

RETHINKING HEZBOLLAH'S DISARMAMENT

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On May 9, 2008, following the orders of Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, Lebanese Shia militiamen launched a series of armed assaults in Beirut and plunged parts of the country into sectarian confrontations reminiscent of the 1975-90 civil war. In one swoop, Hezbollah (the Party of God) took control of the western sector of Lebanon's capital, subdued the Druze part of the Mount Lebanon region, and pursued operations in the North to reopen the highway to Damascus after pro-government gunmen had closed it. Within half a day, the battle of Beirut was over, and no one doubted that Hezbollah would emerge as the victor.

The temporary but forceful seizure of West Beirut surprised sympathizers and enemies of Hezbollah alike. After all, this was an organization that has been fixated on fighting Israel ever since it was born. Using arms internally to advance political objectives, the argument went, was something Hezbollah would try very hard to avoid, given the potential consequences for the group's legitimacy and popularity. But they did it. Surely, Hezbollah's tour de force did not come out of the blue. It took place in the context of an 18-month political crisis that pitted Hezbollah and its

allies in the opposition against the pro-U.S. governing coalition (dubbed the March 14 coalition). Nasrallah's decision to unleash his men on the streets of Beirut was specifically triggered by the Lebanese government's issuing of two "controversial" directives on May 6 that, according to Nasrallah, were aimed at undermining his organization's military autonomy. The first called for an investigation of Hezbollah's private fixed-line communications network. The second sought to fire Beirut international airport's security chief, Walid Shuquair, a man close to Hezbollah. In a speech on May 8, Nasrallah denounced the Lebanese government's decisions and viewed them as tantamount to a declaration of war. His party, he said, would "cut off the hand" that dared to touch his organization's arms.¹ After two weeks of sectarian fighting across the country, the government offered to suspend the two decisions and put them in the hands of the Lebanese army command. This compromise set the stage a few days later for a more comprehensive political deal between the warring factions. Signed in Doha on May 21 and welcomed by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria, the deal brought a new head of state to Lebanon, revised the country's electoral formula, reactivated its parliament and other

state institutions, and gave its severely battered economy a chance to heal.

Hezbollah's military victory, however, comes with long-term political costs. As a result of its violent behavior in Beirut, Hezbollah today scores very low on the popularity scale in Lebanon. More political actors and parties now genuinely distrust and fear the Shia group and view it as the only remaining obstacle to the process of state rebuilding and democracy consolidation that started after Syria withdrew its troops from Lebanon in April 2005. Furthermore, the majority of non-Shia Lebanese accuse it of doing Iran's bidding on Lebanese soil and at the expense of Lebanese interests. No one in Lebanon, least of all members of the Sunni community, will soon forget what happened in Beirut.

The country-wide sectarian clashes were troubling far beyond Lebanon's borders. Lebanon, long an arena for competing regional interests, has become one of a number of political and military battlefields where the United States and its Arab allies compete against Iranian-backed interests. The United States sees the moderate, Western-leaning government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora as a model for the region; Iran, which nurtured Hezbollah from its birth, considers the Lebanese guerilla group an important strategic asset. The White House condemned Hezbollah's offensive in Beirut, saying that the militant group had turned "its arms against the Lebanese people and challenged Lebanon's security forces for control of the streets."²

After 25 years of repeated assurances by Nasrallah not to use his organization's weapons domestically, why did Hezbollah feel the need to turn its arms against fellow Lebanese today? What drove Hezbollah to

make that decision, and which internal and external factors influenced its decision-making process? Would Hezbollah do it again, should it feel threatened by its political adversaries? Or was this another gross miscalculation, like its decision in summer 2006 to abduct two Israeli soldiers from inside the Blue Line, an event that triggered a 34-day destructive war with Israel? Finally, what is the future of Hezbollah in Lebanon? Has the goal of disarming or taming the organization become more distant than ever?

HEZBOLLAH'S AMBITION

A proper understanding of Hezbollah's real objectives and mode of thinking is essential to sound policy making toward the organization. If the first rule of war is to "know your enemy," the United States and Israel, the two nations that have the biggest stake in seeing Hezbollah disarmed or contained, have a long way to go.

More than two decades after its emergence, we still struggle to understand what Hezbollah really stands for. Is it an anti-Western organization that revolutionary Iran created in the early 1980s and assigned the responsibility of defending the Islamic Republic's interests abroad? Is it a Syrian and Iranian proxy involved in a regional power struggle against the United States and its allies? Or is it a local group that strives to protect its interests and those of the historically marginalized Lebanese Shia community through horizontal and vertical integration in Lebanese society, political participation, military buildup and supra-state alliances? There is enough empirical evidence to suggest that Hezbollah could be all these things at the same time. However, a close look at Hezbollah's own founding constitution

followed by a careful scrutiny of its relatively short historical experience support the hypothesis that the Party of God is first and foremost a Lebanese Shia Islamist group³ whose *raison d'être* is to pursue its ideal of establishing an Islamic order in Lebanon, whether by force or by persuasion, as dictated by circumstances.

Hezbollah's Islamic Order in Theory

Theories of the Islamic state vary, some requiring sharia law (the Islamic legal code), others adhering to more rigid state models. There also appears to be no Islamist consensus concerning the legitimacy of contemporary self-proclaimed Islamic states like Sudan and Iran. Hezbollah's case is no different.

Hezbollah first introduced itself to the world in an 'Open Letter' in 1985.⁴ In that letter, Hezbollah defined itself as a struggle movement of faithful Lebanese who believe in Islam, resistance and liberation of the land. Hezbollah stressed that the Islamic order it defends is characterized by ideology, doctrine, political order and mode of governance, without specifying the content of these terms.

Hezbollah's views on the Islamic state are addressed by the discourse of its leaders and cadres, most notably by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and his vocal deputy Naim Qassem. In a 2004 document called "Identity and Goals" — its latest self-description, which includes aspects of its political ideology and political program — Hezbollah reminded its followers that its strategic ideal aims at establishing an Islamic Republic (*Jumhuriyya Islamiyya*).⁵ In that document, Hezbollah argued that there is no Islamic movement that does not advocate the creation of an Islamic state in its own country.

Hezbollah does not seek to apply the Islamic order by force or violence but rather through peaceful political action, which offers the opportunity for the majority in any society to adopt or reject it. "If Islam becomes the choice of the majority," says Qassem, "only then will it be implemented. If not, it will continue to coexist with others on the basis of mutual understanding, using peaceful and political means to reach peaceful solutions. And that is what the case should be to the non-Islamists as well."⁶

The components of Hezbollah's religious ideology are belief in Shia Islam, the adoption and application of the doctrine of *wilayat al faqih* (guardianship of the jurisprudent or Islamic judge) and jihad in the way of God (spiritual and physical). Hezbollah views *wilayat al faqih* as the principle tenet of its Islamic cultural authenticity. Basing itself on the classical Shia interpretation of the doctrine of Imamate (universal authority in all religious and secular affairs, in succession to Prophet Muhammad), Hezbollah recognized Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, and later Ali Khamenei, as the official *marja al taqlid* (the senior cleric of Shiism, whom all people of faith are supposed to follow in religious matters).

Hezbollah calls upon the populace to opt for an Islamic state, the only system of governance capable, in its view, of guaranteeing justice, liberty and security for all. The terms for its discourse are political-ideological, affirming that only an Islamic system is capable of halting any new "colonialist-imperialist" intervention in Lebanon. However, as impressive as rhetoric and written documents can be, they do not constitute proof that Hezbollah is trying to build an Islamic state in Lebanon. Concrete evidence from the historical record also supports this hypothesis.

Hezbollah's Islamic Order in Practice

It is admittedly not easy to measure the concrete manifestations of Hezbollah's Islamic order in Lebanon. The group has been very smart in marketing its Islamic vision and careful in implementing it. Over the years, its members have been actively engaged in preparing the ground for an Islamic order, at least in the areas in which the party wields power, and they have struggled politically, economically and spiritually in this pursuit. Unlike the Egyptians, Algerians and other fellow Islamists, Hezbollah has not fallen into the trap of a bloody and perpetual confrontation with the state. Since its emergence in the early 1980s, Hezbollah has evolved considerably, moderating its rhetoric and making tactical concessions, while maintaining its strategic focus. Its leaders, when pressed on the issue, often declare that building an Islamic state at this historical juncture is impractical.

Hezbollah has been promoting its Islamic identity through a pragmatic political agenda, by respecting the peculiarities of the Lebanese confessional system, mainly to woo Christians and other Muslims who oppose an Islamic state and see in confessionalism a deterrent to its establishment. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has employed an Islamization process among its own Shia constituency by working within the state's political and administrative structures, while at the same time establishing Islamic social-service institutions (*Jihad al Bina*) and charitable foundations (such as al Shahid Foundation) within civil society. For example, Jihad al Bina increases the Islamic-cultural and educational development of Lebanese Shia by rehabilitating and building schools in the most remote villages and towns. In these

schools, children learn Shia Islamic values at a very young age and benefit from a number of extracurricular activities. Jihad al Bina also constructs and rehabilitates mosques and Islamic monuments in Hezbollah-controlled territory.

What holds much of Hezbollah's Islamic project together is a notion of development that includes both material modernization (infrastructure, technology, scientific progress) and an Islamic outlook. Unlike the Taliban's almost medieval system of governance, Hezbollah's Islamic state embraces a conception of modernity that integrates material and spiritual progress. In this vision, Islam and development go hand in hand, and in fact promote one another.

From 1982 to 1990, Hezbollah established an Islamic order in areas it controlled, adopting a militancy that was primarily aimed at eliminating the foreign (mainly U.S., Israeli and French) presence in Lebanon. The armed jihad included a variety of techniques, among them martyrdom operations, guerrilla warfare and hostage taking. The divided Lebanese government that followed the 1975-90 civil war did not have the power to prevent Hezbollah from pursuing its goal. Moreover, Syria, which exercised authority over major parts of Lebanon, was forced out of most Lebanese territory. Accordingly, Damascus was willing to accept help from Tehran against the hostile foreign forces entrenched in its Lebanese backyard. Instead of remaining enmeshed in the internal upheaval, Hezbollah recognized the opportunity provided by the 1982 Israeli invasion and turned its guns and energy against the foreign occupation.

From 1990 to 2000, Hezbollah devoted all its resources and energy to forcing

Israel to withdraw from the occupied part of southern Lebanon, known by the Israelis as the Security Zone. Hezbollah's military wing steadily increased its operations against the occupying Israeli troops from 100 for the period 1985-89, to 1,030 for 1990-95, to a peak of 4,928 for 1996-2000.⁷ At the same time, the party enhanced its legitimacy in the Lebanese system through a process of social and political integration⁸ that was dubbed the "Lebanonization period of Hezbollah." Terrorism was only employed when the organization felt that Israel had overreached. Israel's 1992 assassination of former Secretary General Abbas Mussawi and his family and its 1994 bombing of a major training center in the Beqaa Valley and the accompanying abduction of Sheikh Mustafa Dirani are two examples. With Iranian help and coordination, Hezbollah reacted to these attacks by staging separate terrorist operations in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

From Israel's withdrawal in May 2000 until the eruption of war in July 2006, Hezbollah toned down its militancy along the Blue Line and often cooperated with Israel on some rules of the game (codified in the "April understanding" of 1996). Military activity was largely limited to the Shebaa Farms, an Israeli-occupied tract of disputed ownership, where the two sides would let off steam every now and then.⁹ Hezbollah claimed it was "detering" the Jewish state. Whether a deterrence relationship ever existed between Israel and Hezbollah is, however, debatable.¹⁰

Until July 2006, Hezbollah's project of establishing an Islamic order in territories it controls was very much alive. There were no major internal or external threats to that vision. In areas like Baalbek-Hirmil, Beirut's southern suburbs and a few

villages in the South, Hezbollah imposed Islamic law, replacing Western values and norms, resolving conflicts among people and bringing violators to justice. The war with Israel in the summer of 2006 badly set back Hezbollah's project. Ironically, it was not because Israel obliterated the party's headquarters in Beirut, killed many of its fighters, or (allegedly) destroyed its long-range-missiles layout,¹¹ but because it inflicted great physical and emotional damage on the Shia. The Shia community's impairment has greatly reduced Nasrallah's room for maneuver, as indicated by his admission in early September 2006 that, had he known in advance Israel's response to the kidnapping of the two Israeli soldiers, he would never have ordered the operation.

Nasrallah needs a period of quiet with Israel to rehabilitate his organization's civilian infrastructure and fully reconcile with his Shia support base. The February 13, 2008, assassination of top Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh could not have come at a worse time for the organization. Mughniyeh, assigned the role of developing and supervising the party's external-security and military wings, was a person in whom Iran had long invested. At a time of fierce political struggle with the Lebanese government, Hezbollah viewed the assassination as a wider counterintelligence war aimed at crippling it from the inside. For the first time in its history, Hezbollah felt it had been penetrated by foreign intelligence services. The secrecy of its organizational structure, which has enabled the group to wage successful combat operations, was jeopardized. Once again, the Islamic project suffered a setback. To defend its faith and Islamic order, Hezbollah forcefully replied by

neutralizing the internal threat — which culminated in the seizure of Beirut — and by planning a revenge operation against Israel.¹²

HEZBOLLAH'S WORLDVIEW

Strategic political decisions that could affect Hezbollah's survival and Islamic order fall under the jurisdiction of the Iranian supreme leader. For example, the decision by Hezbollah in 1992 to join the Lebanese political process had to be issued by Khamenei himself. Under normal circumstances, however, Hezbollah produces four different types of responses to perceived external threats and opportunities: religious, military, political and socio-economic. Day-to-day political and socioeconomic decision making is partly the product of internal competition. As in any conventional Western political party, there is room for negotiation and bargaining. This quasi-democratic culture does not exist in the religious and military realms, however. Here the seven-member Shura Council, Hezbollah's highest body, holds sway. In this aspect, Hezbollah is elitist, in keeping with the doctrine of *wilayat al faqih*.

In sum, Hezbollah's homogeneous clerical leadership, often in direct consultation with Tehran, is in charge of coordinating and formulating policy at the religious and military levels in response to external threats and opportunities. Hezbollah's heterogeneous non-clerical bodies are occupied with formulating policy at the political and socioeconomic levels under the guidance of the Shura Council and Hassan Nasrallah. This hierarchical division of labor (which permits certain degrees of flexibility) enables the party to move comfortably between the military and

the political apparatus, depending on the circumstances. Whether an external crisis requires a political, socioeconomic, religious or military response, the party is well structured to handle it.¹³

Threats and Opportunities

- *Lebanon (state and society)*: Lebanon's weak central government, vulnerable armed forces, dysfunctional state apparatus, and open politics and society give Hezbollah free rein to pursue its Islamic project in areas it controls. On the other hand, the confessional nature of the Lebanese system has so far prevented any communal group or political party from controlling the others. An inbuilt mechanism of checks and balances deters totalitarian impulses, preserving pluralism. Furthermore, Lebanese society, the vast majority of which is secular and opposed to the concept of an Islamic state, will continue to actively work against Hezbollah's attempts to create an Islamic order.

- *The Palestinian theater*: Hezbollah's direct and indirect assistance to the Palestinians enhances its legitimacy in the eyes of other domestic and foreign Islamic movements and boosts its popularity in the Arab-Muslim world. However, such involvement comes at the risk of tarnishing its Lebanese credentials.

- *Israel*: Hezbollah views Israel as an illegitimate entity that poses an existential threat to the party, its faith and its constituency. Hezbollah's armed struggle against Israel has often been critical to defending its Islamic order.

- *Iran*: Hezbollah's staying power is a direct result of Iran's generous religious, military and financial assistance. On the other hand, Iran's foreign-policy agenda, in

which Hezbollah features prominently, often undermines the party's Islamic project.

- *Syria*: Hezbollah receives political support through Syria's enduring political influence in Lebanon. Syria is also one of its arms suppliers and a conduit for Iranian weapons. These positives notwithstanding, Syria could be tempted to break with Hezbollah and cut off the party's external support from Iran if it were offered the right carrots and brought in to a U.S.-brokered comprehensive deal with Israel.¹⁴

- *International pressures*: U.S. diplomatic efforts to disarm Hezbollah, which have culminated in the sponsorship of two UN Security Council resolutions — 1559 and 1701 — present the party with challenges. Should an international consensus on the enforcement of such resolutions develop, Hezbollah will come under the scrutiny of not just Washington, but the entire international community.

- *Iraq*: The elimination of Saddam Hussein's regime by the U.S. military in 2003 set the stage for the political ascendancy of Shia Muslims in Iraq. This Shia revival boosts Hezbollah's political confidence. Hezbollah also benefits from its working relationships with a number of Shia groups, such as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, now ISCI) and the Mahdi Army.¹⁵ However, the spillover effects of the sectarian conflict in Iraq — whether in the emergence in Lebanon of al-Qaeda-like groups that are hostile to Hezbollah or in the worsening of Sunni-Shia tensions — pose a series of security and political threats to the "Party of God."

TAMING HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah has skillful and determined fighters, legitimacy at home and abroad, powerful patrons in Iran and Syria, and

deep roots in Lebanese society. For more than two decades, Israel, with its enormous edge in weaponry, has tried one approach to disarm the organization: crushing it militarily. Israel could not beat Hezbollah during its 18-year occupation in Lebanon. Indeed, not one of Israel's three major military offensives (1993, 1996 and 2006) came close to achieving that goal. On the contrary, Hezbollah today is better armed and stronger than ever.¹⁶ Over the years, its estimated 4,000 active fighters have managed not only to inflict heavy casualties on Israeli forces in Lebanon but also to take the fight right into Israel's backyard, something that no Arab army has been able to do. During its war with Israel in the summer of 2006, Hezbollah fired more than 4,000 rockets, some of which landed deep inside Israeli territory, posing a real threat to the Jewish state's national security. One must conclude that Israel's military strategy has backfired.

Non-Military Strategies

- *Ask Syria to rein in Hezbollah*. The argument is that if Syria were offered the right carrots — positive ties with the United States, an international recognition of its power-broker role in Lebanon, and a comprehensive peace deal with Israel that would return the Golan Heights — it could weaken Hezbollah militarily, ending its arms supply and cutting off its support from Iran. However, a decision by Damascus to completely break ties with Hezbollah would not be taken lightly, for it has larger strategic implications for Syria and its regime. Ending its relationship with Hezbollah would put Syria on a collision course with Iran, something Damascus is arguably not prepared to do, even in the event of a peace deal with Israel.

Hezbollah's military existence is a strategic issue for Iran. Peace between Syria and Israel, if and when it happens, will most likely redefine the parameters of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, and in turn the Syria-Hezbollah relationship, but will not lead to its demise.¹⁷ Furthermore, supporting Hezbollah enhances the Syrian regime's legitimacy at home and boosts its popularity in Arab-Muslim circles. But, assuming Syria is either convinced or forced to abandon Hezbollah, how effective would such a strategy be in containing or disarming the group? While short- and medium-range missiles and rockets would no longer be supplied by Damascus, there are other ways for Hezbollah to survive militarily. With its effective control over Beirut's international airport, Hezbollah could receive weapons from Tehran in Iranian cargo planes. Iran already smuggles most of its weapons into Lebanon by a combination of air and overland routes. Should Syria end its weapons supply and stop being a conduit, Iran would compensate by increasing its air shipments directly to Beirut. During the past few years, Iran has effectively disguised its weapons shipments to Hezbollah as humanitarian aid.

- *Ask Israel to withdraw from the Shebaa Farms and to free all Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails.* This diplomatic route to disarming Hezbollah would weaken the rationale for keeping its arms. On many occasions, Hezbollah leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah and his deputy Naim Qassem, have defended the existence of their party's military wing on the grounds that Israel still occupies Lebanese territory — the Shebaa Farms (the ownership of which fluctuates between Syria and Lebanon) — and still detains Lebanese

prisoners of war in its jails. Today, there appears to be diplomatic movement on the issue of Shebaa and restoration of the prisoners file. The Israeli government has recently approved a deal to hand over five Lebanese fighters to Hezbollah (in addition to Samir Kontar, the longest-serving Arab prisoner in an Israeli jail) in return for the bodies of the two Israeli soldiers whose capture sparked the summer 2006 war. Meanwhile, talk of a prospective Israeli pullout from Shebaa has intensified. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on May 19, 2008, to discuss the way forward on the issue, while U.S. State Department Deputy Spokesman Tom Casey said the United States would be supportive of any direct Israeli-Lebanese negotiations over Shebaa.¹⁸ French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner also said he favored resolving the Shebaa problem within an international framework, stressing that there is a proposal to grant the United Nations the role of mediator. Even if Israel withdrew from Shebaa, it would not guarantee that Hezbollah would renounce its weapons. One would only have to listen to the statements of the party's leadership on that issue. For example, Hezbollah deputy chief Naim Qassem said recently that the party had no problem with an internationally supervised pullout from Shebaa. However, he added, "This does not mean that we need to disarm. The question of our arms is not linked to the issue of Shebaa or a prisoner exchange," but to a defense strategy for Lebanon.¹⁹

- *Strengthen the Lebanese army.* While strengthening the Lebanese army would serve many useful purposes, disarming Hezbollah is not one of them. The issue

has less to do with physical capability (Hezbollah has a considerable edge over the army in both weaponry and combat skills) than with politics. The Lebanese army does not function in a constitutional or political vacuum; therefore, disarming Hezbollah is not a decision it could take unilaterally. Civilian control over the Lebanese military and security apparatus is absolute. The army chief answers to the defense minister, who is supervised by the Council of Ministers (the cabinet). As long as Hezbollah has major input into the political and decision-making process, no cabinet decision will deal forcefully with the issue of its weapons. In the event, however, that a robust, anti-Hezbollah political coalition emerges, dominates the executive decision making process, and instructs the military to take on Hezbollah (all unlikely hypothetical scenarios), the army would still fail to deliver. The army is a mirror of Lebanese society, structured along confessional lines. Should the army be asked to disarm Hezbollah, it would lead to its disintegration and most likely to another civil war. Shia members, who comprise more than 35 percent of the fighting force, would leave and join ranks with their co-religionists in Hezbollah.

- *Help Lebanon flesh out a viable national-defense strategy.* At the core of a viable national-defense strategy for Lebanon is a modern military that could protect the country from external aggression, defend its airspace, secure its waters and patrol its borders. Without such an army in place, Hezbollah has repeatedly said it would not seriously consider transforming itself into an unarmed political party. However, revamping the Lebanese military is easier said than done. The military has a minuscule budget and a very

poorly trained and badly equipped combat force. Although the Bush administration has provided more than \$380 million in tactical aid to Lebanon since the Syrian withdrawal of 2005, no air-defense system or intelligence-gathering equipment has ever been included in U.S. military-assistance programs for fear that it might fall into enemy hands or challenge Israel's ability to wage aerial campaigns in Lebanon with impunity.²⁰ Assuming that, down the road, Lebanon miraculously succeeds, with massive foreign aid, in building a reliable military, will Hezbollah hand its weapons to the army? It's very hard to predict. While Hezbollah might allow its military wing to be incorporated into the army as a special-operations or commando unit, it would most likely retain autonomy over its military decision-making process, which falls under Iran's jurisdiction, not the Lebanese state's.

RETHINKING THE CHALLENGE

There is a better way to tame Hezbollah. It should be noted from the outset, however, that it will be very difficult to achieve and will require patient and creative diplomacy. The answer to Hezbollah's military challenge lies neither in Damascus nor in Beirut, but in Tehran, specifically in the office of Ayatollah Khamenei. Unlike al-Qaeda's terrorism, there is a clear address regarding Hezbollah's arms. While Khamenei does not hold a monopoly on authority in the Islamic Republic, he remains the locus of executive decision making, particularly on issues of strategic and ideological importance, including Hezbollah.²¹

Contrary to some analysis, comprehensive peace in the Middle East should not be viewed as a precondition for disarming

Hezbollah. Indeed, Hezbollah's weapons often have been linked unnecessarily to many developments in the region, most notably to Syrian-Israeli negotiations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Arab-Israeli peace in general. While there is no doubt that Hezbollah is involved in regional politics, most notably in the Israeli-Palestinian theater, this is mostly at the behest of Iran. Indeed, Hezbollah allows Iran to defy geography and project its power into the Levant and influence events there. This is not to suggest that Hezbollah grudgingly takes orders from Iran or has no interest in engaging in regional politics. Hezbollah unreservedly follows Iran's supreme leader and genuinely trusts him to look after its best interests. Instead of a patron-client association, Iran's connection to Hezbollah resembles a father-son relationship. While liberating Jerusalem and continuing the armed struggle against the Jewish state are also ideals Hezbollah strongly believes in, they are unrealistic distractions. Hezbollah longs for the day when Palestinians regain their rights and Israel ceases to exist, but its *raison d'être* has always been local: the establishment of an Islamic order in Lebanon.

The issue of Hezbollah's military arsenal can only be resolved in the context of a broader deal between the United States and Iran through direct bilateral negotiations. As such, a "grand bargain" between the United States and Iran is guaranteed to put the issue of Hezbollah's weapons on the table. However, this is like saying that the United States can only solve its current energy crisis by inventing cold fusion. It is simply unrealistic. The scope of this article does not allow for a thorough assessment of the difficulties or the costs and benefits of U.S. engagement

with Iran,²² but the Islamic Republic is the only actor capable of instructing Hezbollah to end its armed struggle against Israel once and for all and to shift its focus to the Lebanese political process. At what price would Iran be willing to cooperate on Hezbollah, and what if it is not interested in cooperating?

There seems to be a consensus, both inside and outside Iran, that, as part of an overall settlement, the United States would have to extend to the Islamic Republic a "security guarantee," effectively a U.S. commitment not to use force to change the borders or form of the Islamic Republic. This would be accompanied by a lifting of all U.S. unilateral sanctions and a normalization of bilateral relations.

The Bush administration missed opportunities for rapprochement with Iran while the reformist Khatami government was in office in Tehran. The door slammed shut after Iran was labeled by the U.S. president as a member of the Axis of Evil.²³ With the election of the hard-line Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, hope for improved relations dissipated, and the U.S. posture became even more hostile. Assuming that the United States and Iran are unable to start a diplomatic process for resolving their major differences, what can be done *today* regarding Hezbollah's weapons? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. Hezbollah is a major strategic asset for Iran.

Instead of striving for the absolutist goal of disarming Hezbollah (which merely enhances the group's bunker mentality and aggravates the existing sectarian and political polarization in Lebanon), the United States can try to mitigate the effects of the most pressing challenge posed by Hezbollah. To that end, Washing-

ton needs to prioritize and ask itself the following questions: Is the Hezbollah challenge defined by the group's global terrorist potential? Is it its ability to undermine U.S. interests in Lebanon and the region? Or is it its military buildup and uncompromising posture *vis-à-vis* Israel? A strong case could be made that it is the latter.

How can the issue of Hezbollah's arms be managed in the short term? The United States could try to limit the long-range weapons supply from Iran and Syria to Hezbollah by enforcing, with the help of its allies, a stricter UN monitoring regime — in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1701 — in southern Lebanon. UNSCR 1701 calls upon the UN secretary-general to devise proposals for a lasting ceasefire along the Lebanese-Israeli border that would take into account some of the outstanding issues between the two countries. They include the fate of the Shebaa Farms and Israeli overflights in Lebanese airspace (now that the issue of prisoners of war has been resolved). If agreement can be reached on an Israeli withdrawal from Shebaa and a cessation of all Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty, it would significantly contribute to neutralizing Hezbollah's ability to employ arms against Israel. Washington could also try to test the willingness of Damascus to seriously cooperate on the issue of Hezbollah's weapons by gradually but conditionally easing its policy of isolating Syria in a way that does not damage Lebanese freedom and independence. A more urgent test of Syrian willingness to cooperate would be on the issue of Shebaa. Since the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon three years ago, the Lebanese government, with the unprecedented support of the international community, has

demanded control over its political relationship with Syria. One of the pressing items on Lebanon's agenda has been the long-overdue border-demarkation project that would finally lead to a Syrian-Lebanese treaty and the beginning of normal diplomatic relations. Syria has repeatedly refused to mark its shared boundary with Lebanon, for fear of losing an important card in the regional game, to be played not only against Israel, but also against its political opponents in Lebanon.

Israel joins Syria in its continued reluctance to cooperate on Shebaa. Israeli concerns with regard to that region can be summarized as follows: First, Israel refuses to accede to an unjustified demand from a terrorist organization. Second, transferring Shebaa into Lebanese hands "would set a political precedent with strongly negative implications, for it would encourage the Syrian-Iranian strategy of using terrorism as a weapon to gain territory and extort political concessions from Israel." Third, the area of Shebaa is essential to Israeli security and strategic concerns because, topographically, it dominates Jordan River sources.

Arguably more relevant, however, than the strategic value of Shebaa is the fact that the region has become a symbol of Hezbollah's steadfastness and its ability to mold the regional status quo in its favor. For Israel, it is no longer a border dispute emanating from nebulous sovereignty, but rather a conflict that might affect the regional balance of power and the Iranian-Syrian struggle for supremacy.²⁴

Nevertheless, both U.S. strategies — making more efficient use of UNSCR 1701 and testing Syria's and Israel's willingness to cooperate on Shebaa — produce imperfect results and will not disarm

Hezbollah. Iran would find a way not only to undermine Syrian-Israeli negotiations through its Palestinian allies Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but also to arm Hezbollah using alternative channels, as argued previously.

HEZBOLLAH'S FUTURE

There is no consensus among observers of Hezbollah on whether the party has made a strategic decision to disregard its ideological agenda and accept the nuanced Lebanese formula. Some have stressed that the party's active engagement in the political arena indicates that its rivalry with the Lebanese state may have been exaggerated. They point to Hezbollah's cooperation in expelling Israeli troops from the South and note that the party has gradually and steadily evolved as a result of its baptism by blood and fire against a foreign enemy. Hezbollah, it is argued, is no longer an alien entity struggling against the state, but an accepted opponent in the political field. The point often made is that political constraints and opportunities are the desiderata of political behavior and that ideology takes a back seat; the game of politics erodes all ideals.²⁵ An opposing view contends that Hezbollah's social-service foundations are parallel institutions to those of the state and that their very existence represents a threat to its authority (although the Lebanese state has indeed licensed and partially funds Hezbollah's foundations). More important, trapped in the discourse of confrontation and liberation, Hezbollah's leadership does not appear to appreciate the seriousness of the challenge of economic and political development, which Lebanon desperately needs.

What is the future of Hezbollah's project? Hezbollah's Islamic state may

ultimately depend on the structural transformation of Lebanese politics and the political orientation and behavior of the Lebanese Shia community. If Lebanese political elites reach a historic deal and abolish confessionalism (a long-championed political ideal) for the sake of a majoritarian (one man, one vote) system, Hezbollah can start seeing its Islamic state project become a reality.²⁶ This is because a truly democratic system in Lebanon that divorces communal identity from political access would enable the Shia, presumably the largest sectarian group in Lebanon, to become the majority in both the parliament and the cabinet. Political confessionalism, ironically and with all its faults, appears to be the most potent deterrent to Hezbollah's Islamic aspirations.

The process of transforming Hezbollah into a normal political party has two separate stages. The first requires Iran's cooperation: instructing Hezbollah to end its armed struggle against Israel. Once Hezbollah's weapons are rendered obsolete, Lebanese politicians will finally be able to enter into negotiations with the party on the nature of its full integration into the state apparatus and on the future political representation of its constituency, the Lebanese Shia.

It is beyond doubt that Hezbollah's future role as an armed force will be determined by Iran. As long as Tehran sees value in Hezbollah's deterrent power against Israel and the United States, the Party of God will continue to exist as an armed entity, irrespective of regional developments. But Hezbollah's Catch-22 is that it recognizes that perpetual war against Israel is not a motivating pursuit for the Shia community. Lebanese Shia are eager to rebuild their homes and to defend

their power in the political system. They are far more interested in looking inward politically than looking outward militarily. Their frequently cited goal is an open political system and a place at the table, rather than having to stand at the back door as a supplicant. The nonviolent orientation of most Lebanese Shia will continue to affect Hezbollah's militancy against Israel in years to come. If Hezbollah is to seriously pursue its Islamic venture in Lebanon, it will be forced to pay closer attention to the preferences of its constituency and adopt a more peaceful and accommodating approach towards Israel. The fact that Hezbollah has a central place in Iran's regional calculations and broader foreign-policy agenda, ironically, works against the realization of its local dream.

¹ "Nasrallah Threatens to Cut Off the Hands That Dare Touch the Resistance's Weapons," AFP, May 8, 2008.

² "Hezbollah Moves Swiftly to Take Control of West Beirut," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 2008.

³ Hezbollah scholar Nizar Hamzeh defends this thesis in his authoritative book *In the Path of Hezbollah* (Syracuse University Press, 2004), p. 44.

⁴ The Open Letter can be accessed at http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/hezbollah_program.pdf.

⁵ Hezbollah Central Press Office, retrieved May 25, 2004.

⁶ Naim Qassem, *Hezbollah: The Story from Within* (Saqi Books, 2005), pp. 38-39.

⁷ *In the Path of Hezbollah*, p. 89.

⁸ Hezbollah participated in the 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2005 parliamentary elections and in the 1998 and 2004 municipal elections, winning big in all of them. In 1992, the party captured eight of the 27 seats allocated to the Shia in the Lebanese Parliament. In addition, it won four other "allied" seats (two Sunni and two Christian), making the party a strong bloc in the Parliament of 1992. In 1996, Hezbollah's representation dropped from eight to seven, and its allies dropped from four seats to two. In 2000, Hezbollah won nine seats in parliament after capitalizing on its "liberation of the South" and on its extensive provision of social welfare services to the Shia community. The 2005 parliamentary elections saw Hezbollah and its Shia allies under a joint ticket between Hezbollah and former rival Amal — called the Development and Resistance Bloc — winning all 23 seats in South Lebanon and claiming 35 seats total. While Hezbollah's participation in the parliamentary elections since 1992 has given the party legitimacy and political clout, the municipal elections of 1998 and 2004 provided it with the opportunity to integrate in several important cities, towns and local governments. Hezbollah's performance in the 1998 municipal elections — held for the first time in 35 years and the first local elections in which Hezbollah participated — was regarded as a landslide victory. In total, Hezbollah gained 90 seats in the five Lebanese municipal districts. In 2004, the party performed even better by winning 98 seats total, securing eight more seats than in 1998.

⁹ This period has been carefully studied by Daniel Sobleman in "New Rules of the Game: Israel and Hezbollah after the Withdrawal from Lebanon," The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Memorandum No. 69, January 2004. <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/memoranda/memo69.pdf>.

¹⁰ For a commendable study on the evolving deterrence relationship between Israel and Hezbollah, see Shmuel Bar, "Detering Nonstate Terrorist Groups: The Case of Hezbollah," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (October 1, 2007), pp. 469-93.

¹¹ Whether or not Israel succeeded in destroying Hezbollah's long-range missiles in "Operation Specific Weight" is unclear. Hezbollah denies Israel's achievement, while the Jewish state has boasted of its success.

¹² Bilal Y. Saab, "Israel Braces for Hezbollah's Revenge," *Jane's Foreign Report*, March 17, 2008.

¹³ *In the Path of Hizbullah*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁴ Hezbollah has always had a problematic relationship with Syria. While party officials are intent to emphasize their close collaboration with Damascus, there are no illusions. There have been several bloody clashes between Syrian troops and Hezbollah over the years, such as in February 1987 when Syrian forces killed 20 militiamen, provoking a storm of protest from Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri and then-Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi.

¹⁵ "Hezbollah Said to Help Shiite Army in Iraq," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2006. <http://>

www.nytimes.com/2006/11/28/world/middleeast/28military.html.

¹⁶ “Defying U.S., Hezbollah Stronger Than Ever,” *Reuters*, July 14, 2008.

¹⁷ Bilal Y. Saab and Bruce Riedel, “The Future of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance,” *Al Hayat*, December 21, 2007, <http://english.daralhayat.com/opinion/contributors/12-2007/Article-20071221-fd717858-c0a8-10ed-0025-b6bfbc58574/story.html>.

¹⁸ “Shebaa Moves into Local, International Spotlights,” *The Daily Star*, June 21, 2008.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Assertion communicated to the author by current senior U.S. Department of Defense officials in a private meeting at the Pentagon.

²¹ For more on Khamenei and his worldview, see Karim Sadjadpour, “Reading Khamenei: The Worldview of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader,” *Carnegie Endowment Report*, March 2008, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19975>.

²² Iran expert Kenneth Pollack studies U.S.-Iran relations and explores possible avenues for engagement between the two countries in *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (Random House, November 2004). See also Ray Takeh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (Times Books/Henry Holt: October 2006) and Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (Basic Books, June 30, 2006).

²³ In the aftermath of 9/11, Iran supported the American-led campaign in Afghanistan on the side of the Northern Alliance, which Iran had long backed against the Taliban. In an unprecedented display of diplomatic cooperation, American and Iranian envoys at the December 2001 UN-sponsored conference in Bonn to construct a new Afghan government exceeded their official directives and opted to work together. This launched the only prolonged period of direct diplomatic contact between the two nations in over thirty years. Despite the many important Iranian contributions, the Bush administration did not take advantage of this overture. Instead, Secretary of State Colin Powell sent personal notes of thanks to each foreign minister represented at the conference except for the Iranian minister. President Bush’s inclusion of Iran in an “axis of evil” in his January 2002 State of the Union address further underscored the administration’s contradictory positions: engagement on Afghanistan coupled with public reproach.

On May 4, 2003, the Swiss ambassador to Iran, Tim Guildimann, faxed the U.S. State Department an Iranian document entitled “Roadmap,” which suggested that Iran would consider compromises on such issues as its nuclear program, its position toward Iraq, sponsorship of anti-Israeli militants, and recognition of Israel’s right to exist as part of a two-state solution. In return, Iran hoped that negotiations with the United States would generate an end to sanctions, access to peaceful nuclear technology, and acknowledgment of its “legitimate security interests.” According to the fax’s cover letter, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, then-President Mohammad Khatami, and then-Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi approved the proposal for comprehensive talks (though Kharrazi stated that Khamenei harbored a few reservations on certain points). While this opening appears to have been genuine, not enough is known about it. What is clear, however, is that the Bush administration declined to pursue the overture and never responded to the Swiss go-betweens. In fact, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice testified on Capitol Hill in February 2007 that she did not remember seeing the document when she was national security adviser. Then-Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is quoted as saying that the administration could not determine what in the document could be attributed to the Swiss and what to the Iranians, and that he felt the Iranians “were trying to put too much on the table.” While many are skeptical that this opening signified a credible avenue toward a grand bargain, it still might have expanded the U.S.-Iranian dialogue at a key moment if pursued. It is also significant that the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate states that Iran suspended its nuclear weapons program (at least temporarily) around the time of the Guildimann fax.

²⁴ Reuven Erlich, “Raising the Issue of the Shebaa Farms in the Proposed American-French Security Council Draft Resolution for Ending the Fighting: Background Information and Significance,” August 9, 2006, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/shebaa_farms_e.htm.

²⁵ August Richard Norton, *Hezbollah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics* (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2000) <http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Norton.pdf>.

²⁶ *In the Path of Hezbollah*, pp. 142-151.