanese sovereignty and preventing cross-border attacks. The move would deny Hizballah armed control of this area under its traditional excuse of protecting Lebanon against Israel.

Conclusion

Hizballah cannot be allowed to remain the exclusive armed, nongovernmental force in Lebanon, whose arms could also be used domestically. While the old order in Lebanon is being shattered—hopefully giving way to freedom and true democracy—a new order may be filled with forces and capabilities that are essentially anti-freedom, anti-democracy and anti-peace. The current movement of political “tectonic plates” under Lebanon and the Middle East presents a unique moment of opportunity to begin undercutting the armed Hizballah-Iran axis. If seized, this moment could also have an impact on Iran's regional posture.

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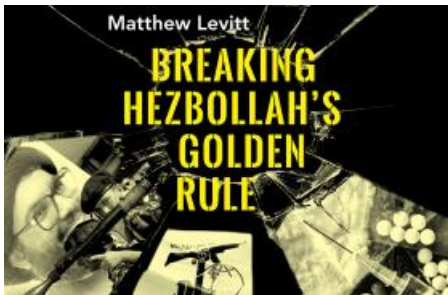
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