

Hizballah and the Upcoming Lebanese Elections: Shifting Priorities

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Brief Analysis

Hizballah is shifting its focus from armed resistance to internal matters in anticipation of the upcoming parliamentary elections. Hizballah hopes to translate its "victory" over the IDF and South Lebanon Army into a greater share of domestic political power. Hizballah Secretary-General Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah acknowledges the shift in priorities, stating "...in the coming stage, we'll have a larger focus on local issues and try to serve our country and people even more." An emphasis on internal matters, however, does not mean that Hizballah will soon dissolve its two armed wings: its guerrilla forces and its terrorist apparatus.

Electoral Prospects. The upcoming elections for Lebanon's 128-seat parliament, set for two rounds on August 27 and September 2, will be the first since the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon in late May. The last parliamentary elections took place in 1996. Hizballah-Lebanon's leading Shiite Muslim party-is enjoying an upswing in both its domestic popularity and its international stature, especially for its role in driving the IDF out of Lebanon. In June, Hizballah Secretary-General Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah held unprecedented separate meetings in Beirut with both Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, underscoring Hizballah's strengthened position. However, the limited number of seats awarded to Shia Muslims, complicated voting alliances, and perhaps voting irregularities, will limit the extent of Hizballah gains and likely belie its true political strength.

Hizballah, which currently holds seven seats in the 128-seat parliament (divided by law between 64 Muslims and 64 Christians), is fielding just nine candidates. If all nine win, a net gain of only two seats would occur, although Hizballah will also be able to count on the support of some non-Hizballah Shiites and other parliament members on many issues. Fielding a small number of candidates is largely the result of two factors. First, Damascus has engineered-as it has in previous elections-an electoral alliance between Hizballah and its Shia rival, Amal, for the purpose of keeping Hizballah's domestic political power in check and preventing an annihilation at the polls of the Syrian-backed Amal party. The killing of two Hizballah guerrillas in a shootout with Amal gunmen in July was the latest demonstration of continued animosity between the two groups, despite rhetoric to the contrary by Amal and Hizballah officials. Second, the Lebanese election law assigns Shiites-Lebanon's largest single constituency and the Muslim sect to which Hizballah members belong-27 seats, meaning that Hizballah is already competing for a third of all Shiite seats.

Hizballah's inability to gain a large number of seats could be offset by an opportunity for a ministerial position in Lebanon's new government. A ministerial post appears to be in the offing as a reward for Hizballah's central role in ousting the IDF from Lebanese territory. Sheikh Nasrallah has not ruled out the prospect of joining a government for the first time, stating: "Let's wait and see." Nasrallah will carefully consider the pros and cons. On one hand, greater power and influence in Lebanese domestic politics will enhance the party's ability to channel aid for rebuilding the South, improve social services for its constituents, and make it less dependent on Iranian aid. On the other hand, joining the government could subject Hizballah to direct criticism for failed government policies and rankle hard-liners within the party that favor sitting in the opposition.

Hizballah's acceptance of a government post would indicate a further shift by the group towards the center of Lebanon's political establishment, and further demonstrate the party's adaptation from a pan-Islamic and revolutionary ideology in the 1980s to one of accommodation to the realities of Lebanon's multi-confessional political system. This process began in 1992 when Nasrallah decided the group would participate in parliamentary elections-much to the chagrin of party hardliners-and won 8 seats.

Retaining Its Armed Wings. Nasrallah's admitted shift in emphasis to internal affairs will not result in the disbanding of its militia, known as the Islamic Resistance. Hizballah officials have reiterated that the group will not disarm, and indeed its militia remains active near the Israeli border. Hizballah conveniently cites continued grievances with Israel as a pretext for the possible use of force. These grievances include the unresolved Palestinian refugee issue in Lebanon, claims of continued Israeli violation of Lebanese territory (although such claims run counter to UN findings of a complete Israeli withdrawal), and detention of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails (including former Hizballah leader Sheikh Abdel-Karim Obeid). In reality, however, Hizballah on its own is unlikely to provoke any major cross-border attacks for fear of creating a backlash among the vast majority of south Lebanese interested in rebuilding their homeland, not turning it back into a war zone.

Hizballah has several other reasons for wanting to retain its arms. First, maintaining its guerrilla force keeps Hizballah in a privileged position as the most powerful militia in Lebanon. Second, Hizballah wants to deter Israeli attacks against Lebanon, or, failing that, retain the option of using force should the situation along the border deteriorate into armed conflict. Third, Hizballah wins prestige and support, both locally and regionally, through its role as armed "protector" of southern Lebanon against Israel-so long as the militia is not seen as a provocateur. Finally, Hizballah leaders probably calculate that disarming their guerrillas could create friction inside the organization, an unnecessary risk given the current coincidence of support from Damascus and Tehran for the militia.

Hizballah is also unlikely to shed its terrorist wing, which gives the organization the option of carrying out covert warfare against Israeli interests, both in the region and overseas. If pressured by Damascus and Tehran into attacking Israel, covert warfare-or covert assistance to Palestinian terrorists-could be Hizballah's preferred option. A terrorist capability also serves as a deterrent against Israel killing Hizballah leaders. For instance, the attack against the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992 was in response to Israel's assassination of the Hizballah Secretary-General in Lebanon. The US government noted in its latest annual Patterns of Global Terrorism that Hizballah maintains cells in Europe, Africa, South America, North America and Asia, in addition to operating in Lebanon.

Iran and Syria, Hizballah's key external backers, have their own reasons for supporting Hizballah's armed wings. Tehran remains motivated by opposition to Israel and the peace process, and uses military support to Hizballah as an outlet for armed involvement against Israel. Iranian President Khatami and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei pledged continued material and ideological support for Hizballah guerrillas when they met Nasrallah last month in Tehran. Damascus, with little leverage since the IDF withdrew from southern Lebanon, wants to keep the security environment along the Israeli-Lebanese border uncertain and precarious to pressure Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights. The presence of anti-Israeli armed groups in southern Lebanon is consistent with that strategy. However, Syria's strategy could backfire if fighting spirals out of control and Israel makes good on its threats to attack Syrian targets in retaliation for cross-border attacks.

US Interests. The United States has conflicting interests in the upcoming parliamentary election. Washington supports free and fair elections in Lebanon, but the prospect of Hizballah and its allies broadening their representation in Parliament could endanger U.S. interests. Regardless of the outcome of the elections, Hizballah will remain armed-and thus a threat-at least until a Syrian-Lebanese peace deal with Israel is on the table.

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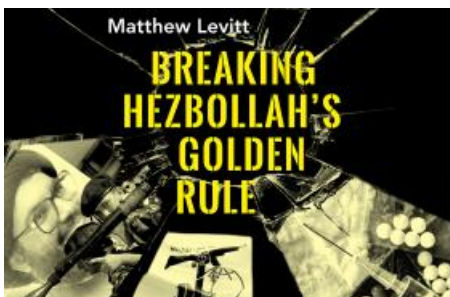
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