

# Hizbullah at the Crossroads

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**A**t the end of the week in which the IDF pulled out from Lebanon, Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah made a fiery speech before an enthusiastic crowd in the town of Bint Jubayl. His statements, and the gathering itself, conveyed a feeling of triumph over Israel, whose military advantages had not availed it in its struggle against popular forces. The speech was interspersed with threats against Israel, particularly against its northern residents who, according to the speaker, are now facing an unknown future. Since the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon, Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli relations have in effect moved to a new footing which is in the process of taking shape, and is accompanied by numerous question marks, not least of which is the death of President Hafiz al-Assad. The stability of the region or, alternatively, the developments likely to impel Israel to implement the deterrent threats that attended the withdrawal will be significant to the calm and wellbeing of Galilee.

What the speech failed to say expressly is that the future also contains serious question marks about the Hizbullah movement itself. Contrary to Hizbullah's image created outside Lebanon, particularly in Israel, the movement and all its various sections were not engaged wholly in furthering the struggle against Israel. Granted, this struggle was a focal course of action, but it was only one of several, all of which are aimed at mobilizing popular support and stability for the movement as an influential factor in the Lebanese political arena. When Israel withdrew from Lebanese soil, any justification to maintain this course of action was considerably eroded. The withdrawal threatens to deprive Hizbullah

of its special position, and thus is now facing complex challenges pertaining to its status in the Lebanese power equation.

The struggle against Israel, which had contributed greatly to Hizbullah's growth in the eighties, was encouraged and reinforced by Syria as well as Israel, each in its own way, in the nineties. Syria played a central part in disarming the various Lebanese militias, in accordance with the Ta'if Agreement signed in August 1989, aimed at regulating the Lebanese political system following years of civil war. It was formulated and implemented with Syrian backing, and it set out steps to impose the central government's sovereignty throughout all of Lebanon. The agreement accorded Hizbullah formal permission to

maintain its military strength in order to continue the fight against the Israeli presence in south Lebanon. The Ta'if Agreement, which validated Syrian control in Lebanon, called for an IDF withdrawal to the international border and the disbanding of the SLA as so to enable the Lebanese army to deploy in the region. (An appendix, moreover, expressed consent to a redeployment of Syrian forces in Lebanon and their concentration in the Baq'a.)

However, the decision-makers in Israel virtually ignored the chance of stabilization along the border hinted at in the agreement. Based on the assumption that withdrawal would not succeed in stemming hostile acts against northern Israel, and in virtual disregard of the contribution of the IDF's presence in south Lebanon to the continuation of anti-Israel activity of Hizbullah, no policy changes were made. The IDF and SLA maintained their operations in south Lebanon, aimed at thwarting hostilities against Israel's northern settlements.

The security zone failed in its declared objective, as it did not offer effective protection for Israel's northern border. The Israeli soldiers manning the outposts, as well as the SLA forces, were themselves a target for the military operations of Hizbullah forces. What is more, Hizbullah activity directed against the security zone in south Lebanon and northern Israel was consolidated in the nineties and became

the scene of Syrian-Israeli confrontations. Thus, Syria's assistance on the one hand, and Israel's counteraction on the other, served as a support and a motive to strengthen Hizbullah's status in the Lebanese arena.

The situation now emerging in Lebanon in the wake of the withdrawal, with its inherent obscurity, dangers, and opportunities, holds one certainty for Hizbullah. In the wake of the withdrawal, this movement remains the only party in Lebanon with a legal military arm, yet with no *raison d'être* for it. This situation requires the creation of a new power equation between Hizbullah's foundations and various organizational divisions, and between the movement and the other power factors in Lebanon.

It is estimated that Israel's withdrawal will erode the status of the movement that, since the creation of the security zone in 1985, and more especially since the implementation of the Ta'if Agreement, has mounted operations which, in effect, were aimed at keeping IDF forces on Lebanese soil. The escalation in Hizbullah activity directed at northern Israel in the weeks preceding the withdrawal were prompted by their fear of losing their military relevance and political validity in the struggle against Israel. Concurrently, this escalation was intended to cause loss of life and strengthen popular protest in Israel against remaining in Lebanon, thereby stressing Hizbullah's role in the decision to withdraw, if carried out. The withdrawal itself granted Hizbullah a sense of victory and widespread popular recognition. From here on, however, any

Hizbullah military action against Israel will be perceived in a different light. Its continued struggle against Israel could result in events that will undermine the movement's claimed achievement of the IDF withdrawal, and turn previous advantages into an obstacle on its road to survival and continued growth.

The IDF withdrawal from Lebanon has thus created a crisis for Hizbullah from which it can extricate itself by choosing one of two fundamental options: inertia or change. It is thought that elements in this movement will attempt, at least in the coming months, to hold on to their heritage in south Lebanon, and from there continue their anti-Israel activities. Another way, more difficult and complex, would involve an organizational change in priorities, and adapting the movement's sections and internal relations to a new operational strategy. Both possibilities entail a combination of risks and opportunities for the movement's future and status. Since Hizbullah depends on outside sources for their weapons supplies and financing, and these come mainly from Syria and Iran, one of the two strategic choices will depend on the stance of these countries and their support for the path chosen by the movement.

Continuing the struggle against Israel in the wake of the withdrawal requires organizational stability. The operational direction will almost certainly be pursued by the military arm of Hizbullah, fearing that a halt to the struggle could deprive it of its internal organizational power. The support of the movement's leadership of this course, if chosen, will reflect a fear of

internal upheavals brought on by change or a reluctance to forgo a proven useful pressure tool. At the same time, the conflict could well continue, without being based on a decision by the organization's leadership, but due to the inability to reach a strategic decision. While the leadership debates whether to make a decision or to seek the support of the movement's members and sympathizers for some other decision, the possibility cannot be ruled out that militant factors in the organization will act, dragging its forces in south Lebanon into a confrontation with Israel. Such a confrontation could well lead to a major escalation, on the assumption that Israel will be compelled to make good its threat to retaliate sharply if there is no peace in the Galilee. Provoking Israel from inside Lebanon, however, will not be possible unless Syria chooses either to look the other way or to demonstrate its overt support.

This course of action involves risks which would considerably reduce the likelihood of its implementation. A military escalation between Syria and Israel, no matter how controlled, will affect Hizbullah, and its role, at least during the confrontation, will be totally meaningless. There is no knowing what its place in the arena will be afterwards. While sporadic incidents along the border and controlled punitive action by Israel may not develop into all-out escalation, they will nevertheless dampen sympathy for Hizbullah or the readiness of other power players to pay the price exacted by the movement's actions. The IDF withdrawal has not deprived the Hizbullah of its

ideological-religious cause, but it has curtailed the political one.

An Israeli reaction, which would adversely affect the effort to stabilize the Lebanese situation, will elicit anger directed at Hizbullah by the villagers in south Lebanon who returned to their homes after the withdrawal. A serious reaction from Syria is also foreseen if Hizbullah's actions threaten to embroil it in a confrontation with Israel under circumstances unsuited to the political agenda or timetable in Damascus. Syria will presumably wish to divert local and international attention from the problematic, albeit mostly dormant, issue of its control in Lebanon. An escalation for which Syria would be held responsible will not serve such an aim. Syria is without a doubt capable of paralyzing Hizbullah by withholding direct support from it, blocking the supply routes from Iran, or by using military force.

At the same time, there can be no denying the possibility that, in light of the freeze in the Syrian-Israeli political negotiations, Damascus will endeavor to sustain the strategic significance of the security zone in south Lebanon, as leverage on Israel on the Golan Heights issue. If that is the case, an attempt will be made, through Hizbullah activity, to induce Israel to cede the Golan in return for calm in Lebanon.

However, any action launched on Syria's orders without public Lebanese support could damage Hizbullah and its efforts over the past decade to achieve a socially-based structure. In other words, a continuing struggle, directed or inspired

by Syria or Iran, or involvement therein, will lead to a regression in Hizbullah's process of "Lebanonization", and the movement could in future be shunted to the political sidelines.

Hizbullah's "Lebanonization" process will form the foundation for the organizational changes following Israel's withdrawal. Its choice of this course of action was already clear from its participation in the Lebanese parliamentary elections held in August-September 1992. Since then, Hizbullah has

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competed against Amal for influence in the Shiite community. Hizbullah tried to undermine Amal's influence not merely by nurturing the fight against Israel, but also in the social arena, which is the latter's traditional stronghold. In keeping with the role of Islamic movements, Hizbullah established separate educational, health and welfare networks in the vicinity of Beirut and in the Baq'a. They also set up two channels of operations and mobilization of support during the nineties, which jointly built up the movement's power: the social aspect and

the struggle against Israel. Therefore, to forgo the fight with Israel, will not, at least for the moment, involve a search for an entirely new road. It will mean a change in the balance between existing courses of action and the organizational elements responsible for them.

It should be recalled that the strategic option of concentrated social and political activity also entails risks. Loss of its advantage in the struggle against Israel will underscore Hizbullah's inferiority vis-a-vis Amal even more. The latter receives far greater popular support, and is also trusted by other Lebanese power players. If it is to retain its edge, Hizbullah will need to emphasize its historic commitment to establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon. However, this ideological line has always given rise to the opposition and doubts of other powerful factors in Lebanon. In order to retain the power it has accumulated during the years of its anti-Israel struggle and in the days following the withdrawal, Hizbullah will need to expand the scope of its social activities. To that end, it will require financial sources beyond those already at its disposal. Intensified efforts to raise funds from Islamic communities overseas are therefore expected. These will presumably bear fruit – at least in the near future – in light of the sympathy evoked by the movement's achievements in south Lebanon. Even if the problems of financing are resolved, the process of change will not be smooth sailing. The military arm of the movement, or elements within it, could weaken the organizational framework by resisting their changed status.

Furthermore, an unequivocal "Lebanonization" option may not encompass the entire movement, and thus lead to the departure of certain groups which will continue acts of anti-Israel provocation along the northern border as well as in the international arena.

The change in Hizbullah's scale of priorities, if adopted, will not occur immediately. Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon has in fact created a new order in Lebanon, following which Hizbullah will need to draw up a new agenda for itself. By choice or not, Hizbullah is subject to the influence of Lebanese and other regional elements which, in turn, are now also undergoing a process of rethinking and realignment. Furthermore, not every conceivable future incident is bound to involve a decision or the incurring of calculated risks. Numerous scenarios can be drawn up that

involve loss of control and embroilment in confrontations contradictory to the wishes of the parties involved. The various developments, particularly those directed at a military escalation between Syria and Israel or a weakening of the fragile balance between the Lebanese communities, could render Hizbullah negligible in comparison with other and stronger movements. At the same time, an conscious choice to forgo the struggle with Israel and focus on alternate courses of action, some of which are already quite consolidated, will enhance the movement's strength in coming years, reduce chances of a deterioration likely to menace its integrity, and enable it to merge with the Lebanese and regional system which strives for stability.

Israel could contribute a great deal to a process whereby Hizbullah will position itself on social/political, and inevitably

more moderate, foundations. A first step in this direction has already been made in the form of the actual withdrawal. The sharp punitive threats that accompanied the withdrawal served an understandable need. However, at the next stage, Israel will need to exercise caution regarding the automatic fulfillment of its threats, even in light of incidents that threaten to disrupt stability along the border. On the one hand, restraint and delay could lead to an erosion of Israeli public trust in the decision-makers and a weakening of Israel's deterrent power vis-a-vis Syria, Lebanon, Hizbullah or other elements attempting to disrupt the calm. On the other, allowances must be made for the fact that a massive retaliation by Israel could cause the remnants of the pre-withdrawal struggle to become the start of the next conflict which will pay no heed to the border.