

Preventing Iran and Hizballah from Filling the Void in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

The March 8 mass rally in Beirut, organized by Hizballah to counter the popular Lebanese opposition movement, serves as a reminder that establishing genuine freedom and democracy in Lebanon will require more than a Syrian withdrawal. Whereas the opposition, backed by strong international and regional sentiment, focuses on rejecting Syria's occupation, Hizballah focuses on rejecting international interference in Lebanese affairs. Yet, if Iran and Hizballah are permitted to fill the void created by a Syrian departure, Lebanon will continue to be subjected to such foreign interference. Such a development would also increase the potential for escalation on the Lebanese-Israeli front, with possible regional spillover. Accordingly, while encouraging the ongoing historic events in Lebanon and pushing for an end to Syrian domination, the international community should not neglect two other key implications of UN Security Council Resolution 1559: ending the Iranian presence and disarming Hizballah.

Foreign Intervention and International Response

Lebanon has long been subjected to foreign occupation and intervention. Syria invaded Lebanon in 1976, during the Lebanese civil war, and has since occupied it, dominated its politics, and used it as a springboard vis-à-vis Israel. Because Syria views its domination of Lebanon as important to its national interests—domestic, strategic, political, and economic—it is unlikely to cede ground easily. Syria's announced intention to phase out its forces in Lebanon is modeled after the Taif Accord (1989), which called for withdrawal of Syrian forces to eastern Lebanon within two years and for subsequent Syrian-Lebanese negotiations on further withdrawal. In essence, this arrangement allows Syria to maintain a solid grip on Lebanon.

In addition to the Syrian presence, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, responding to attacks by Palestinian militant groups that had settled in Lebanon after they were ousted from Jordan in 1970–1971. Israel then established a security zone in southern Lebanon, maintaining this presence until its UN-certified withdrawal in May 2000.

In the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion, the newly established Islamist regime in Iran sent an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) contingent to Lebanon and sponsored the establishment of Hizballah. Since 1982, both the IRGC and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) have established and run an extensive network of

terrorist training camps in eastern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Numerous terrorists and suicide bombers have trained there, including several of the operatives responsible for the 1996 bombing of the U.S. military's Khobar Towers housing facility in Saudi Arabia. Concurrently, Iran helped transform Hizballah into an influential Lebanese political party, the strongest armed militia in Lebanon, and an effective Iranian operational arm against Israel, the United States, and other "enemies of the revolution" across the globe. Analysts estimate that Hizballah receives \$100-200 million per year from Iran.

Resolution 1559 (September 2004) reflected a shift in the international attitude toward the Syrian presence in Lebanon. Past declarations had called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon (e.g., Resolution 425 in 1978, Resolution 520 in 1982), but they were disregarded by the foreign powers in question (with the exception of Israel) and never translated into international action. Yet, Resolution 1559 aligned the United States and Europe in pressuring Syria to withdraw. Specifically, the resolution "calls upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon" and requests the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias."

Iran and Hizballah's Reaction to Current Developments

The key to turning the Lebanese opposition into an all-encompassing Lebanese movement lies with the Shiite community, the largest sectarian constituency in Lebanon, and more specifically with Hizballah, the most influential Shiite faction. After initial vacillation, both Hizballah and Iran have expressed support for Syria and for the implementation of the Taif Accord. But Hizballah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah deliberately shifted the focus of the discussion from Syria's presence to the international intervention in Lebanese affairs represented by Resolution 1559. Nasrallah specifically rejected the resolution's call to disarm Lebanese militias, claiming that Hizballah is not a militia but a legitimate resistance movement against Israel (despite the long-completed Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon). At the same time, he was careful not to denounce the opposition, instead signaling a willingness to engage it. Indeed, Hizballah must navigate conflicting considerations. On the one hand, Syria has been allied with Iran and Hizballah for many years, opening the Lebanese theater to them and sharing common interests with them vis-à-vis the United States and Israel. If Syria withdraws, the heat of Resolution 1559 may be brought to bear on Iran and Hizballah, as both a foreign force and an armed militia. On the other hand, as a Lebanese political party, Hizballah cannot ignore the tide of Lebanese popular sentiment. Moreover, Iran and Hizballah stand to gain expanded independence to operate in and around Lebanon if Syria departs. Given these factors, Nasrallah's recent speeches begin to sound like a call for the highest bidder.

Filling the Void of a Syrian Departure

Allowing Iran and Hizballah to enjoy a freer hand in Lebanon is fraught with danger. Although Syria permitted Hizballah, with active Iranian support, to develop politically and militarily and to use Lebanon as a platform against Israel, Damascus consistently strove to restrain both parties lest they trigger an Israeli backlash that would adversely affect Syrian interests. For its part, since it pulled out of southern Lebanon, Israel has effectively preserved its deterrent posture against Hizballah primarily through pressure on Syria. In several cases, Israel reacted to Hizballah provocations by attacking Syrian targets in Lebanon or terrorist targets in Syria. Such retaliations forced Syria to restrain Hizballah from conducting crossborder attacks, noticeably lowering their frequency and profile. Instead, Hizballah focused its efforts on fueling Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel.

If freed from Syria's restraining hand, Iran could provide Hizballah with new and dangerous weapons systems via direct shipments to Lebanon (Damascus has been particular about ensuring that any such shipments be made through Syria). This would expand Hizballah's existing Iranian-supplied arsenal beyond its current tally of 13,000 rockets and other armaments. Moreover, Tehran could more easily override Hizballah's domestic political restraints in order to aggressively employ the organization's terrorist skills in the service of overall Iranian interests vis-à-vis Israel and the West. For its part, if Israel is faced with Hizballah provocations without a Syrian pressure-lever, it will

be more prone to direct military engagement with the organization. This significantly increased potential for escalation on the Lebanese-Israeli front would also heighten the risk of regional spillover.

A Fully Free Lebanon

Even as the United States and the international community push for freedom and democracy in Lebanon and focus pressure on Syria, they must also address the consequences of leaving behind an Iranian presence and its long-sponsored militia, both bent on destroying hopes for Israeli-Palestinian peace and wielding a global terrorist reach. The withdrawal of Iran and the disarmament of Hizballah are part and parcel of Resolution 1559. The latter stipulation in particular should become a benchmark in the bid to free Lebanon. The international community should seriously address the question of how to promote this goal, making it clear to Hizballah that the disarmament issue will determine whether the organization is treated as a political party or a terrorist group. After all, Hizballah will not take the initiative to disarm itself.

In this context, suggestions to fill the security void in Lebanon with international peacekeeping forces should be scrutinized very carefully so as not to repeat past traumatic failures. Disarming Hizballah could in fact require a peace enforcement element (whether Lebanese, regional, or international), and securing a quiet Lebanon-Israel border requires a different solution than the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which has proven totally incapable, by its very nature, of checking Hizballah.

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