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In Their Own Words:

Hizbollah's Strategy in the Current Confrontation

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The confrontation between the March 8 opposition, led by Hizbollah, and the March 14 forces that control the Lebanese government threatens to shatter Lebanon's stability. After Syria withdrew its military forces last year, there were high hopes that Lebanon was on the road to sovereignty, democracy, and prosperity. However, after the controversial elections of 2005 and the devastating Israeli-Hizbollah war last summer, Lebanon finds itself embattled and divided.

The protests that erupted in early December, and threaten to escalate throughout January 2007, represent a complex confluence of tensions and conflicts involving local, regional, and international players. The March 8 opposition charges that the March 14 governing coalition is unfairly overplaying its majority in parliament and monopolizing power. This opposition is calling for a national unity cabinet in which it can have at least one-third representation and thus veto power over decisions requiring a weighted majority. The opposition also wants to review the details of the international tribunal responsible for the prosecution of those involved in the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri and others. It is further calling for a new electoral law and for early parliamentary elections, to be followed by the parliamentary election of a new president.

The March 14 group argues that the protests have been timed to block the formation of the international tribunal and insists on approval of the international tribunal before discussion of any other issues. In the West, most observers have weighed in on the side of the March 14 coalition and interpret the protests not only as attempts to stop the formation of the international tribunal, but also as part of a wider strategy by Syria and Iran to roll back U.S. influence in the region and bring down friendly governments.

In a series of interviews conducted in early December, Hizbollah officials present their own, different views of the confrontation. The officials present the crisis as a confrontation between a government ready to do the bidding of the United States and Israel and a national opposition committed to resisting this subjugation; between a government that represents only a portion of the population and a national opposition asking for a government of national unity in which all parties would be represented.

The ideas expressed in the lengthy interviews, which we summarize below, are vitriolic. In deciding what material to use and what to leave out, we picked neither the most inflammatory nor the least controversial. Rather, we picked the ideas that were expressed repeatedly. We present those ideas without commentary, even when the language is extreme and accuracy questionable. We believe the raw material of the interviews will be helpful to readers seeking to understand the current crisis in Lebanon as well as the potential long-term ramifications of the crisis.

This presentation of Hizbollah's ideas is based on six interviews conducted in Beirut by Amal Saad-Ghorayeb. The officials interviewed between November 1 and December 10, 2006 were: Sheikh Na'im Qasim, Hizbollah's Deputy Secretary General; Sheikh Nabil Qaouk, the Commander of the Resistance in the South; Seyyid Nawaf al-Mousawi, the head of Hizbollah's Foreign Relations Unit; Hussein Khalil, Seyyid Hassan Nasrallah's Personal Political Assistant and member of the party's Shura-Council; Ali Fayyad, head of Hizbollah's think tank and member of Hizbollah's Politburo; and Ghaleb Abou Zeynab, member of Hizbollah's Politburo. In addition, Amal Saad-Ghorayeb used material from a number of speeches and interviews given recently by Seyyid Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's Secretary General, on August 14, August 27, September 5, September 12–13, September 22, October 31, November 19, and December 7, 2006. She also relied on a number of interviews with various Hizbollah officials published in local and international media, as well as statements and public talks by officials.

Hizbollah's Strategy after the War

I. Political Strategy

Justifying the Confrontation

Hizbollah's opponents are highly critical of the party's decision to turn to direct pressure from the street rather than to a parliamentary vote of no confidence to cause the present government to fall. Hizbollah's answer is that the opposition (by which it means Hizbollah itself, the other Shi'ite party, Amal, and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun, as well as a smattering of other non-Shi'ite leaders and small political groups) had to turn to the street because a lopsided political system gave it no choice. According to Hizbollah, the March 14 forces backing the present government have an "illusory" majority created by an unfair electoral law and the gerrymandering of districts rather than a real majority based on genuine popular support. Even with those advantages, the March 14 coalition could not control the majority of parliamentary seats without Hizbollah's help—the party delivered the Shi'ite vote and thus an additional ten seats in one district in the 2005 elections. Hizbollah leaders argue that even this majority became null and void when the March 14 coalition reneged on its agreement with Hizbollah, and thus the government effectively "betrayed the popular mandate it was given" and lost its "legitimacy as a majority," according to Ali Fayyad, a member of Hizbollah's Politburo. [Editor's note: During the 2005 parliamentary elections, a "quartet agreement" was struck between Hizbollah and Amal on the one side, and Hariri's Future Movement bloc and the Druze leader Walid Jumblat's group on the other. Under the agreement's terms, the March 14 camp would protect Hizbollah's Resistance from outside pressures in exchange for the Shi'ite vote for its candidates. The understanding was enshrined in the cabinet policy statement, which read: "The government considers that Lebanon's resistance is a sincere and natural

expression of the Lebanese people's right to defend its land and dignity in the face of Israeli aggression, threats, and ambitions as well as of its right to continue its actions to free Lebanese territory.”]

Hizbollah's belief that it is unjustly deprived of its legitimate role is augmented by the group's view that the opposition now enjoys the support of a majority in the country, a claim buttressed by a recent Beirut Center for Research and Information opinion poll, which predicts that the opposition would win an election with 58 percent of the popular vote. (The survey was conducted between October 19-31, using a simple random sample of 5,000 respondents, stratified by sect and region.)

The government broke a political agreement and furthermore has lost its popular legitimacy, as shown by the polls. In any “respectable democracy,” argues Mousawi, “there is an immediate call for early elections when alliances are broken.” According to Fayyad, early elections are also held when “the government is paralyzed because of political polarization or when public opinion is split as revealed in opinion polls.”

Yet the government has rejected the call for early elections and has refused to agree to the formation of a government of national unity in which the opposition would control one-third plus one seat, giving it veto power on major decisions requiring a two-thirds majority. Hizbollah and its allies feel that they had to resort to street demonstrations to protest the government's intransigence and exert pressure on it. Hizbollah has been calling for early elections and argues that this happens in many democracies around the world when the government loses its majority or when the government's decision-making power is paralyzed. The Lebanese government, however, buoyed by external support, insists on “clinging on to power” in the face of widespread popular discontent, thereby substituting Western backing for internal legitimacy, argues Energy Minister Mohammad Fneish. Reliance on external support further delegitimizes the government in the eyes of Hizbollah. Hizbollah leaders also blame Prime Minister Siniora for a number of misdeeds, including distancing himself from the Resistance in the early days of the war, being too close to the West, and acting like “the head of a faction rather than the head of a government for all Lebanese,” according to Hizbollah MP, Hassan Fadlallah.

But Hizbollah goes further, arguing that the government also lost constitutional legitimacy when Shi'ite ministers resigned from the cabinet. According to the preamble to the Lebanese constitution, “There is no constitutional legitimacy for any authority which contradicts the ‘pact of communal coexistence.’” In Hizbollah's interpretation, this means that all communal groups must be represented in the cabinet. In refusing to dissolve in the absence of Shi'ite representation, the government is thus “usurping” power and staging a “coup” against the constitution.

Dismissing Accusations

The international tribunal on the Rafiq Hariri assassination

Hizbollah dismisses claims that its attempt to force the resignation of the government or its demands for veto power are maneuvers to prevent the international tribunal's formation. Indeed, the government only makes such accusations to mislead the public about the real reasons for Hizbollah's withdrawal from the cabinet. “This is a mine they threw to mislead their supporters and derail the consultation talks,” claims Khalil.

Hizbollah was already calling for a national unity government before the war with Israel in July, according to its officials. Pressure increased when Nasrallah, Hizbollah's Secretary

General, issued an ultimatum to the government in an October 31 interview, announcing that he would wait only one more week for ongoing consultations between the rival sides before taking action. Around the same time, Hizbollah officials made it clear that “action” meant the resignation of Hizbollah ministers from the cabinet if the ruling majority rejected the party’s demand for a veto-wielding share of power. On November 11, the ministers resigned in protest not only over the failure of the negotiations, but also over the unexpected announcement by March 14 forces that a vote on the draft UN Resolution on the international tribunal would be held two days later in the cabinet without giving opposition forces the opportunity to examine the draft.

Hizbollah officials stressed that the main reason for the walkout was not the dispute over the tribunal, but the government’s refusal to accept its demand for a veto-wielding share of power. Nasrallah asserted in November that “the issue [of the resignation] had nothing to do with the international court. If it were related to the court I would tell them right now: form a national unity government and try us. Bring the draft of the international court to the national unity government and try us. If we obstruct it, expose us to the people...” The party issued a joint statement with its Shiite ally, the Amal movement, underlining their unremitting commitment to the principle of an international court to which they had already agreed during the first National Dialogue session held in March 2005.

Hizbollah officials claim they agreed “to discuss the matter [of the tribunal] in a highly positive, serious, scientific, objective, and interpretative manner,” but that they had not expected to be presented with a specific proposal for a few months. The government’s sudden call for a vote on the UN resolution not only caught Hizbollah by surprise, but prevented any serious discussion, since it gave Amal and Hizbollah no more than a few days to have it “translated, reviewed by legal persons, and discussed by us.” Hizbollah leaders argue that this was a deliberate attempt to prevent further discussion. [Editor’s note: Opposition figures object to certain components of the tribunal agreement, particularly elements of Article Three of the Attachment to the Agreement, which puts forward extremely broad definitions of criminal responsibility for the crimes, including any persons who might have “contributed in any way to the crime” as well as any of their superiors. It was felt that this wording was too broad and should be narrowed down. Hizbollah has also expressed reservations about the open-ended nature of the tribunal’s mandate, which would allow it to deal with future cases or to reopen cases already settled by the Lebanese judiciary.]

Relations with Syria and Iran

Hizbollah denies the accusation that its decision to launch demonstrations on December 1 was part of a “coup” engineered by Syria and Iran to dominate Lebanon as part of their strategic confrontation with the United States and Israel. It is the March 14 politicians, Hizbollah argues, that were Syria’s allies and collaborators until recently, and it was Hizbollah that had been the target of Syria’s “intelligence apparatus” previously, according to the head of Hizbollah’s Foreign Relations Unit, Nawaf al Mousawi.

Nevertheless, Hizbollah readily admits to having strong ties with Syria and Iran. As Mousawi declared in a recent interview, “we do not deny this alliance, we shout it from the rooftops. We are part of a resistance axis to American hegemony in the region, from the resistance in Afghanistan to the resistance in Palestine.”

Hizbollah leaders argue that this does not mean that Hizbollah is a pawn of its allies, but rather that it has political autonomy. Hizbollah’s ties to Syria and Iran are strategic alliances, not patron-client relationships. Hizbollah’s agenda simply “intersects with part of, I repeat,

part of, the Iranian and Syrian agendas,” maintains Mousawi. Similarly, Ghaleb Abou Zeynab, a member of the party’s Politburo, argues that “Syria and Iran cannot impose their will on us” and that “Hizbollah uses this alliance to Lebanon’s benefit.” Knowing that even repeated verbal reassurances have done little to assuage the fears of the March 14 camp, Nasrallah suggested in a November speech that the formation of a national unity government would solve the problem as it would prevent either side from imposing the dictates of its foreign allies.

Power for What?

If Hizbollah is not seeking to stop the international tribunal and serve the interests of Syria and Iran, as its critics accuse, what are Hizbollah’s goals? The interviews suggest these goals are twofold:

A Bigger Role in Government ...

Hizbollah is seeking a greater share of political power in the cabinet. The one-third plus one representation is crucial in order for the party and its allies to have a say on “strategic” issues requiring a two-thirds majority. Sheikh Nai’im Qasim, Hizbollah’s Deputy Secretary General, repeatedly stressed that the opposition does not aspire to dominate the government, but rather, wants “to participate in fateful and strategic decisions” with a minority veto-power. Moreover, a one-third share would permit the opposition to topple the government if its ministers collectively resigned. Hizbollah officials stress that they are only seeking a “guaranteeing third,” not the power to impose their own decisions.

With the current number of seats, Qasim argues, the party and its allies in the government feel that their cabinet presence is only cosmetic. In Nasrallah’s words, they are not treated as “equal partners” but are expected to act as “yes men” while the ruling majority dominates all decision making. Furthermore, Hizbollah’s demand for power sharing and veto power, while odd in a majoritarian western democratic system, is very much part of the Lebanese tradition, in which all major communities have a share of power. Qasim argues that the cabinet must be structured to allow all communities and political forces with parliamentary representation to participate in strategic decisions, in the same way they participated in the “National Dialogue” meetings that began in March 2005. Indeed, according to Qasim, “if the cabinet reflected parliamentary representation or popular representation then it would have been the forum for a dialogue,” obviating the need for an *ad hoc* institution.

To stress the point that they are seeking participation in strategic decisions rather than power for themselves, Hizbollah officials emphasize that the party is not pursuing more cabinet posts for itself or Shiites, but wants the inclusion of its main Christian ally, the Free Patriotic Movement, led by former General Michel Aoun. As Nasrallah stated in a November speech: “we have never asked to increase Hizbollah’s share or that of the Amal Movement’s. All that we asked for was including other major political forces ... because their presence represents a national insurance.”

... in order to further the Resistance agenda

Emboldened by its perceived success in its “divine victory” against Israel last summer, Hizbollah is not only claiming a larger share of political power, but it is doing so in the name of furthering the cause of the Resistance, rather than simply enhancing its power as a domestic actor.

The loss of Syrian control over strategic decisions made by the Lebanese government has been a major factor in Hezbollah's change of focus. The party, Nasrallah pointed out in November, had not sought political power in the past: "... up to 2000, the year during which Lebanon was liberated and the Israeli enemy was historically defeated ... the subject [of joining the government] never came up for discussion. After 2000 it was discussed, but we had never asked for a ministerial portfolio or for joining the government." In fact, the party did not feel an exigent need to participate in government at the time given the fact that all strategic decisions were in Syria's hands, shielding the Resistance from external and internal pressures to disarm.

In 1992, Hezbollah partook in the first postwar parliamentary elections, in order to legitimize and entrench its Resistance activity and, in so doing, transformed itself from an anti-system party into an opposition party operating within the parameters of the political system. With the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005, however, Hezbollah could no longer confine itself to the legislative realm, and was compelled to join the government in order to fill "the strategic void," to use Fayyad's terms, left by the Syrian withdrawal. Of particular concern to Hezbollah was the international pressure to implement the provisions of UN Resolution 1559 pertaining to the disarmament of "all Lebanese militias." Thus, in 2005 Hezbollah took the second significant step in its integration into the state by joining the government—the first step was the 1992 decision to contest the parliamentary elections. In both instances, political participation was a means to a military end, resistance.

It is through this lens that Hezbollah's 2006 demand for a veto-wielding share of cabinet posts and, more recently, early parliamentary elections, must be viewed.

As explained by Mahmoud Qomati, the deputy head of the party's Politburo, in an early December interview with the Associated Press, Hezbollah is also highly critical of the March 14 group's actions and policies during the war, and in some sense regards the government itself as the enemy. "Now we are demanding it [a greater share of cabinet posts] because our experience during the war and the performance of the government has made us unsure. On several occasions they pressured us to lay down our weapons while we were fighting the war. So after the war, we had no choice but to demand this guarantee that would give us legal and constitutional strength. If we take one-third plus one, the government will not be able to impose its decision on us." Nasrallah adds, "We are not seekers of power or positions. We are advocates of a cause, for which we sacrifice ourselves and our children." What "concerns" Hezbollah is "the outcome" and "not its presence as a party in what is called a national unity government."

Hezbollah's politico-strategic program is essentially a strategically defensive one: to protect the Resistance, maintain Lebanon's "Arabism" and centrality in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and to keep Lebanon out of the U.S.-Israeli orbit. In July and August, Hezbollah felt that it had succeeded in achieving these aims militarily by thwarting Israel's stated objectives, and preventing Lebanon from becoming the launching ground for the Bush administration's "New Middle East." But from Hezbollah's perspective, the war has not yet ended, but merely assumed a different form. Sheikh Nabil Qaouk, the Resistance's Commander for South Lebanon, summarizes this sentiment by affirming that "although the war ended on the military level, it did not end on the political level. There is now a political assault to achieve the same aims as the military war. And this time the instruments are Lebanese." The government, adds Mousawi, is striving to execute "what Israel failed to do."

Thus, rather than being "distracted" from the military arena as some commentators have surmised, by challenging the Siniora government Hezbollah sees itself as confronting the

U.S.-Israeli plan to disarm the Resistance and redraw the face of Lebanon and the region. Hizbollah is determined to fight this political battle with the same zeal and determination that it displayed in the military war with Israel. Put simply, Hizbollah feels that if it loses this political conflict, it loses not only its political power and the type of Lebanon that it envisages, but also its arms. Hizbollah believes that such a loss would have regional implications, weakening Hizbollah's strategic allies such as Syria, Iran, and other Islamist movements while bolstering Arab regimes allied with the United States and strengthening Israel's hand against the Palestinians. Hizbollah, however, feels that it will not lose. According to Seyyid Ibrahim al Amine, the head of Hizbollah's Politburo, "the victory which the Resistance won was an introductory step to a bigger victory which we will soon witness, the implications of which will affect the entire region."

The Siniora Government, the United States, and Israel

Hizbollah officials interviewed for this research and Nasrallah himself in his recent pronouncements do not hide their view that the main enemy in this fight is not the Siniora government, but the United States and Israel. Despite its declared victory last summer, Hizbollah remains "threatened by Israel, the United States, and all the international powers." The United States is the greatest threat because it orchestrated the war "in terms of decisions, planning, weapons and desire," and harbors greater ambitions than Israel's endeavor to "end the military threat" posed by Hizbollah, in "wanting to end our very existence," according to Mousawi.

Hizbollah does not fear the Lebanese government. The government cannot forcibly disarm Hizbollah, because of the party's military superiority vis-à-vis the Lebanese army and all other armed groups in the country. However, Hizbollah does not want to be dragged into an internal civil war that would derail it from confronting Israel. As explained by Fayyad, "internal stability is central to its [Hizbollah's] national project" if it is to succeed in its Resistance mission. After the death of a Hizbollah protestor, Ahmad Mahmud, in a Sunni neighborhood of Beirut, Nasrallah urged for calm, "We in Lebanon will not be dragged into internal sedition even if you kill Ahmad Mahmud, or a hundred people like Ahmad Mahmud. We shall not point guns at anyone." Indeed, Hizbollah argues that the United States is encouraging Sunni-Shiite tensions in the country, and elsewhere in the region, to further its own aims.

In order to maintain stability in Lebanon, Hizbollah is determined to resist the alleged U.S. policy of "divide and rule" whereby it "incites sedition between Sunnis and Shiites" as it did in Iraq. Nasrallah has repeatedly warned about the dangers of following the "Iraq model" stressing that civil war "is a red line" that "is forbidden." Hizbollah's supreme spiritual guide, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, asserted in December, that "the wise position taken by Hizbollah to call for national unity should be the first priority" in that it deprived the Americans of the opportunity to reach their objectives.

Hizbollah officials do not hide their contempt for the Siniora government and the March 14 forces, which they see as "tools" of the United States. Qasim stresses that "tool" is even more derogatory a label than "collaborator" because a tool lacks agency. In the same vein, Fneish depicts the ruling forces as "prisoners" to their "commitments" to outside powers, which denies them the ability to act autonomously. In Hizbollah's view, the Lebanese government is acting on the U.S. ambassador's instruction in refusing to increase the opposition's presence in the cabinet. Officials find further proof of the government's submission to the United States in President Bush's praise of Prime Minister Siniora for his

refusal to yield to Hizbollah's demands. "I'm proud of Prime Minister Siniora. He has shown tenacity, toughness in the face of enormous pressure from Syria as well as Hizbollah, which is funded by Iran." Hizbollah officials find these remarks to be condescending, and they contrast this praise to the harsh language the Bush administration uses against Hizbollah. They see themselves dismissed and delegitimized by the United States as Syrian and Iranian backed "terrorists" and "extremists" seeking "to undermine democracy" by plotting a coup, and using "undemocratic," "violent," and "intimidating" means (i.e. street protests) against the "legitimate" and "democratic" government.

Hizbollah interviewees argued that the United States "wants to turn this country into a colony; a political, security and military base;" that Prime Minister Siniora has become the "Kharzai of Lebanon" ; and that "Lebanon has fallen under indirect U.S. occupation," thereby reducing its Lebanese allies to "an occupation government." Hizbollah further claimed that U.S. plans for the Middle East are "in a state of decline and collapse," owing to its "great failures" in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, and that Washington "deals with Lebanon as a form of compensation for its failures elsewhere." The United States will also fail in Lebanon, according to Qasim: "If you are wondering whether Hizbollah will defeat the United States in Lebanon, then we say 'yes, we will,' because we will not accept that the United States control Lebanon." Mousawi is certain that, just as the Resistance defeated the United States and Israel in 1982, a "much stronger" Hizbollah today will defeat the United States politically in Lebanon.

If the March 14 forces' submission to U.S. policy amounts to acceptance of a new colonialism, their relationship with Israel amounts to high treason in Hizbollah's eyes. The ruling majority conspired against the Resistance "before, during, and after the war," becoming "partners in the American Israeli aggression against Lebanon." "Stabbed in the back" and "injured with knives" is how Hizbollah interviewees described the actions of the Lebanese government. Accordingly, they argued that they could not possibly allow the March 14 forces to maintain enough cabinet posts to be able to continue implementing such a conspiracy.

Hizbollah's accusations are numerous and virulent. The government "prepared the ground for the aggression by harming the Resistance, thus giving a green light for the Israeli aggression," according to Fneish. Qaouk claims that "we have information which assures us that some of their [March 14] leaders were informed of the aggression and were in favor of it, but that they were expecting it for the end of the summer season or beginning of fall, at the end of the tourism season." Correspondingly, Nasrallah also claimed in November that "the current government knew about the aggression beforehand and it asked the Israelis to prolong it." In December, he went even further, calling for the formation of an impartial judicial committee to investigate his allegation that "the party that is responsible for the war and destruction is the party that asked Israel to use this operation as a pretext to launch a war against Lebanon" and not Hizbollah, as the government alleges. In a particularly fiery speech, he explained that "[domestic forces had] officially asked America, George Bush, and Dick Cheney, to wage a war on Lebanon, citing as an excuse that the dialogue on the Resistance's arms had reached a dead end, and that there was no internal capability to disarm the Resistance.... The only way was for the U.S. administration to ask Olmert's government to wage a huge, destructive, and fatal war not only on Hizbollah but also on all those who support it or embrace it so as to completely terminate the Resistance and any possible future reemergence of it." According to Qaouk, March 14 officials even had foreknowledge, courtesy of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, of the "Guantanamo-inspired Rosh-Pina

prison which was being built in Israel from the first day of the war,” to accommodate up to 10,000 Hezbollah members and supporters.

Hezbollah finds signs of the March 14 forces’ complicity with Israel everywhere. A special Israeli cabinet meeting called in early December to discuss support for the Siniora government was greeted with scorn by Hezbollah. “Is it not shameful that the Zionist inner cabinet, which usually convenes when there is a matter which threatens Israeli interests or security, convenes only to discuss how it could help this collapsing government in Lebanon?” Nasrallah asked. The possibility that Israel would return occupied lands such as Ghajar or the Shebaa Farms to bolster the Siniora government was met with equal derision by the party: “Siniora should resign just because the Israeli says he supports him,” Qasim said.

Why does Hezbollah Want to Stay in the Government?

Hezbollah perceives the March 14 forces to be a tool of the United States, willing to allow the country to be “colonized” in order to keep Hezbollah down. Hezbollah further accuses many of the March 14 government’s members to be guilty of treason for collaborating with Israel.

Why, then, does Hezbollah want to coexist with these forces and share power with them in a national unity government? The answer, the interviewees candidly admit, is political necessity. In Fneish’s words, “the truth is, we can’t rule without all political forces in the country [being represented]. If we had a choice, we would never choose to be in a government with them. We are doing this for national unity.” His words echo Nasrallah’s earlier statement that “had we not been concerned about this homeland, had we not been aware of the religious and sectarian sensitivities, I would have stood on August 14, not to speak about a national unity government but to speak about traitors who should stand trial in Lebanon.” Hezbollah, therefore, says it is its fear of Sunni-Shiite strife, as well as overall political instability, which compels the party and the opposition movement it leads to politically cohabit with the very forces it perceives as the enemy. Whether as a new political majority under early elections, or as a “blocking third” in a national unity government, the most that can be hoped for is that the cold war between the two sides will give way to a cold cohabitation.

II. Military Strategy

Copying with UN Security Council Resolution 1701

Minor changes ...

UNSC Resolution 1701 of August 11, 2006, ended hostilities between Israel and Lebanon and led to the deployment of thousands of Lebanese army troops and United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) forces south of the Litani River to maintain the fragile ceasefire. The Resolution also called on the government to halt the flow of arms to which it does not “consent”—in other words, the flow of arms to Hezbollah. UNSC 1701 did not empower UNIFIL to disarm Hezbollah, however, and the Lebanese government has not entrusted the Lebanese army with that task. The result is a military limbo in which Hezbollah’s weapons are not decommissioned but deactivated insofar as “no visible armed manifestations” are permitted by the Lebanese government. Hezbollah thus retains its hidden arms caches.

The organization finds this arrangement acceptable and commends itself on its success in rejecting two more objectionable draft resolutions of SR 1701. “We agreed to this state of affairs and if we hadn’t agreed, UNIFIL would not have been able to deploy” boasts Qasim. Facts on the ground have been little altered by the resolution, claims Hizbollah—its weapons were “never for show.” The only substantial change has been the removal of its public observation posts along the border with Israel, but those “were of no military or surveillance value, they were just there for public show” argued Mousawi. “The scene south of the Litani will be similar to what is north of the Litani,” Nasrallah explained in September, implying that the Resistance south of the Litani would enjoy the same freedom of action it was granted north of the river.

The deployment of the Lebanese army in the south is equally inconsequential, according to Qaouk: “The Lebanese army was [always] present south of the Litani and on the borders. Didn’t the army have roadblocks in the Litani area? Weren’t they in Tyre? What happened to the army was a huge reinforcement,” and the increase in UNIFIL troops was nothing more than reinforcement as well. What is more, Hizbollah argues that these foreign troops operate under the authority of the Lebanese army, which, in Nasrallah’s understanding, is not empowered to disarm, “spy on,” or “raid places where the Resistance might store its arms,” but merely to seize any arms it happens to inadvertently come across them. This confidence in the Lebanese army is attributable to the history of cooperation and coordination between it and the Resistance, and the absence of any clashes between the two since the end of the war. It is also buttressed by the army command’s declared intent to “deploy side by side with our resistance” (August 17) and to “make use of the national capabilities of the residents [of the South] including the resistance,” in the event of an Israeli attack (October 11).

...That do not alter the logic of Resistance

In the eyes of Hizbollah officials, Resolution 1701 neither hampers the Resistance nor reduces the need for it. In September, Nasrallah asserted that “The resistance is present south of the Litani River and in the whole of South Lebanon ... we are people of the land. Therefore no one can prevent us from being present on our land, or from defending our land...” Hizbollah is indispensable to safeguarding Lebanon’s security, Nasrallah contends, “Can the Lebanese army, with its current conditions and capabilities, fight a war if a war is imposed on Lebanon? Would UNFIL, even if supported by 10,000 or 20,000 or 50,000 soldiers, stand to defend and protect Lebanon if Israel attacks? This is out of the question.”

Hizbollah’s stance is the product of its perceived victory over Israel last summer. It is true that the victory was achieved at a heavy cost of lives, Mousawi admits, but in relative terms the losses were low; in any case, losses do not preclude victory—the allied powers lost 100,000 people in Normandy and the Vietcong three million in Vietnam yet both prevailed, he argues. Last summer Hizbollah won by keeping Israel from achieving its objectives—Israel failed to eliminate Hizbollah, push it back to the Litani River, halt its rocket attacks, or secure the release of the captured Israeli prisoners. Qasim argues that the value of the victory is increased because the “entire world supported Israel in accomplishing these goals” and Hizbollah “remained steadfast” in the face of such a worldwide campaign against it. Israel was forced to recognize its failure, Hizbollah officials claim, pointing out that Israel “admitted and investigated its [military] failure, and revised its combat doctrine, tactics and formations.”

The outcome of the July war, according to Hizbollah, vindicates the logic of resistance and demonstrates the effectiveness of its unconventional military tactics, not only in “liberating land through a protracted war,” as explained by Nasrallah in a September interview, but also

in “withstanding an invasion and preventing the occupation of the country or its fall to the Israeli army.” To be sure, Israel attacked Lebanon, Fayad explains, but “we never said that Israel wasn’t able to attack Lebanon; we said that if Israel did attack, it would pay the price.” Nevertheless, Hizbollah admits that this deterrence capability may not prove effective indefinitely, or even beyond the short-term, as Israel may well decide to launch another large-scale attack. As proof of this continued threat, Qasim cites Israel’s numerous violations of the cease-fire in the months after the cessation of hostilities and argues that this justifies Hizbollah’s state of constant military preparedness.

... nor Hizbollah’s capacity to rearm

Because of the continuing threat from Israel, Hizbollah strives to ensure that its arms supply remains unaffected by the embargo, which is supposedly being enforced by land, air, and sea. In his victory rally speech, Nasrallah brazenly declared: “Within a very few days and after emerging from a fierce war, the Resistance restored its entire military and organizational structure and its armaments,” suggesting that Hizbollah had somehow managed to rearm itself in the immediate aftermath of the war. Mousawi partially corroborates this view when he asks his fellow Lebanese to “imagine what would have happened to us if we didn’t have a neighbor like our Syrian brother [to help us] during the Israeli bombardment,” indicating that Hizbollah was able to rearm during the war.

In the same Victory Rally speech, Nasrallah also declared: “I tell them ‘blockade and close the borders, the sea, and the skies.’ This will neither weaken the will nor the arms of the Resistance ... what we used in the war was a very small part of our resources.” Hizbollah is eager to appear unperturbed and unrestricted by the arms blockade imposed by Resolution 1701, lest the group lose its deterrent capability. As Nasrallah proclaimed: “I once said that we have more than 12,000 rockets. I don’t lie, I am not allowed to lie but at the same time I know how to play a psychological war ... the number of rockets might be 13,000 or 20,000 or 50,000, and all these are more than 12,000, but I don’t reveal how many.” As for the purpose of such stockpiles, Nasrallah insists that Hizbollah “would keep [its weapons] as it had kept them between 1996 and 2006, without using them except in the event of a broad military aggression on Lebanon.”

The Problem of UNIFIL

Despite its dismissal of Security Council Resolution 1701 as a nuisance rather than a real obstacle to the Resistance, Hizbollah objects vehemently to the deployment of UNIFIL forces all over Lebanon, rather than only in the south.

The government, Hizbollah officials assert, went further “than what the Americans and Israelis are asking of Lebanon.” According to Qaouk, “The Security Council, the United States, and Israel agreed to the deployment of UNIFIL without the disarmament of Hizbollah as a precondition, whereas the March 14 forces in the government put this on the cabinet agenda before deploying the Lebanese army. They asked the Army General to implement this command, but he was wiser than them and told them this would lead to civil war.”

Hizbollah argues that the government had hoped for a deployment of UNIFIL under Chapter 7. Qaouk elaborates, “That plan failed because of the failure of the Israeli army. If Israel had won militarily, Lebanon would be occupied by an international force under Chapter 7. They were waiting for Hizbollah to break down militarily, then the international forces under Chapter 7 would be stationed to disarm the Resistance. We would have

considered them occupation forces and the government would be considered an occupation government because these occupation forces would act under the authority of this government.”

Although UNIFIL operates under a Chapter 6 mandate that does not entitle it to enforce its mission militarily, Hizbollah remains suspicious that, in Nasrallah’s words, “the government’s plans remain unchanged: it is to turn UNIFIL into a multinational force operating under Chapter 7 that would occupy and control Lebanon under the guise of assisting Lebanon and ridding it of its crises.” Such fears are exacerbated by March 14 leaders such as Walid Jumblatt calling to entrust UNIFIL with the implementation of the Tai’f Accord—a euphemism for disarming Hizbollah, according to the party. Qaouk cautions the government “not to pull UNIFIL on the slippery slopes of internal Lebanese politics, transforming it into an internal actor which takes sides with one party against another.”

UNIFIL has made it clear it will not disarm Hizbollah by force, but the party believes the government is still determined to seek greater foreign assistance in reaching its goals. It has asked UNIFIL troops to help enforce an arms embargo on Hizbollah by monitoring Lebanon’s airport and patrolling its waters. It wanted UNIFIL troops to patrol the border with Syria in order to obstruct any arms flow, and has not rejected a French plan that would replace the surveillance of flights into Lebanon exercised by Israel with a French “aerial umbrella.” To Mousawi, the ruling majority “is willing to let the country be colonized. It wants to give the airspace to the French and the sea to the Germans.” Along the same line of reasoning, Qaouk asks: “What’s the meaning of deploying international marines in the Lebanese coast, which was not asked by Israel, and is not present in 1701. This is rewarding the enemy at the expense of national sovereignty ... They tried to station international forces on the border with Syria and the airport ...” As a result, one of the central objectives behind Hizbollah’s bid for greater political power is obstructing the government from expanding the scope of UNIFIL’s mission any further.

Recalibrating the Resistance Priorities

According to Hizbollah officials, the Resistance has always had multiple functions, namely liberation, defense, and deterrence. While the new situation does not change the need to and the possibility of performing all these functions, it has forced Hizbollah to recalibrate its priorities, putting defense ahead of liberation.

The Resistance in defensive mode

The Resistance’s main objective and overarching strategy—defending Lebanon from Israeli aggression—remains unchanged, according to Qasim, but the tactics have changed. “Our objective is not to wage a conventional war, nor to maintain positions or carry weapons for public show. Our aim is to have the capability to defend, in the event of an aggression.” “Aggression” for Hizbollah is not confined to a large scale Israeli attack, but also denotes Israel’s continued occupation of the Shebaa Farms, its incarceration of Lebanese political prisoners (for whose release Hizbollah abducted Israeli soldiers last July), and its continued infringements on Lebanese sovereignty. According to Hizbollah, the latter include abductions of Lebanese civilians, air attacks on villages, and violations of Lebanese airspace, despite the cessation of hostilities. “As long as these issues remain, we retain the right to defend ourselves,” Fayyad declares.

Hizbollah recognizes that the Lebanese army has the primary role in the defense of Lebanon and that its own role is one of support. Yet it still reserves for itself the “right” of self-defense. It will only relinquish its defensive role when the state is willing “to carry out its responsibility.” “If the state abandons its responsibility then it becomes the responsibility of the Resistance to initiate this thing ...” Nasrallah remains unimpressed by the government’s political resolve. Hizbollah accuses the government of not taking a firm stand against Israel’s numerous breaches of Lebanese sovereignty, “turning the Lebanese army into a unit responsible for counting complaints and recording violations” rather than for “defending the country and protecting its citizens ... Be assured that we will not be patient for long. If the state and government fail to carry out their responsibility ... the Lebanese people will assume this responsibility as they have done since 1982.” And Mousawi asserts, “Regular citizens armed with kitchen knives will not wait for Kofi Annan if an aggressor enters their home.”

Liberation role on hold ...

Playing a defensive role is nothing new for Hizbollah, Qasim points out. “There was never a time when Hizbollah was not constrained” by political and military developments. The specific trajectory followed by the party was always shaped by the interaction between its armed activity and external factors: “We had three stages of defense. Before 2000 [when Israel occupied southern Lebanon], we made daily operations against Israel, and then between 2000 and 2006 we had ‘reminder’ operations against Shebaa ... Now we are in a third phase which is different from the other stages. We must now find ways to maintain our preparedness. In all three stages we regard ourselves as a Resistance. Usually the Resistance adapts to circumstances, but the objective remains [unchanged].” [Editor’s note: after Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Hizbollah continued sporadic and low-key military operations to liberate an Israeli occupied area known as the Shebaa Farms, which Lebanon claims as its own].

Qasim hinted that Hizbollah will now suspend its “reminder” operations aimed at liberating the Shebaa Farms. In Nasrallah’s words, “we are now emerging from a war and we are not in a hurry to carry out operations in the Shebaa Farms.” Nevertheless, Hizbollah believes that the diplomatic initiatives on the issue, called for in Resolution 1701, are an exercise in futility. “Let our people and the whole world say that we gave [diplomatic initiatives] a chance ... Do they need one hundred years to solve it diplomatically?” Mousawi asks. The liberation of the Shebaa Farms is a “right and a duty” that the party will not forgo and “will be resumed once the international community and international diplomacy fail in liberating the Farms,” according to Qaouk.

... but Hizbollah needs its arms for deterrence purposes

Although it is switching to a more defensive position and putting liberation on hold, Hizbollah has no intention to give up its weapons. The Lebanese government has never liberated its territory. The current government has not responded to Israeli violations and thus has no right to order the Resistance to surrender its weapons. “Have those great people liberated Shebaa Farms and secured the return of people to their lands in the Shebaa Farms? Do they ask us to hand over our weapons because they freed prisoners? Do they come to us with real guarantees of protecting Lebanon against the Israeli enemy which is still threatening? ... Who will defend the country? Who will teach Israel a lesson?” asks Nasrallah.

Even if all Israeli-occupied land was returned and all prisoners freed, Hizbollah believes, Israel would remain a grave threat to Lebanon’s security. “As long as Israel remains

aggressive in the region, we must fear this aggression. These arms will then remain to confront and defend against aggression,” declares Qasim. An attempt to disarm Hizbollah forcibly would be futile. According to Nasrallah, the Resistance is stronger than it has been at any time since 1982. The only condition under which Hizbollah would give up its deterrent role, and hence its arms, is the establishment of a “strong, capable state that reassures and protects its people ... their livelihoods, waters, and dignity.” The Resistance is not the cause of the state’s weakness, but its consequence. Until the causes of the virtual absence of the state are addressed, Hizbollah’s arms will remain. ■

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