

# Doesn't Hizbollah Brake at Red Lights?

## The Crisis in Lebanon and its Implications for Israel

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The deadlock in the crisis in Lebanon calls into question the possibility of establishing “a new order” in the country. The campaign in which Hizbollah – with the support of Syria and Iran – has packaged the objective of toppling the Siniora government is multidimensional. This is a battle over the status of the Shiites in Lebanon; over the status of Hizbollah as an armed organization; over the identity of Lebanon; and a critical phase in the campaign over the character of the region. Even if the sides reach a compromise that forestalls the country's deterioration, this is not the end of the line as far as Hizbollah is concerned, and Hizbollah's uncompromising drive to determine each of these battles does not bode well for Israel, the United States, or regional stability, and certainly not for the future of Lebanon.


### **What Does Hizbollah Want?**

Since the crisis erupted in Lebanon on November 11, 2006 with the resignation of the Shiite ministers from the Siniora government, Hizbollah's demand for a unity government and for political influence – ostensibly legitimate claims on the need for fair representation of disadvantaged groups (mainly, the Shiites) – has been couched in escalating criticism of the government's ability to function and its affinity to the United States. At the same time, senior organization officials have acknowledged that fundamentally at stake is the struggle for the very existence of “the resistance” and that one of its main motiva-

tions is to undermine any attempt by the Siniora government (or any other government, for that matter) to disarm Hizbollah.<sup>1</sup>

And indeed, if Hizbollah has instituted a course of action so far-reaching that it stretches the limits of Lebanese so-called “confessional democracy” to the threshold of civil war, then apparently the perceived threat is substantial. Not that significant events have occurred since the end of the war: the ceasefire along the Blue Line has for the most part been upheld;<sup>2</sup> the fragile rules of the game between Hizbollah and the Lebanese army and UNIFIL have generally been observed; Hizbollah is restoring its military infrastruc-

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ture under the guise of rehabilitation projects for Shiite villages in the south; and the smuggling of arms from Syria continues under the noses of thousands of Lebanese troops deployed along the Syrian-Lebanese border.

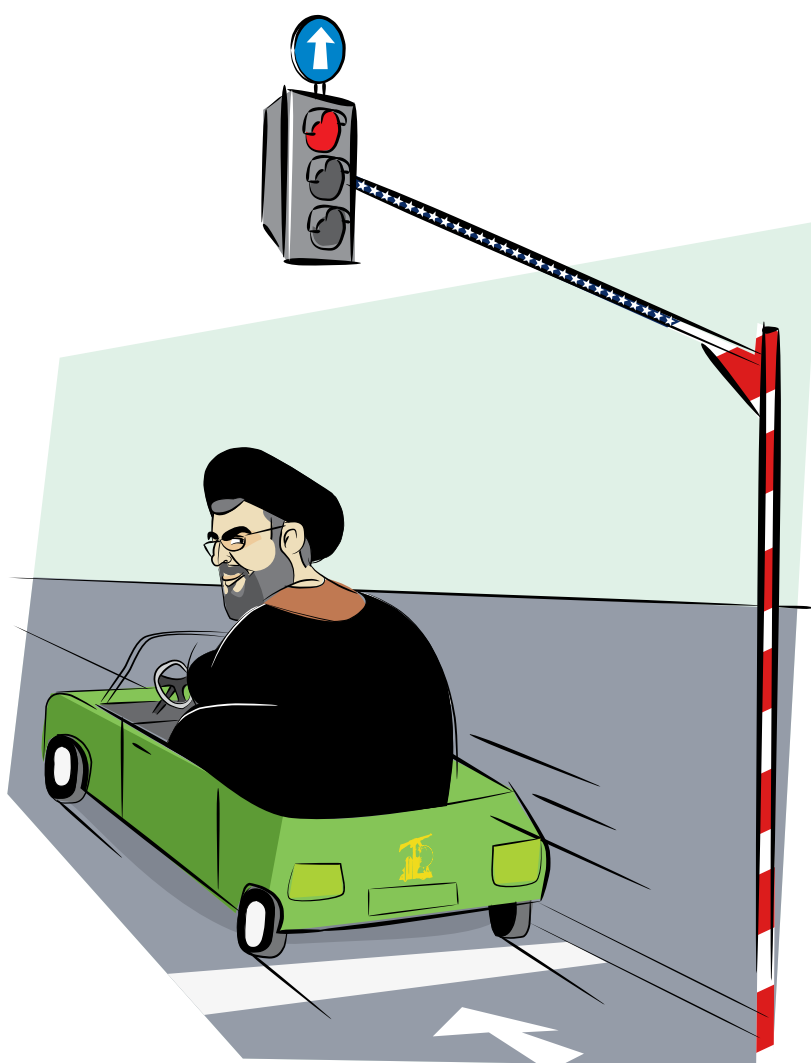
Nevertheless, even before the war Hizbollah understood that in the present reality, it faces a domestic coalition whose extensive external support favors disarming the organization. The July-August war and the adoption of Security Council resolution 1701 merely emphasized for Hizbollah – and this is perhaps one of the most important conclusions that the organization reached from these events – the need for strong political entrenchment and for securing a political rear line in preparation for the next round of the confrontation. Following Operation Grapes of Wrath (1996), the organization understood that its weak point was operative stamina and the ability to endure a protracted battle against Israel. Hizbollah rectified this deficiency. Ten years later, the latest campaign revealed its main weak point to be political stamina, i.e., widespread domestic legitimacy to contend with Israel over time and in its own way.

Hizbollah is trying to rectify this deficiency and by doing so, to ensure that before the next confrontation with Israel, it will be prepared not only at the operative level but also at the political level – to guarantee that no government will stab it in the back during a confrontation with Israel, as it claims the Siniora government did.<sup>3</sup> As far as the organization is concerned, the existence of an Israeli threat against Lebanon lies at the foundation of its legitimate demand to retain its arms, and anyone who challenges it is essentially a traitor. As a result, Hizbollah shifted its main strategic effort to the internal Lebanese arena, while setting as its objectives the toppling

of the Siniora government and the establishment of a government that is more accepting of the organization. One major tactic is to ensure early parliamentary elections (the last were in May-June 2005), since it is confident that this time, the opposition will win, or at least improve its position.

The wrestling match between “the opposition,” led by Hizbollah, and “the coalition,” led by “the March 14 camp,”<sup>4</sup> is apt to have two problematic implications for Israel:

- **Paralysis of the government, which would block the process of creating the “new order” in Lebanon.** Even if a compromise formula is achieved that would provide the Siniora government with enough political clout to last at least until the elections, it is highly doubtful that Hizbollah will be satisfied with this. It would not be difficult for Hizbollah to find causes to attack the coalition and voice various arguments to deepen the political and operational paralysis of the Siniora government, and thus it could claim that the government, perforce dysfunctional, must be replaced. Any settlement that might be achieved would constitute an intermission that would not obviate the outbreak of the crisis but only postpone it. As far as Israel is concerned, the political paralysis and intensification of the internal tensions are liable to bring the process of designing “the new order” in Lebanon and the implementation of resolution 1701 to a complete standstill. The Lebanese government will be unable to do much more than what it is doing today. There will still be a military presence deployed along the border in the south, which will take care to keep its distance from Hizbollah. However, the Lebanese government, which will be preoccupied with its own political survival, will be hard-put to curtail Hizbollah’s attempts to define



rules of the game for renewing the friction with Israel. Until now, the organization was careful to refrain from terrorist attacks because it was more interested in rehabilitating its military infrastructure, but it appears that it is already “testing the waters” along the border, in preparation for a possible resumption of the game.<sup>5</sup>

▪ **Hizbollah’s gradual legitimization from within and without.** The establishment of Hizbollah as a central power in the Lebanese political system is liable to cause political/ethnic groups in Lebanon to join “the strong side,” similar to the way that Christian leader Michel Aoun made a pact with Hizbollah, and this would help the or-

ganization blur the ethnic-Shiite tinge to the opposition to the government.<sup>6</sup> This support has electoral significance for parliamentary elections. At the same time, more and more members of the international community will reason that there is no other choice but to talk with the organization and to acknowledge the special status of Hizbollah in Lebanon, and will consider its involvement in politics as the key to its moderation. This is not a new trend, and in Europe (particularly in France) there has been talk about this since the Syrian withdrawal. It is doubtful that this will be the principal trend in the United States (although there too sentiments of this sort are voiced<sup>7</sup>) and the US will not be in a hurry to consider Hizbollah a part of the solution. Yet once Hizbollah becomes deeply entrenched in Lebanese democracy and becomes a legitimate central power, it will be extremely difficult to uproot it as a military organization, and virtually impossible via diplomatic means.

### Civil War: Lebanon’s Default?

Lebanon is already caught in a dizzying web of political crises, and every now and then the Lebanese people sense that the country is on the verge of civil war, particularly given Lebanon’s historical record and the rising ethnic tensions, mainly between the Sunnis and the Shiites. The bloody riots on January 23 and 25, 2007 in Beirut revived many memories of the civil war. Contributing to this sense is the frequent use of the term “civil war” in Lebanese political discourse every time one political faction wants to strike its adversary. In fact, the definition of “civil war” refers to different forms of internal confrontation at an extreme level of violence, which is disproportionate to what is currently happening in Lebanon.

Furthermore, although theoretically the historical, political, and social conditions of Lebanon make it a country prone to violent deterioration to the point of civil war, there are obstacles that at least for the time being are preventing this:

- Since the end of the civil war in 1989, the Lebanese political system has undergone a process of stabilization and perhaps even of maturation in relation to all matters pertaining to coping with internal crises, which are almost an integral part of the political agenda in Lebanon. Although a high level of political tension prevails in Lebanon that tends at times toward outbreaks of political violence, at present it is contained.

- There is an understanding among most of the powers in Lebanon that collective experience memorializes the last civil war as a traumatic event, and that a new war of this sort would heap disaster on Lebanon and not serve the interests of anyone. Therefore, there is a consensus on the need to avoid a deterioration of this sort. Hizbollah, perceived in Lebanon as a force having the power to prevent or to generate a civil war, is a party to this view.

As the most organized political and military power in Lebanon, Hizbollah is likely to survive an internal confrontation. However, such a confrontation is liable to erode its forces at the expense of its potential struggle against Israel; there is no guarantee whatsoever that the Shiite sect will continue to embrace it as it does now; it will completely lose its domestic legitimacy, particularly if perceived as responsible for the deterioration; it will be blamed for causing a civil war; and it will expose Lebanon to foreign intervention. Nasrallah's precarious course of action includes a certain dimension of political violence intended to intimidate his adversar-

ies and apply pressure on them, but it is not directed toward plunging Lebanon into the abyss of internal deterioration. As the recent riots in January demonstrated, when the pot boils, Hizbollah knows how to lower the flames.

Nevertheless, for a number of reasons these obstacles do not guarantee that political violence will not escalate: the ethnic-political tensions that cannot always be contained; the existence of more than one armed force in the country that is not subordinate to the authority of the government; reports on the arming of various political groups; the existence of external elements, such as Syria, that encourage deterioration in order to topple the Siniora government and believe that such a situation is likely to serve their interests; and elements in Lebanon with nothing to lose by internal deterioration: the Palestinians and members of the global jihad, which flourish particularly in failed states that are subject to internal conflict.

As far as Israel is concerned, internal deterioration in Lebanon is a dangerous scenario that is liable to redefine the nature of the threat emanating from the northern arena. Just as the previous civil war reduced the Palestinian threat in Lebanon and converted it into the Shiite threat, even if Lebanon does deteriorate to an internal confrontation that will weaken Hizbollah, there is no guarantee that precisely out of the governmental chaos a new threat will not arise in the image of global jihad figures who are already expanding their activities in Lebanon, although it appears that at the moment the extent of their influence is relatively limited.

Moreover, the weakening or collapse of the central government will thwart Lebanon's current efforts to extricate itself from the status of a failed state unable to function

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as a responsible governing body and turn it into a regional focal point for instability. Under such a situation, no vestige of a resolution 1701 regime would remain; Syria would try (as in the past) to grope its way back into Lebanon in order to impose order (an undesirable situation as far as Hizbollah is concerned); and Iran would expand its influence. Lebanon is liable to undergo demographic fluctuations that would increase the percentage of Shiites even more, since the Christians and Sunnis are more likely candidates for emigration.<sup>8</sup> The latent Palestinian volcano is liable to erupt, with approximately 400,000 refugees demanding to exercise their right of return and almost certainly joining the side taking action against the government, which would have a hard time controlling them.

### **A Hizbollah Takeover of Lebanon**

Another development that could occur in Lebanon as a result of a prolonged political crisis is the far-reaching possibility that Hizbollah might take over the country, almost certainly with the support of Syria and Iran. The term “takeover” may relate to two scenarios, first of all, a takeover by force. In terms of capabilities, Hizbollah is capable, with the assistance of partners inside or outside of Lebanon, to physically conquer large sections of the country (the south, the Bekaa valley). However, Hizbollah is saving this possibility for extreme scenarios, under which the Lebanese country alone, or with the assistance of foreign elements, would declare war against Hizbollah for the purpose of disarming it, or as a possible outcome of a civil war.

It is difficult to believe that Hizbollah would have an interest in initiating a military coup in Lebanon under other circumstances. Lebanon’s unique conditions as a multieth-

nic country whose existence and stability is dependent upon ethnic equilibrium make any course of action whereby one ethnic group gains control over all the rest a proven recipe for instability to the point of entanglement in a civil war, which is, therefore, not worthwhile politically. In this scenario, the organization would have to expend most of its resources fighting the internal arena at the expense of the confrontation with Israel. And while in the ideological ethos of Hizbollah there is a “fantasy” of transforming Lebanon into an Islamic republic, the Hizbollah leadership has repudiated this publicly, since it is clear to it that under the current circumstances, this would not be practical. This may be a more tangible scenario in a few generations, if and when the Shiites become the absolute majority in Lebanon.

The second kind of takeover could be in the form of gradual political control. The assumption is that within the scope of its drive to neutralize the threat from within, Hizbollah is interested in running Lebanon’s affairs from behind the scenes, mainly through reliance on the Shiite community as a solid political home front. This occurs by way of a formula similar to the mechanism of Syria’s control in Lebanon prior to its withdrawal – a combination of a puppet government supporting Hizbollah (and Syria) to sustain the ethnic equilibrium, and the deterring projection of strength.

Hizbollah is striving to reach this situation not by a violent or military coup, rather gradually, through a combination of pressures, threats, and “legitimate” political maneuvering (for example, parliamentary elections), which would enable an allied coalition to obtain a majority in the parliament and set up a government that would back Hizbollah fully as a military organization that



legitimately defends Lebanon. Later, Hizbollah is likely to exploit the broad parliamentary base to institute material constitutional changes: to redefine the allocation of duties among the ethnic groups and delegate key positions to the Shiite sect to run the country, and perhaps to cement Hizbollah's status as "legitimate resistance"; in other words, re-writing of the Ta'if accord.

For Hizbollah, this is the ideal scenario (although presumably its implementation would spark reservations among some of its political rivals and perhaps even some of its partners if it pursued this scenario): outwardly, the "confessional democracy" is sustained under the auspices of Hizbollah, which is afforded a dominant standing and internal legitimization for its status as "resistance" to Israel, without its having to bear the direct burden of running the country. Thus the organization, with the encouragement of Syria and Iran, would be able to restore Lebanon as the heart of "the resistance," to strip resolution 1701 of substance, to distance itself from the West, to renew the confrontation with Israel along the Blue Line, and to strengthen the Iranian and Syrian influence in the country.

This scenario is the most dangerous in terms of Israel. The more entrenched Hizbollah's internal standing in Lebanon, the harder it will be to rout it. Lebanon would become an active focal point for exporting the idea of "the resistance" to the Palestinian arena, the Iraqi arena, and even beyond, in a more extensive way than today. Hizbollah's success in taking over Lebanon would likely become a model that other radical factors in the region would want to emulate. Under this reality, the possibility of another confrontation between Israel and the organization would significantly increase.

### **The Syrian Option: A Broken Reed**

Syria has once again recently made the headlines, but not only in the negative context that usually accompanies references to the country, but rather as a relevant factor capable of contributing to stability in the Middle East that is even extending its hand in peace to Israel. The Syrians are encouraging this image and trying to convey the message to the international community that removal of the isolation imposed by the United States and European Union countries would contribute to regional stability in light of Syria's connections with "the resistance" in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian arena.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, in the international arena there is recognition that Syria wields influence, for better or worse, over the regional stability in general, and in Lebanon in particular. This emerges from the Hamilton-Baker report, which attributes to Syria and to Iran a key role in stabilizing the region, not only in the Iraqi context;<sup>10</sup> this also emerges from the "wooing" of Damascus by senior officials in European Union countries and even by American senators who visited there in December 2006.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the official position of Washington has not changed. It continues to view Syria as a pariah state and repeatedly warns it about efforts to topple the Siniora government.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the party cast as the element that can help in mitigating the crisis in Lebanon is also one of the key contributors to its instability. During the crisis, Syria stood behind Hizbollah's demands, encouraged it to escalate, and contributed to the incitement against the Siniora government, activity that was accompanied by a series of terrorist attacks, subversive actions in Lebanon, and the continued smuggling of arms into the country. But the question remains: can Syria

change direction and play a constructive role in Lebanon?

There is no doubt that Syria could contribute to mitigating the crisis, but under the present circumstances one should not overestimate its role. In fact, it would be wise to lower the expectations with respect to how Syria can contribute constructively to the Lebanese context. At the most, Syria could exploit its close connections with Hizbollah and with other powers in Lebanon in order to assist in a political solution or to moderate its subversive activities. Any course of action beyond this would obligate President Bashar Asad to choose a substantive change of direction, and it is doubtful that he is prepared to do this.

As background, one can point to the weakening of the Syrian influence over Hizbollah after its withdrawal from the country, concurrent with the tightening of ties with Iran.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, theoretically, Syria could dry up the well and not allow the transfer of military or other assistance from its territory into Lebanon, and by this, damage the axis of “the resistance.” Yet in fact, Syria has deep and complex interests in Lebanon, whose fulfillment since the withdrawal of its forces depends to a great extent on Hizbollah as a key powerbroker.<sup>14</sup> Thus, when there is an interdependence and convergence of interests between Hizbollah and Tehran and Damascus, Syria, lacking alternatives or substitutes, will not be in a hurry to relinquish it.

The possibility that Hizbollah will topple the Lebanese government and bring about the establishment of a pro-Syrian government suits the Syrian interests, *inter alia* because such a government would not cooperate with the international tribunal bringing to trial those responsible for the assassination of Hariri and other Lebanese. Syria, the

principal suspect in these actions, considers it critical to thwart the process establishing this tribunal, and in exchange for the negligible assistance that it could offer in the Lebanese context, it will demand an exorbitant price – a “concession” to Syria in relation to the international tribunal and recognition of its special status in Lebanon. In this context, the US secretary of state has clarified that the United States would not agree to a deal with Syria that would compromise Lebanon’s future in exchange for other interests.<sup>15</sup>

In any case, Syria is facing neither any significant pressure nor any positive incentive to change its behavior, certainly not in relation to issues concerning its vital interests in Lebanon. On the contrary, according to its line of reasoning, it is in a relatively good place: more and more elements in the Western world are recognizing its relevance to a resolution of crises in the Middle East (Iraq), and the Hamilton-Baker report (even if not defined as official policy) only bolsters this feeling; and Siniora’s anti-Syrian coalition has never been in a more difficult situation. Furthermore, the stick of economic sanctions is not too severe, as long as Syria has its Russian and Chinese backers.

One way or another, the message from Washington is that if Syria wants both recognition of its regional status and the gates to the West opened to it, Syria is the one that needs to pay the “membership fee” and inject real substance into its intentions for regional relevance. Calls for renewing the peace process with Israel are insufficient without offering a clear regional package. Thus far Syria has proven that it can do more harm than good. In the Lebanese context, the ball is in Syria’s court, yet Syria is not sending signals that it intends to take any steps whatsoever in order to placate the international

arena and particularly the United States that would attest to recognition of Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, for example, the opening of embassies, or demarcating the border between the two countries (a course of action that would help clarify the status of the Shab'a Farms).

### Implications for Israel

Since the Syrian withdrawal in April 2005, Lebanon has attempted with international assistance to extricate itself from its status as a failed state. Thus the deadlock in the political crisis in Lebanon casts a dark cloud over the prospects of establishing a "new order" in the country, particularly as long as Hizbollah maintains its strength and focuses its strategic efforts on changing the balance of power in the internal arena.

The battle over Lebanon is far from over, and another drawn-out struggle between the camps can be expected. For the time being, "the March 14 coalition" is still enjoying public support in Lebanon,<sup>16</sup> in the Arab-Sunni world, and in the international arena, and particularly from France and the Bush government, which views the existence of a stable pro-Western government in Beirut as a key phase in the battle for regional order. These parties succeeded in raising 7.6 billion dollars among international donors for the Siniora government.

However, economic, material, and political support of the coalition is only one side of the coin. The other side, which is not being implemented, is strict enforcement of Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701, particularly the sections pertaining to the dismantling of the militias. Barring this implementation, there is no real hope for any government wanting to implement a "new order" in Lebanon. Focusing only on one

side is tantamount to bailing out a sinking ship without plugging the hole in the hull.

The current situation presents Lebanon with three alternatives, and all three are problematic for Israel. The first concerns the coming period, possible prolonged political paralysis along with an escalation of the tensions and political violence. This situation opens a door to the second alternative, internal deterioration. A third, long-term possibility is that Hizbollah will come out of the crisis even stronger, in a way that would improve its chances of becoming the dominant power in the country and establishing Lebanon as a regional focal point for radicalism, under the aegis of Iran and Syria.

Can Israel influence the battle over Lebanon? Stopping the radicalist unrest that the Damascus-Tehran-Hizbollah triad is fomenting and that is challenging Lebanon is an interest shared by Israel, the Sunni Arab world, and the international arena. Nonetheless, under the current reality, Israel's practical ability to influence what is happening in Lebanon is very limited, and most of the burden rests on the shoulders of the international powers. Of course Israel from the outside could support any type of international coalition to assist in stabilizing Lebanon, but any involvement beyond this would arouse considerable sensitivity in the Arab world and in Lebanon. And in this context:

- Israel must be aware that there is an acute Israeli angle to the internal tension in Lebanon: in the "evidence" that Hizbollah is amassing against "the March 14 coalition," the ostensible partnership between it and Israel and the United States – during the second Lebanon War and in the current crisis, which Hizbollah considers the next stage of the campaign – is particularly blatant. There-

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fore, any type of Israeli intervention would be exploited by Hizbollah as another cause for demanding the ousting of the coalition and would contribute to a deepening of the polarization in the country. Furthermore, any military incident or flare-up along the border is liable to be exploited by Hizbollah as evidence of the failure of the Lebanese army to deter Israel. From here to the demand to assume control of Lebanon's security affairs and set new game rules for the confrontation with Israel is a short road indeed.

- At the same time, the international community expects Israel to make goodwill gestures to the Siniora government within the scope of implementation of resolution 1701, and under the argument that this would strengthen the government. This would include discontinuing the flights over Lebanon, or willingness on the part of Israel to arrive at a solution favoring Lebanon in relation to Shab'a Farms. At the most, however, such gestures would present Israel in a favorable light in the eyes of the international arena, and it is very doubtful they would yield the government any significant advantage over the real challenge that it is facing, Hizbollah. Indeed, it is not for this reason that Hizbollah is taking action to replace the government in the country. Such a course of action would be perceived (and rightly so) by Hizbollah as directed against it, and it would accelerate its efforts to neutralize the threat.

- Even if Israel does accept Damascus' offer to renew the political negotiations, and even if it arrives at a peace accord with it, payback in the Lebanese context would be poor at best and too late at worst. Syria's Lebanese dowry under Bashar Asad is far more limited than during his father's time. In the absence of a presence in Lebanon,

Syria's ability (and desire) to neutralize the actions of Hizbollah, which would thereby challenge Iran, is limited.

In the event that the international and regional efforts to find a political solution to the crisis fail, Israel needs to take into account the possibility of an adverse change in the status quo in Lebanon that would initiate a profound decline in its strategic environment, especially if Hizbollah gets stronger and becomes the dominant power in Lebanon (which is linked, of course, to developments in the regional and international arenas). In that case, Israel is liable to find itself between two players, Hamas in the south and Hizbollah in the north, that have mutual interests, enjoy foreign patronage, and share the "doctrine of resistance" and the outlook that is opposed to the very existence of Israel. Therefore, in light of such a potential scenario, it would be wise already today to deliberate modes of action at the political and operative levels (preferably with the United States). In any case, the option of another military confrontation with Hizbollah will always be on the agenda.

## Notes

1. According to Mahmoud Kumati, deputy head of the Hizbollah Political Council, "at the end of the war, we had no choice but to demand a guarantee that will grant us power by virtue of the constitution and the law," December 16, 2006, [www.naharnet.com](http://www.naharnet.com). For an analysis of Hizbollah's motives regarding the crisis in Lebanon, see Amal Saad Ghorayeb, "In Their Own Words: Hizbollah's Strategy in the Current Confrontation," *Policy Outlook*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2007.
2. The single exception thus far is the exchange of fire between the IDF and the Lebanese army on February 7, 2007.
3. As part of the battle over the patriotic narra-

- tive in Lebanon, and as justification for the moves against the Siniora government, Nasrallah claimed that this government shares a front with Israel and the United States against "the resistance." In a December 12, 2006 speech, Nasrallah "revealed" that members in the coalition initiated the war in order to cause the disarmament of Hizbollah. See the Hizbollah website, <http://www.moqawama.org/english/amenspeeches.php?filename=20061213175255148>.
4. The so-called majority bloc in the parliament and in the government, composed of Christian, Druze, and Sunni parties and politicians, which, following the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, led to a widespread public battle to push the Syrians out of Lebanon.
  5. On February 5, 2007, the IDF discovered an area near the border, not far from the area of Avivim, laden not long before with explosives by Hizbollah, *Haaretz*, February 6, 2007.
  6. The leader of the "Free Patriotic Movement," the Maronite-Christian general Michel Aoun, conducted a political battle against the Syrian presence in Lebanon until his return to Lebanon after fifteen years of exile. On February 6, 2006, he signed a memorandum of understanding with Hizbollah, and since then has turned into a political ally of the organization, despite the differences in their outlooks (Aoun supports the disarming of Hizbollah within the scope of national dialogue). Aoun's party has earned widespread support within the Christian sector (according to surveys, approximately 50 percent), which has created a rift among the Christian population.
  7. Robert Grenier, "If You Love Lebanon, Set it Free," *New York Times*, December 17, 2006; online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/17/opinion/17grenier.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/17/opinion/17grenier.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print).
  8. Gregory Katz, "The Silent Exodus: Vanishing Christians of the Middle East," *Houston Chronicle*, December 24, 2006; online at <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/world/4424050.html>.
  9. Richard Beeston and Hugh Macleod, "We Have Conditions Too, Say Iran and Syria," *The Times*, November 15, 2006.
  10. James A. Baker, III, and Lee H. Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report* (2006), p. 51: "Under the aegis of the New Diplomatic Offensive and the Support Group, the United States *should engage directly with Iran and Syria* in order to try to obtain their commitment to constructive policies toward *Iraq and other regional issues*" (emphasis added).
  11. "Kerry, Dodd Meet with Syrian President," *Associated Press*, December 21, 2006.
  12. David E. Sanger, and Michael Slackman, "U.S. Reports Plot to Topple Beirut Leaders," *New York Times*, November 2, 2006.
  13. Perhaps in order to lower expectations, Bashar Asad admitted during an interview to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* (December 15, 2006) that it is true that Syria wields influence over Hizbollah, but added that this does not mean that the organization will listen to Syria, should it act contrary to its interests. See <http://www.repubblica.it/2006/11/sezioni/esteri/medio-oriente-26/parla-assad/parla-assad.html>.
  14. Mona Yacoubian, "Syria's Role in Lebanon," *USIPeace Briefing*, United States Institute of Peace, on line at [http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace\\_briefings/2006/1109\\_syria\\_lebanon.html](http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/1109_syria_lebanon.html).
  15. AFP, December 12, 2006.
  16. The support is mainly on an ethnic basis: Sunnis and Druze versus Shiites, and at least half of the Christians. This emerges from a survey conducted in early December 2006 by the Beirut Center for Research and Information. Thus, 83 percent of the Sunnis and 90 percent of the Druze support the government. On the other hand, 94 percent of the Shiites claim that the government has lost its constitutional legitimacy, while the Christians are split, 50 percent for and 50 percent against the government. See the survey at: <http://www.beirutcenter.info/default.asp?ContentID=705&menuID=46>.