

Hizbollah: The Battle over Lebanon

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At the height of the Lebanese parliamentary elections campaign, Hassan Nasrallah addressed a conference in the Beqaa Valley. In an impassioned speech, he sought to enlist support for Hizbollah's candidates by referring to the Israeli enemy:

Today Israel is following the Lebanese parliamentary elections worried and concerned. But it is also relaying threats, through leaks to *Der Spiegel* to manipulate the international committee investigating the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri [which reported that Hizbollah was involved in the murder of the late prime minister] and through conferences held at Tel Aviv University.¹

Without a doubt Nasrallah meant the conference about the Lebanese elections at the Institute for National Security Studies, which received advanced billing before the elections. I mention this because it shows that Nasrallah still purports to be able to read Israel, though it seems that he has come to understand that there is a difference between reading everything published and being able to grasp and fully internalize the information. After all, Nasrallah once claimed to be the one who could read Israel better than anyone else in the Arab world, whereas today it seems that he realizes that this is not the case.

This issue is linked to an interesting piece of information published by the Zogby Institute² in the United States about Nasrallah's popularity in the Arab world, which in the last year plummeted from 26 percent to a mere 6 percent.³ Thus Nasrallah is no longer the most popular leader in the Arab world. This indicates something about the one whom we in Israel had crowned as the omnipotent leader, the man with the Midas

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touch capable of turning anything into gold. The immunity we attributed to Nasrallah has been lifted; he is no longer the invincible leader. The Second Lebanon War made an important contribution to this process.

In this context, it is worthwhile comparing Nasrallah's standing in July 2009 to his standing of seven years prior. On October 18, 2002, Beirut hosted a conference of Francophone states; President Jacques Chirac and 55 other heads of state were in attendance. Suddenly, during the opening session while Chirac was delivering the introductory greeting to Lebanon's political and religious leadership, in front of a stunned French president, 55 presidents from all over the world, and the international media, Nasrallah slipped in and seated himself in the chair reserved for him between Lebanon's Sunni mufti and the Maronite patriarch Boutros Nasrallah Safir. This was one of the climaxes of Nasrallah's career, and a high point in Hizbollah history. The moment was evidence that at the end of a very long road, Nasrallah and his organization had not only captured Lebanon and the entire Arab world, but had also won recognition, prestige, and broad international standing. It seems that barely a shred of that is left today.

In any case, the rise of Hizbollah and its status in Lebanon should be understood in light of two central phenomena. The first is the rise of Shiite power in Lebanon. This community is on Lebanon's fringes, but in recent decades, because of its increasing demographic weight and additional processes, its political clout has grown. Thus members of the community seek a fair, equal slice of the Lebanese pie. The distribution of power after the Lebanese civil war (1975-89) according to the Ta'if agreement, however, discriminates against the Shiite community. In the Lebanese parliament, which is based on a sectarian division of representatives, Shiites are represented by only 15 percent of the members, 27 out of 128, whereas the community's actual representation in Lebanon is apparently double that percentage and perhaps even more. Until this issue is settled, Lebanon will not know any peace. While it is true that the Shiite rise would have happened without the involvement of Nasrallah and Iran, today Hizbollah is riding the wave of Shiite protest and the community's legitimate desire for a larger slice of the Lebanese pie, and has in practice become the communal leader and decision maker. Without understanding this point, it is impossible to fully comprehend Hizbollah's rise to grandeur.

The second phenomenon in understanding Hizbollah's power and standing in Lebanon is the Islamic regime in Iran and its strategic aspirations in the region. As early as the Safavid and Qajar dynasties, Iran had interests in the heart of the Middle East. In the 1970s the Persian shah maintained this tradition, as did the revolutionary regime afterwards. The interface between Iran's strategic interests and the Lebanese Shiites' ambitions was expressed in Hizbollah's ideological platform published in 1985. In fact, at the very outset the organization declared its goal as twofold: first, turning Lebanon into an Islamic republic along the lines of the Iranian Islamic Republic and creating an Islamic sea from Tehran to the shores of the Mediterranean. Hizbollah seeks to attain this goal though peaceful means and by consensus with the other communities in Lebanon rather than by coercion. The second aim concerns the struggle against Israel. This struggle is destined to continue until the liberation of Jerusalem and the eradication of the Zionist entity. These two aspirations, to which Hizbollah is still committed, reflect the two dimensions of its activity and its identity: the Shiite and the Iranian-Islamic.

In 2002 Nasrallah could certainly have looked back at the previous twenty years with a great deal of satisfaction. From a collection of cells or a small militia in early 1982, whose greatest achievement lay in carrying out terrorist attacks against the foreign forces on Lebanese soil, the organization evolved into a leading legitimate mass movement, which alongside its military wing operates an impressive civilian, political, and economic branch. This process was made possible by the organization's pragmatism and willingness to adapt to the changing reality in Lebanon. In 1989, Hizbollah accepted the Ta'if agreement, even though the accord discriminates against the Shiites and in fact subjects Lebanon to a Sunni-Druze-Maronite arrangement. Later on, Hizbollah decided to participate in the Lebanese elections and send its representatives to the parliament. All of these are expressions of the organization's pragmatism and its willingness to deal with a changing political and social reality.

At the center of the organization's achievements stands its transformation from a military-terrorist element to a force on the Lebanese political arena with economic, social, and political dimensions. For most Lebanese, certainly for most Shiites, these aspects are far more important than the military banner. So, for example, in the 1980s were a Shiite youth asked why he was joining Hizbollah, the answer would

usually be, “They came to the village, some fighters on a command car, with ribbons around their necks and a submachine gun, and it impressed the kids who were running around barefoot in the village alleyways. We wanted to be like them, to achieve something in our lives.” Today, this is not the answer one hears from the young Shiites when asked why they support Hizbollah. Today the support is based on a desire to become a senior official or an attorney in one of Hizbollah’s financial institutions. In fact, today the organization is the best networking tool by which one may find one’s place in the Lebanese job market. Alternately, Shiites will tell you that Hizbollah is the entity that maintains their children’s schools and their families’ health and welfare organizations. This apparatus, established with Iran’s generous assistance, is an important element in maintaining and promoting the organization’s popularity among Shiites in Lebanon.

At its second stage, Hizbollah changed from a social, economic, and political movement operating in the Shiite sphere into the most important leading Shiite organization in Lebanon. It did so by taking advantage of Iranian financial backing and by using the competition’s weakness, especially the personal weakness of Nabih Berri, the leader of Amal – the other Shiite organization operating in Lebanon.

In fact, over the years Hizbollah has become the biggest, most important organization representing the Lebanese Shiites. This rise in power is especially impressive since Hizbollah brought an unfamiliar religious concept and worldview to Lebanon; even now, it is unacceptable to many of the Shiite religious leaders there. In the 1990s only 30 percent of Shiites supported the organization, whereas in the decade that followed the rate of Shiite support reached 75 percent. In 1998, in the first municipal elections held in Lebanon after the civil war, Hizbollah won one quarter of the seats in Shiite towns and villages, whereas in the 2004 elections it already controlled 80 percent of the Shiite municipal sector. In other words, the organization became the most important leading element among the Shiites.

On the basis of this achievement, Hizbollah, starting in 2003, began to call for a change in the Lebanese system of government. These calls grew stronger especially after the United States exported democracy to Iraq following the invasion of the country. Thus Hizbollah now seeks to cancel the Ta’if agreement or at least introduce significant changes

and establish democratic elections and a power sharing system, which according to Hizbollah's assessments would turn the organization into Lebanon's main political force and the Shiites into the most important community in the country.

Against this background, one may say that from the internal Lebanese aspect, Hizbollah's path has been strewn with success. In the Israeli context, the picture was similarly rosy until the Second Lebanon War. Hizbollah reached the height of its success against Israel in May 2000 with Israel's withdrawal from the security zone. This achievement was expressed by Nasrallah in the "spider's web" speech he gave in Bint Jbail that same month:

A few hundred Hizbollah fighters forced the most powerful state in the Middle East to wave a white flag. The era in which the Zionists have intimidated the Lebanese and the Arabs is over. The Zionist entity lives in fear after the defeat of the occupation army at the hands of Islamic resistance fighters in Lebanon. This fear exists not only in northern Palestine but also in the heart of Tel Aviv, in the depth of occupied Palestine. Israel, which has nuclear weapons and the strongest air force in the region – this Israel is weaker than a spider's web.⁴

Indeed, Hizbollah managed to undermine the two basic assumptions underlying the existing relations between Israel and Arab states. According to the first assumption, no *muqawama* – armed resistance against Israel – is possible from or within a sovereign state. Arab states had to choose between resistance and sovereignty. This was the dilemma faced by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1956, and this was the dilemma faced by King Hussein of Jordan in September 1970 ("Black September") and the Syrians in 1974 on the Golan Heights. In all three cases, the states opted for sovereignty rather than terrorist organizations and resistance. According to the second basic assumption in Arab-Israeli relations, should an Arab state seek to recover territory lost in a war against Israel and should it seek to be accepted as a member of the Western world, it must make peace with Israel.

During the years of confrontation with Israel in the security zone culminating in May 2000, Hizbollah managed to undermine both of these assumptions to an extent. First, the organization proved that it is possible to conduct an armed struggle, *muqawama*, against Israel from

within a sovereign state without that state being harmed. Thus a situation was possible wherein the south was ablaze but life in Beirut continued as normal. Second, Hizbollah proved that it is possible to recover territory lost in war even without making peace with Israel. Moreover, it is possible to attain international prestige even without an agreement or recognition of the Zionist entity.

After the IDF withdrawal from the security zone, Hizbollah started to channel most of its energy towards a takeover of Lebanon itself. From 1992 to 1996, Hizbollah undertook 1030 attacks in the security zone. From 1996 until the withdrawal in 2000, that number rose to around 4060. From 2000 until 2007, the number of attacks dropped to about 27. In fact, from 2000, Hizbollah staged terrorist attacks only to remind the world it was still maintaining the armed struggle. In reality, its resources were diverted primarily to the intra-Lebanon arena. By creating deterrence based on its massive missile reserves, Hizbollah managed to foster a situation such that Israel was not standing in its way and was even expressing tacit support for the new rules of the game, whereby once every few weeks there would be a targeted terrorist attack against its soldiers stationed along the border.

Because of Hizbollah's missile arsenal, Israel asked itself time and again if it was necessary to respond to the killing of an Israeli soldier along the fence, when the risk of war, with hundreds of thousands of civilian Israelis living in bomb shelters, was hanging in the balance. The answer to the question was always no. Israel's leaders felt that this was not a price they were willing to pay in order to deal with the targeted attacks. Indeed, consider what Nasrallah himself said on the day of the abduction:

The Israeli leaders in government right now and those who are responsible are new. Olmert is a new prime minister and there is also a new minister of defense. Therefore, I would like to advise them, before they meet tonight at 8:00 P.M. to decide on Israel's response to the abduction, that they had better seek counsel from previous prime ministers and other former ministers about their experiences in Lebanon. When someone new is in charge it is still possible to mislead him. Therefore, in order not to be misled, they should ask, check, and make sure before they make any decisions.⁵

When the Israeli government took the decision to respond extensively to the July 12 abduction of the soldiers, some ministers may have known that Hizbollah had 12,000 missiles, but some certainly did not understand the significance of this fact.

As for the war itself, from day one I contended that Hizbollah was destined to be dealt a devastating blow and pay a steep price because a significant portion of its efforts had been focused on the intra-Lebanon arena and the construction of a stronghold within the Shiite population. All this did in fact play out. Nonetheless, from Hizbollah's perspective, its achievements in the war were several, as may be inferred from Nasrallah's "divine victory" address, on September 22, 2006:

Today, we celebrate a divine, historic, strategic victory. After all, is there anyone among us who imagined that a few thousand of your sons, members of the Lebanese resistance, would be able to stand firm for 33 days on the naked, open earth, exposed under the heavens to the strongest air force in the Middle East? to face 40,000 Israeli soldiers and officers, four elite brigades, and three reserve divisions? the best tank in the world? the strongest army in the region? Is there anyone among you who imagined that a few thousand of your sons would stand and fight an enemy under such difficult conditions, would manage to repel warships from our territorial waters, to destroy Merkava tanks, the pinnacle of Israel's industry, and Israel's helicopters, and finally turn the soldiers of the enemy's elite brigades into terrified, panicked rats? Did anyone imagine this at a time when the entire world, especially the West, had abandoned us, when Lebanon is divided and not lining up as one behind us?⁶

However, Hizbollah erred in its assessment of Israel's response to the abduction of the soldiers. Nasrallah even conceded this error: he did not think that the abduction would cause a war, he did not want a war, and he did not foresee a war. This war was forced on him. From his perspective, Israel's goals were far reaching, as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared in the Knesset during the war:

Only the return of the abducted soldiers will end the action. Israel will fight against Hizbollah for as long as it takes to bring the abducted soldiers back and implement Resolution 1559 fully, as well as implement the outline drafted by the G8 leaders – the unconditional return of the abducted sol-

diers, the dismantling of Hizbollah, and the termination of the risk of missile fire against Israel.

It may be that in internal documents different things were stated, but these were the prime minister's words in the Knesset. Therefore from Nasrallah's point of view, his organization survived what was seen as an Israeli threat to eradicate it or at least mortally damage it. Moreover, the literature, speeches, and articles written by Hizbollah members explain that the organization survived not only on the conceptual level, but also on the military one, and as proof pointed to the fact that its command and control system continued to function. In this context, we may recall that once as Nasrallah was speaking, the Hizbollah leader, with perfect timing, invited the residents of Beirut to look out their windows and see the damage to the Israeli naval vessel *Hanit*. There are many other examples attesting to the fact that the command and control structure continued to operate until the last day of the war.

Another important outcome is the fact that Hizbollah's propaganda apparatus was not impaired. On the first day of the American attack in Iraq in 2003, al-Jazeera's television station announced that it would broadcast Saddam Hussein's response to the American invasion. Iraq's national anthem was played, and Saddam's *kaffiyah*-clad head appeared on the screen. Following the opening sentence, "Bism Allah al-rahman al-rahim," the picture disappeared. Later on, the broadcast was interrupted four more times, making it clear that the Iraqi regime's ability to communicate its messages through its propaganda machine had been severely compromised. In the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah's TV station, al-Manar, continued to operate throughout the war and broadcast messages to the Arab world as well as to Israel itself.

From Hizbollah's point of view, the missile fire was also a success. Some 4,000 missiles were fired until the last day of the war. From its perspective, as more time passed under the pressure of the fire that the IDF was incapable of stopping, the Israeli government started to lower its expectations of the war. As Nasrallah explained in one of his speeches:

At the beginning they said they would disarm Hizbollah; after that they said they would be satisfied with the destruction of our rocket capabilities rather than the destruction of all of our infrastructures. They lower their expectations of the war every day, and now they admit that they can't even destroy Hizbollah's military force. They only want to weak-

en and hurt us, and push us back some 10 or 20 km from the border.⁷

Without a doubt, even in Hizbollah's own estimation, it suffered a very harsh blow, but its stockpiling of 12,000 missiles proved itself, as Israel did in fact lower its level of expectations. From Hizbollah's perspective, the Israeli government blinked first, because it could not tolerate a situation in which one and a half million citizens were living in bomb shelters for 34 days. At least in this regard the missiles were effective.

Hizbollah and its Syrian allies also viewed the ground fighting as successful. On August 16, 2006, two days after the end of the war, Syrian president Bashar Asad communicated a threat and warning to Israel on the heels of what he perceived as a Hizbollah victory:

In 1982, Israel began a war against Lebanon. Its forces invaded that country and within a few days were already on the outskirts of Beirut, and they managed to take the city. By contrast, today, five weeks after the war broke out, Israel is still stuck in a war of attrition and is bleeding from its desperate attempt to take a few hundred meters here and there, and can't even do that. There is no doubt that the Israelis have become an object of ridicule. They've lost their credibility; it doesn't exist any more....The truth is that in 1982 the technological gap between Israel and the other side, whether the Lebanese or the Palestinians fighting against Israel, was smaller than the gap today. Today, Israel is much stronger but the difference lies in the will to fight, which we didn't have then but have now, as the last war proves.⁸

All of this, of course, is to be placed in the plus column. While Hizbollah suffered a harsh blow, in its own mind it had scored many successes, which it would naturally seek to emphasize when asking itself how to prepare for the next war.

At the same time, when we ask ourselves what has happened on the intra-Lebanon arena as a result of the Second Lebanon War and what has happened to Hizbollah since then, it is clear that the war joins a no less important event, the Cedar Revolution of February 2005, which was a turning point in Lebanon's history. That month, following the murder of the Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the finger pointing at Syria, large scale street demonstrations broke out, eventually leading to the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. Since then, Syria has

not been able to play the leading role it had hitherto filled in Lebanon. In addition, a broad popular consensus arose among most of Lebanon's residents, which included the message: no to Hizbollah.

This is when Hizbollah's intra-Lebanon problems started. A major expression of this distress was the fact that for the first time various Lebanese officials were able to attack the organization in public. Nonetheless, the Cedar Revolution likewise created an opportunity for Hizbollah, because the Syrians, while having assisted Hizbollah, had also acted more than once to limit its power, especially as they did not want Hizbollah to take over Lebanon. Today, the Syrian glass ceiling has been largely removed.

Hizbollah's troubles on the intra-Lebanon arena worsened as a result of the events of the summer of 2006. The war cancelled Hizbollah's magic touch and damaged – and is still damaging – Nasrallah's image as immune from error and harm. Nasrallah's image as a leader capable of leading the campaign against Israel, a leader who has the definitive answers about Israel, and a leader who also promises security and stability to the Lebanese, has been shattered.

Moreover, the war exposed Iran's involvement in an unprecedented manner and underscored the danger that the armament of Hizbollah poses for all intra-Lebanon systems. In this sense, a new and problematic reality was created for Hizbollah, because whereas in the past it stood on two legs – the Lebanese arena and the struggle against Israel – today the second leg is shattered. In the last three years, Hizbollah has not operated along the border, and did not even respond to the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, the head of its military branch (February 2008), attributed by the organization to Israel. In addition, Hizbollah did not assist the Palestinians in Operation Cast Lead (December 2008–January 2009).

Still, at the end of the day, when we examine the organization's military capabilities, we see that they are stronger and better than before. In this sense, a question of another round is a possibility that definitely exists. Just as no one wanted the previous round and no one anticipated it, things might evolve unexpectedly in a future round as well.

As for the internal Lebanese arena, the struggle over Lebanon continues. An important stage in this struggle was the Lebanese parliamentary elections of June 7, 2009. At first glance the elections handed Hizbollah a defeat, but if one examines the number of votes for

the organization rather than the number of representatives it garnered – what in the United States is known as the popular vote – it becomes clear that Hizbollah and its supporters received almost 66 percent of the vote. Because of the Lebanese confessional system, these numbers translate into fewer than half the seats in the Lebanese parliament, 51 out of 128. Hizbollah's primary rival earned 33 percent of the vote but won 71 out of 128 representatives to parliament. This is possible because in various Maronite or Greek-Orthodox places such as Batroun, Koura, and elsewhere in Lebanon, a candidate needed only 4,000-5,000 votes to be elected, whereas in the south of Lebanon some of Hizbollah's candidates needed 200,000 votes to be elected. Therefore, this phenomenon – Hizbollah and its supporters' electoral power – must also be taken into account, reminding us that demography is still working in Hizbollah's favor and the legitimate ambitions of the Shiites are at once overt and suppressed.

In any case, the last elections and the intra-Lebanon reality in general, like the reality along the border, confront Hizbollah with a difficult problem: whether or not to renew the attacks and risk an Israeli response. More important: the primary project for which Hizbollah was established to begin with and on which it has focused its activity for the last 20-30 years is the takeover of Lebanon. The question from Hizbollah's perspective is: how does one proceed with this project? The Cedar Revolution of 2005 and the Second Lebanon War were viewed as delays, blips on the screen, but they did not deflect Hizbollah from its strategic goal.

Today, in light of this reality, the dilemma is growing more severe. At its center lies the question of whether to continue to play the Lebanese game grounded by the Ta'if agreement, a game that includes participation in the parliament and willingness to accept a sectarian-regional electoral system that discriminates against Shiites and does not allow them or their allies ever to achieve a majority in democratic ways, or attempt to challenge the existing system and thereby drag Lebanon to the brink of another civil war.

In May 2008, as a result of the Lebanese government's attempt to break up Hizbollah's independent communications system in Beirut, Hizbollah gave something of a preview of a civil war when its operatives took over West Beirut, and following this, via the Doha agreement, forced the Lebanese government to give the organization a third of the cabinet

seats, granting it veto power. Today, after the elections, the establishment of a new government is under discussion and we are at the very point where the victorious coalition vehemently insists, by virtue of its victory in the elections, that it can establish a functioning government and that therefore Hizbollah's ministers, should Hizbollah agree to join the government, will no longer have a blocking third. By contrast, Hizbollah is insisting on getting this third. Given Lebanese tradition, we are likely to witness some dramatic affair or episode.

At any rate, it seems that we are advancing towards two possible boiling points. The question is if it is possible to prevent them, or if their occurrence is only a question of time and what will come first: another confrontational round between Israel and Hizbollah or a conflagration on the intra-Lebanon arena. Regarding another confrontation in the north, it is clear that neither UNIFIL forces nor the fact that Hizbollah is not deployed along the border is preventing the renewal of rocket fire or terrorist attacks, rather Hizbollah's own decision not to undertake them because of Israel's deterrence. It is true that today Hizbollah is not deployed openly along the border, which has reduced the number of points of friction that prevailed from the time of the IDF's withdrawal until the outbreak of the war in 2006, but it bears remembering that Hizbollah is stronger than ever. Given this reality, some incident or other – such as the elimination of Mughniyeh or sporadic rocket fire by global jihadists – is liable to occur. At the same time, however, in a situation in which one side has an arsenal of some 50,000 missiles and both sides are asking themselves if and when the next round will break out, these questions might serve as self-fulfilling prophecies.

As for the internal Lebanon arena and a possible flare up there, it is necessary to ask how much longer the Shiites will be willing to live with the reality in which, despite their community's size, they are still politically marginal and do not enjoy the privileges commensurate with their size and their fair share of the loot. No less important is the question to what extent and for how long Hizbollah, which today leads the Shiite community, is willing to settle for this situation or instead come to the conclusion that this is the time to make a comprehensive, sweeping move and take over the Lebanese state by applying military force.

Notes

- 1 See Hassan Nasrallah's speech as broadcast on al-Manar's television station, May 25, 2009.
- 2 2009 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, Zogby International.
- 3 See Zogby International's website at <http://www.zogby.com/News/Read-News.cfm?ID=1697>.
- 4 See Hassan Nasrallah's speech as broadcast on al-Manar's television station, May 26, 2009.
- 5 For Hassan Nasrallah's address, see al-Manar's television station, July 12, 2006.
- 6 For Hassan Nasrallah's address, see al-Manar's television station, September 22, 2006.
- 7 See Hassan Nasrallah's statements in an interview with al-Jazeera's television station, July 20, 2006.
- 8 For President Bashar Asad's speech, see the newspaper *Tishrin* (Damascus) of August 17, 2006.