

Hizbollah after the Syrian Withdrawal

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Introduction

In recent years, and especially since the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, the future of the Lebanese organization Hizbollah and its very *raison d'être* in the absence of the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon has been widely debated. This issue has engaged not only those in the local and regional surroundings, but also the Hizbollah leadership itself. For its part, Hizbollah has demonstrated its capability of adjusting the organization's character and activity to the changing reality, evolving in light of September 11, 2001, the war in Afghanistan, and the overthrow of the Iraqi regime. Currently it faces a new challenge in the form of mounting Lebanese and international pressure on Syria, one of its principal patrons. This pressure has prompted Hizbollah to secure its position, together with Syria and the pro-Syrian establishment, in the internal Lebanese scene and consolidate its role as an armed force in Lebanon. The specific possibility of Hizbollah's future integration in the Lebanese army has become a more urgent issue on the political and media agenda in Lebanon since the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri on February 14.

Hariri's assassination, which will apparently be one of the decisive formative events in Lebanon in the decades since the Ta'if agreement and the end of the civil war in late 1989, intensified the already considerable local and international pressure on Syria to comply with Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2004. This resolution calls for the withdrawal of "all remaining foreign forces" from Lebanon, for the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias," and for "the extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory."¹ For Hizbollah, Hariri's death exposed the organization to new international pressure. It is no surprise that the organization considered the event "an earthquake."

The principal contention of this essay is that the Shiite organization is currently acting vigorously to implant the belief that it is critical that Lebanon preserve Hizbollah's military strength as a strategic deterrent against Israel. This platform earns the organization support from the pro-

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Syrian establishment and even from some senior people in the opposition who were adamant on the Syrians departing the country. Moreover, the impetus for Lebanon to sponsor Hizbollah's military power and thereby shield the organization officially is expected to increase as a function of the growing international pressure on Syria and Lebanon. Hizbollah, whose deterrence against Israel emerges specifically from its being a non-establishment body, will likely aspire to benefit from the protection of the Lebanese establishment, while at the same time preserving its independent status as much as possible.

Focus on the Lebanese Scene

Hizbollah's history indicates that it is far from an organization that stagnates in the presence of dramatic developments, such as the American campaign in Iraq and widespread international support for the war against terror. At least as far as Lebanese internal affairs are concerned, since the

eve of the American war against Iraq a far-reaching change has occurred in the organization's priorities and patterns of operation.

First, Hizbollah began emphasizing openness toward the political parties in Lebanon, including political bodies it avoided in the past. While the vast majority of reports in the Lebanese media traditionally addressed Hizbollah in military contexts, in recent years the organization's name has appeared daily, mainly regarding internal political issues. For instance, when in October 2002 Hizbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah appeared at the opening ceremony of the Francophone conference in Beirut, it was the first time that Nasrallah participated in an event unrelated to the conflict with Israel and in which the US ambassador was among the several foreign dignitaries. On the way to his seat, Nasrallah, again for the first time, shook hands with Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Butrus Sfeir, one of the first important figures to call for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. Rapprochement and coordination meetings of this kind have now become routine matters for Hizbollah leaders, including with the then-exiled and recently repatriated opposition leader – and prominent opponent of the Syrians – Michel Awn.²

Second, in the military context Hizbollah currently markets itself mainly as a strategic deterrent against Israel, and to a far less degree as an organization engaged in daily tactical warfare against it.³ The five years that have elapsed since the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon in

May 2000 may be divided into two major periods: from October 2000 until the end of 2002, when Hizbollah initiated attacks at Mount Dov every few weeks; and from the beginning of 2003 until the present, when the organization's attacks at Mount Dov have occurred at intervals of several months, and primarily as a response to what the organization perceives as Israeli provocation.⁴ Yet already after the IDF withdrawal Hizbollah leaders took pains to emphasize that the organization was intent on maintaining peace, security, and stability in the country. Since then, a new theme of Hizbollah as a complementary force to the Lebanese army that acts in coordination with the national military has surfaced more consistently. Senior Hizbollah officials explain that in light of the army's weakness, "the organization shares a foxhole with the Lebanese army," and therefore its

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military strength must be preserved. This approach has won the approval of the Lebanese establishment.

Specifically, expressions of concern voiced in Israel are recorded and well-received by the various entities located on the northern side of the border – Syria, Hizbollah, the Lebanese establishment, and even some of the leaders of the anti-Syrian opposi-

tion. Not only does Hizbollah note these expressions of fear that it has successfully generated, but it exploits and incorporates them in its internal propaganda campaign aimed at preserving its capabilities and status. Thus the Hizbollah secretary-general declared that the Lebanese army could not by itself deter Israel, whose air force alone is capable of destroying the army within "three to four hours." However, Nasrallah added, Lebanon possesses "the resistance that defeated, humiliated, and deterred Israel over a period of four and a half years."⁵ His deputy, Na'im Qasim, stated that "the deterrent resistance is what is frightening the Israelis."⁶

In reflection of this theme, Hizbollah over the past few years has drawn much closer to the official Lebanese military establishment. When in May 1999 the Lebanese president sent the commander of the Lebanese Republican Guards to meet with Nasrallah and award medals to the organization's soldiers for their fighting in southern Lebanon, this was regarded as an unprecedented gesture by the government toward the organization.⁷ Intelligence material possessed by Israel⁸ on the cooperation between Hizbollah and the Syrian and Lebanese armies, however, suggests that many people in the Lebanese military and political establishments see Hizbollah as helping to compensate for the inferiority in forces compared to Israel. In July of last year the Lebanese army chief of staff, Michel Suleiman, was quoted as saying to Nasrallah that since Lebanon possesses no fighter aircraft and a strong army with which to face up to

Israel, Hizbollah "fills this void" and becomes Lebanon's "smart weapons."⁹ About three months later a member of the Lebanese parliament, Fares Bouez – currently a vocal member of the anti-Syrian political camp while supportive of Hizbollah – explained that "resistance activities are by their nature secret, and if [Lebanon] had the traditional, classic [military] capability of taking on the Israeli enemy,

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the army would assume this task."¹⁰ Lebanese president Emile Lahoud explained that Hizbollah "remains the special essential weapon of Lebanon in the absence of the traditional military balance between the Lebanese and Israeli armies."¹¹ Former Lebanese defense minister Abd al-Rahim Murad remarked that "our capabilities are limited and Lebanon is very small in area, so that we believe that strengthening the resistance is the ideal method for us."¹²

In recent months, perhaps as part of an attempt by the Lebanese defense establishment to protect Hizbollah against international pressure, the implicit and explicit expressions of this concept were strengthened to such an extent that senior officials in Lebanon are now talking about Hiz-

bollah being integrated in the Lebanese military doctrine. The necessity to protect "the resistance" (i.e., Hizbollah) was even mentioned in a special publication distributed to soldiers by the guidance department of the Lebanese army, which explained that "the resistance forms an essential part of the strength of the Lebanese position when facing dangers from Israel."¹³ A few days later Suleiman remarked that "support for the resistance is one of the fundamental national principles in Lebanon and one of the foundations on which the military doctrine is based. Protection of the resistance is the army's basic task."¹⁴ Na'im Qasim agreed that as far as he was concerned, "we as the resistance are always lying within the military doctrine of the Lebanese army."¹⁵

This acknowledgment of the resistance, especially among the pro-Syria camp, is to a large extent based on a set of shared interests between Syria and Hizbollah. Syria regards Lebanon as a strategic asset of the highest order. Its success in achieving hegemony over the country, which began in 1976,¹⁶ is seen as one of the most significant accomplishments of Assad's regime. Damascus regards the Lebanese region as an essential buffer to an Israeli offensive that could bypass the Golan Heights, and a significant source of income for hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers. Syria's strategic concerns are well received by Hizbollah as it, like Syria, believes neutrality is not a viable alternative for Lebanon, and the country must therefore adopt either a pro-Syrian or pro-Israeli stance.¹⁷

Initial Discussions on Integration in the Army

In these circumstances it was only natural that the next discussion on the future of Hizbollah would be a debate regarding the integration of the Shiite organization, officially or semi-officially, in the Lebanese army. Hariri's assassination accelerated the debate. Only two weeks after the assassination Lebanese functionaries were quoted as saying that "in the next stage" the future of Hizbollah and its weapons would be discussed in consultation with all the political elements in the country. The possibilities suggested were setting up an integrated link between Hizbollah and the Lebanese army, integration of the organization's military force in the army, or a declaration that this force would become an "assisting" force for the Lebanese army, as part of a separate special brigade to be called the "Resistance Brigade."¹⁸

Former Lebanese president Amin Jumayyil, one of the opposition leaders who demanded that the Lebanese army deploy in the southern part of the country, remarked that according to Lebanese law Hizbollah could be defined in the category of "supporters of the army," and consequently "the army will bear direct responsibility and attach Hizbollah to the 'supporters of the army' and [the organization] will act under its supervision and responsibility."¹⁹ In contrast, the Syrian ambassador in Washington, Imad Mustafa, spoke about "merging" Hizbollah with the Lebanese army.²⁰ Muhammad Ra'd, the leader of the Hizbollah faction in the Lebanese par-

liament, was quoted as proposing to turn the Hizbollah armed force into a reserve unit in the service of the Lebanese army.²¹

It may be assumed that the organization itself would prefer to retain a sufficient degree of independence in order to prevent its total assimilation inside the army and the elimination of its particular edge vis-à-vis the IDF. In other words, the organization will attempt to preserve the current formula, defined by Nasrallah as "resistance maintaining coordination with and complementing the army,"²² while at the same time enjoying official recognition – and tacit protection – by the establishment. In an interview given at the beginning of April, the deputy director-general of Hizbollah was quoted as saying that "we shall discuss the weapons after [the Israeli withdrawal from] Shab'a [Farms], on

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condition that a reliable alternative is found for the defense of Lebanon. A reserve army does not mean that the resistance has become part of the army, but only that we have found

a formula for coordination with the army. This is actually resistance going under a different name."²³ Soon thereafter the organization hurriedly issued an official clarification, which claimed that Qasim was quoted incorrectly, and that the precise quotation was: "The idea in question does not mean that the resistance will become part of the Lebanese army and will come under its orders, but that there will be a coordinated formula for the defense of Lebanon. Regarding the means and details, these issues must be discussed."²⁴ The clarification was apparently designed to underscore that Hizbollah is loath to forfeit its independence in favor of a standing army and is eager to maintain its distinct operational methods.

Israel and Hizbollah: The Threat Perception

From Israel's point of view, the developments in Lebanon and the question of Syrian influence are regarded as directly linked to the security of the northern border. However, this approach has changed considerably since the beginning of the Syrian military presence in Lebanon in 1976. At that time, when the Yom Kippur War trauma was still relatively fresh, concern centered on the presence of the Syrian army along yet another border. Recent Israeli calls for the departure of Syria from Lebanon no longer stemmed from the fear of a military confrontation with the Syrian army on an additional front. Rather, the idea was that Syria's departure from Lebanon would free Beirut from the chains of Damascus tutelage and would per-

mit the deployment of the Lebanese army along the border with Israel, and as such, removal of Hizbollah.

Media reports in Israel and the remarks of senior Israeli officials in recent years are liable to give the impression that the fear of Hizbollah – an organization numbering a few hundred fighters, armed, according to IDF intelligence reports, with more than 13,000 Katyushas and long range rockets – is stronger, or at least more pronounced, than the fear of the Syrian military threat, which includes about 3,800 tanks, chemical weapons, and a missile system covering the area of Israel.²⁵ The IDF's confrontation with Hizbollah is described as asymmetrical, because of the basic assumption that the other side is an organization that is not subject to the rationale and considerations that generally guide a country. This is in contrast to warfare

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against the Syrian army that, should it develop, would be expected to unfold according to the traditional, familiar norms of military behavior.

The result of this incongruence is the prominence given to the Hizbollah threat. When in October 2004 the Hizbollah flew a mini remotely-piloted vehicle (MRPV) in the skies of Nahariya, media coverage in Israel

was extensive, and a debate ensued over the possibility that the next time the MRPV would carry explosives. Because of this development, reports even appeared that the IDF had deployed a battery of Patriot missiles in the Haifa region.²⁶ In a similar vein, Israel fears that advanced means of air defense (Iskandar and SA-18 missiles) sold by Russia to Syria would find their way to Lebanon:

The Iskandar? Not serious. We know how to deal with the Syrian army, says the IDF. They have missiles, and they will continue to have missiles. The balance of terror between us is clear and decisive, and at this stage they don't worry us. What does worry us? Hassan Nasrallah. Those who have listened to the rhetoric of Hizbollah's leader in recent months can identify clear hints that Hizbollah is seeking creative solutions for Israeli air supremacy.²⁷

This is the same concept that, at least according to news reports, led to the unprecedented acknowledgment by "senior defense officials" in Israel of a link to the assassination of senior Hamas leader Izz-al-Din Sheikh Khalil in October of last year in Damascus.²⁸ If Israel does lie behind the assassination of Hizbollah members in recent years in Lebanon, then in contrast to the killing of Khalil, Israel avoids assuming responsibility for assassinations in Lebanon.

However, signs also exist that there are those in the military estab-

lishment who are beginning to regard the Hizbollah threat in different proportions. Following the media uproar and panic aroused by the MRPV penetration, a senior officer in the Northern Command said, "We are all talking as though in another minute they are going to launch a nuclear bomb against us. Obviously I'm not pleased that an MRPV made a brief sortie over Nahariya and fled, but that's all it was."²⁹ The head of the operations branch, Maj. Gen. Yisrael Ziv, remarked that Hizbollah "put its foot inside our circle. This may perhaps be embarrassing, but it's not terrible."³⁰ In early April there was a second Hizbollah MRPV sortie over Israel, but with more moderate media reaction.

Conclusion

The assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Hariri brought to a peak the international and internal Lebanese pressure on Syria to remove its remaining forces from Lebanon – a step it implemented in April. To date Syria has officially withdrawn all its forces. This does not mean that Syria will totally abandon its national interest of influence in the country, in existence for twenty years. Without a Lebanese influence Syria's importance is liable to be reduced, as described by former Lebanese prime minister Salim al-Huss, when he said that if Syria loses Lebanon it will become "a regular country, just like any other country in the region."³¹ In fact, even if not a single Syrian soldier remains on Lebanese soil, there will still remain allies, a capability of applying sanctions against its opponents, and

bodies loyal to Damascus, as well as Syrian intelligence influence.

From Syria's point of view, worse than its departure from Lebanon is the possibility that Israeli influence may replace Syrian influence. In the foreseeable future every action that is regarded as an Israeli attempt to renew its influence in Lebanon may lead to countermeasures by Syria, including steps that could undermine the stability of the country. At this stage, at least, Lebanese opposition circles recognize that any attempt to damage Syria's political position, according to which Lebanon must not advance independently in the diplomatic-security sphere vis-à-vis Israel, will be regarded in Damascus as out of the question. For this reason the heads of the anti-Syrian political camp were at pains to emphasize from the first moment the "role of Lebanon as an active participant in the Arab-Israeli conflict."³²

Regarding Hizbollah, it does not seem that the opposition will attempt to force the organization to give up its weapons, a scenario that in any case is regarded as well-nigh impossible. Furthermore, even among those favoring the Syrian withdrawal and the resignation of the pro-Syria administration, there are some who believe that Hizbollah military strength is a national asset. The more that Israel is perceived in Lebanon as a threatening country, the more Hizbollah will continue to receive support and will find it easier to market itself as the Lebanese national deterrent against Israel.

From its point of view, Hizbollah must prepare for the future, although

it is not clear what role Syria will play. Whatever happens, it is already apparent to the organization that it must anticipate a situation in which it can no longer rely on Syrian backing, as it has done until now. This situation obligates Hizbollah to accelerate and intensify processes that already exist, in particular its "Lebanonization," or in other words, emphasizing its Lebanese dimension.³³ However, the more "Lebanese" Hizbollah becomes, with the Lebanese establishment influence more official and demanding, the more

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it will encounter difficulties in engaging in non-legitimate activities, such as the aid that it now gives to Palestinian organizations in the territories, aid that so far has not provoked Israel to a response that would undermine the stability on the northern border. It is likely that in the future Hizbollah will encounter less tolerance in Lebanon itself for this activity on the Palestinian scene, since its very existence as an armed force and its provocative activities would be seen as transforming Israel into a threat.

From Israel's point of view, this does not mean that the next time that Hizbollah identifies an Israeli violation of the northern border it won't retaliate. However, the more the orga-

nization assumes a more official and established image, it will gradually turn from a threat into a danger.

Notes

1. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sc8181.doc.htm>.
2. Two recent examples are the meeting held last November in the town of Bkirki between the Hizbollah leadership and the patriarch, during which he was updated regarding the considerations that determined the organization's activities in the southern part of the country (*Al-Mustaqbal*, November 30, 2004). In December the first meeting of its kind was held between a delegation of Hizbollah and a group representing General Michel Awn – the former military commander and president, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, and most prominent opponent of Syria, who recently returned to Lebanon following a fifteen year exile in Paris. It was stated that both delegations raised the issues troubling to each of the organizations, and it seems that Hizbollah wished to confirm that Awn's group would not in the future pin their hopes on Israel. For their part, the representatives of Hizbollah were requested to discuss the organization's future military dimension (*Al-Nahar*, *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 8, 2004). Meetings with Hizbollah representatives took place within days of Awn's return to Lebanon on May 7.
3. Behind the scenes of the Palestinian theater the organization has remained an active instigating factor, but on the northern border events generally take place at intervals of several months.
4. The pattern of this activity received official support in the remarks of senior people in the organization. See, for example, Hizbollah deputy secretary-general Na'im Qasim, in an interview with *Al-Nahar* on March 31, 2005:

"Hizbollah succeeded in developing its concept of resistance to the occupation, from daily military activities to a latent deterrence mechanism, accompanied from time to time by military activities."

5. *Al-Manar*, March 16, 2005.
6. *Al-Safir*, April 8, 2005; *Al-Manar*, April 7, 2005.
7. *Al-Nahar*, May 22, 1999.
8. During 2002 numerous reports were received by IDF intelligence that coordination and cooperation existed at an unprecedented level between Hizbollah and the Syrian and Lebanese armed forces, reflected in shipments of Katyushas by Syria to the organization for the first time, and by Hizbollah being regarded by Syria as a force that would aid its army in the event of a confrontation with Israel. The Israeli media reported that in Syrian military exercises in Lebanon, Hizbollah joined forces with the Lebanese army as a planned part of the Syrian defense. See, for example, *Yediot Aharonot*, March 4, 2005.
9. *Al-Mustaqbal*, July 30, 2004.
10. *Al-Dayyar*, November 14, 2004.
11. *Al-Anwar*, January 15, 2005.
12. *Al-Ahram*, February 23, 2005.
13. National News Agency (the Lebanese official news agency), March 1, 2005.
14. National News Agency, March 6, 2005.
15. *Al-Mustaqbal*, February 27, 2005.
16. In fact Syria wished to set "red lines" for the Lebanese players and make the Lebanese foreign policy subject to Syria. See Eyal Zisser, *Assad's Syria at the Crossroads* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1999), pp. 160-61.
17. See, for example, the remarks of Na'im Qasim, in an interview with *Al-Ahram*, March 10, 2005: "As we can see from the map, Lebanon must be either with Israel or with Syria. It cannot remain outside the sphere of influence of both of them. Consequently it is preferable and proper that Lebanon should be with Syria and not with Israel." See also the remarks of the Syrian foreign minister, Farouq a-Shar'a, in *Al-Safir*, on September 27, 2004: "We don't wish to rule Lebanon; we are afraid that others will rule Lebanon and thus attempt to establish their hegemony over Syria. This is the real Syrian-Lebanese fear."
18. *Al-Mustaqbal*, March 2, 2005.
19. *Kul al-Arab*, February 25, 2005.
20. AP News Agency, March 15, 2005; *Al-Safir*, March 16, 2005.
21. *Daily Star*, April 7, 2005.
22. *Al-Manar*, March 16, 2005.
23. *Financial Times*, April 7, 2005.
24. *Al-Manar*, April 8, 2005.
25. Shai Feldman and Yiftah S. Shapir (eds.), *The Middle East Strategic Balance 2003-2004* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press and Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, 2004).
26. Channel 2, December 5, 2004.
27. Ben Caspit, *Ma'ariv* NRG, January 13, 2005.
28. Israel's assumption of responsibility was reported prominently in all the media. See, for example, the headline in *Ha'aretz* of October 27, 2004.
29. Ynet, November 17, 2004.
30. Ynet, December 5, 2004.
31. *Al-Nahar*, October 19, 2004.
32. See the final communiqué of the opposition conference in *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 14, 2004. It was stated that the opposition defends the "resistance" and rejects any attempt to define it as terrorism, even though differences of opinion exist in the opposition regarding the continuation of Hizbollah's activities in southern Lebanon and the deployment of the Lebanese army in the south. This expression of support was defined as the first of its kind on the part of the opposition. *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 13, 2004.
33. Relevant here is an exceptional meeting held in Beirut in the middle of March between an American delegation, which included former administration personnel and senior members of several Islamic organizations, headed by Hamas and Hizbollah and represented by the party official responsible for external relations, Nawwaf Musawi. See the report in *Al-Mustaqbal*, February 23, 2005.