

Hizbollah's Primary Agent of Change: The Role of the Lebanese Army

Dani Berkovich

UN Security Council resolution 1701 stipulates deployment of the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon, disarming the region of any non-government-held weapons, and prevention of hostilities. It places the major burden of implementation on the shoulders of the Lebanese army, as the principal executive arm of the Lebanese government, a situation that implies potential friction with Hizbollah. However, in terms of actual steps to disarm Hizbollah, there is a long way from theory to practice. The Lebanese government, led by Fouad Siniora, has no intention of acting against Hizbollah, since it is well aware that this will jeopardize the fragile domestic stability in the country.

Nevertheless, deploying the Lebanese army lays the foundation for trends that, if actualized, will have a positive impact on Israel's security, including instilling the concept of the Lebanese state and reinforcing its authority, sovereignty, and responsibility; and on the opposite side, gradual containment of Hizbollah as a military organization. This is a complex and arduous process that Israel should support and Hizbollah is bound to try to sabotage, and its success depends not only on the capabilities of the Lebanese army but also on the government's determination to advance it. But in any case, the very launching of this process is one of the recent war's achievements.

The Lebanese Dilemma: Hizbollah's Weapons

In early October 2006 the Lebanese army, with much media fanfare, completed its deployment in most areas south of the Litani River in accordance with Security Council resolution 1701. This move was accompanied by statements from senior Lebanese figures about the army's determination to confiscate illegal weapons, to prevent attacks from Lebanese territory, and to protect the country against

Israeli attacks and acts of aggression, but not to disarm Hizbollah.¹

This move is apparently a major achievement for Siniora's government, as since the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005 it has faced mounting pressure

from Israel and the international community to implement resolution 1559 on disarming the militias and, as a first step, to deploy its army in the south and assume responsibility for terrorist organization activities from its territory. However, it appears that no one inside or outside Lebanon has any clear idea how to disarm Hizbollah without causing a domestic crisis or, for that matter, regional escalation. The expectations created in Israel and in the international community (as well as among more than a few Lebanese) that the IDF would be able to

¹ See, for example, Prime Minister Siniora's statement that emphasized that "the expression 'disarmament' is absent from our vocabulary," *Daily Star*, October 9, 2006; as well as remarks by the commander of the armed forces General Michel Suleiman, speaking at a ceremony in southern Lebanon, www.naharnet.com, October 2, 2006.

Visiting Research Fellow at INSS.

do that with a swift, decisive military campaign have been shattered in the aftermath of the recent war.

The international community is not enthused with brute force solutions, and no one regards the rein-

lah weapons is no longer theoretical, but has moved to center stage and demands immediate action, even at the risk of friction with Hizbollah. Those in charge of translating resolution 1701 into concrete measures and

Lebanese army able to impose governmental authority on Hizbollah, to the point of its complete disarmament? This complex challenge is influenced by certain critical factors:

- **Balance of power – quantitative but not necessarily qualitative advantage.** The Lebanese army, which was rehabilitated under Syrian patronage after the end of the civil war and the Ta'if accord of 1989,² has more soldiers than "Hizbollah's army." It numbers about 50,000 troops³ and purportedly has means not available to Hizbollah (armored vehicles, helicopters, patrol craft) as well as a commando unit considered the elite

The Lebanese national ethos perceives the army as an organization of the republic that rises above sectarian divisions.

forced UNIFIL troops, sent to assist the Lebanese army in implementing resolution 1701, as a force that will act to disarm Hizbollah. On the contrary, the international community has reverted to its pre-war position, namely, that disarming Hizbollah is an internal Lebanese matter, to be handled politically rather than militarily. This approach is common in Lebanon as well, voiced in the extensive domestic public discourse that began before the war on the future of Hizbollah weapons. This discourse reflects the clash between two opposing ideological approaches: the "resistance" embodied by Hizbollah, built on the idea of ongoing confrontation with Israel with the goal of its destruction, versus the "March 14 camp" (which also represents the majority party in government and in parliament), which strives to establish a new order in Lebanon, based on the resolution of domestic and external conflicts by political means.

In the new reality created in Lebanon following the adoption of resolution 1701, it is amply clear to Siniora's government that the issue of Hizbol-

enforcing the government's authority over Hizbollah are Lebanon's security organs, led by the army. By merely deploying in the south, the Lebanese army has already taken the first step in this direction.

Can the Lebanese Army Do the Job?

The challenge of a sovereign state facing an armed organization that is active within its territory and rebuffs its authority recurs in multiple places around the world, and is no stranger to Lebanon. In fact this has been the status quo since the 1970s, especially in the south of the country (which has metamorphosed from "Fatah-land" to "Hizbollah-land"). Yet the circumstances that fostered such a situation have changed – Syria no longer runs Lebanon's domestic affairs, the Lebanese army is deployed, de facto, almost throughout the country, Lebanon as a sovereign state is determined to bring about change, and the international community is willing to assist the Lebanese government in exercising its responsibility.

Under these circumstances, is the

2 The Ta'if accord was ratified on October 22, 1989 by the Lebanese parliament, marking the conclusion of the civil war and the establishment of a new order in Lebanon, under Syrian auspices. The accord required all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias to be disarmed and surrender their weapons to the state within six months, and mandated that the Lebanese army and homeland security forces be reinforced. Based on this agreement, the Syrians allowed Hizbollah's existence as an armed organization under the pretext of continued confrontation with Israel.

3 Data published by the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies in late 2005 has the Lebanese army numbering about 61,400 (<http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/balance/Lebanon.pdf>), but in fact the number is closer to 50,000, following the new draft law of May 4, 2005, whereby the compulsory service was reduced from two years to six months, after which army service is voluntary. In addition, there are tens of thousands of reserve troops.

of this army. In contrast, Hizbollah numbers several thousand well-equipped combatants, well-trained in guerilla warfare, with the proven ability to confront armies stronger than the Lebanese army.⁴ Moreover, the Lebanese army lacks significant combat experience, having thus far

lation.⁵ This does not mean that in a confrontation with Hizbollah Shiite soldiers would desert en masse – as Hizbollah might wish – but the army command is highly unlikely to walk the tightrope and test sectoral loyalties.⁶

- **Hizbollah-Lebanese army rela-**

Hizbollah seems to believe its power of deterrence in the domestic arena remains unscathed.

acted mostly in domestic security assignments. It lacks professionalism and proficiency, and its equipment is faulty in most of its units: it is still awaiting the generous aid packages promised by different countries. Therefore, the army is unable to pose any formidable challenge to Hizbollah.

- **The Shiite component in the army.** Since the Ta'if accord a special effort has been made to blur the army's sectarian composition. Although in the spirit of the sectarian division that reigns in Lebanon the army commander is always Christian, today, unlike in the past, an effort is made to maintain an ethnic balance in different army formations. The army has a fairly high percentage of Shiites – about 30-35 percent, proportionate to their percentage in the general popu-

tions: co-existence and sharing the burden. Since the Ta'if accord, the existing status quo in Lebanon – under Syrian auspices – endowed Lebanon with two armies: the Lebanese army, as a formal army in charge of domestic security and stability (in which capacity it acted to disarm sectarian militias in the early 1990s), and Hizbollah, which was in charge of the conflict with Israel, even after the IDF

withdrawal from Lebanon. Over the years, Hizbollah has amassed considerable strength with aid from Syria and Iran, and the weak Lebanese government has had to acquiesce to its special status in southern Lebanon and in southern Beirut (Dahiya). Both parties have forged a system of understandings and accommodation, whereby the state, represented in the south by only a token security presence, does not confiscate Hizbollah's arms, does not arrest its personnel, and turns a blind eye to its armament efforts and its military/ terror activities.

Following the deployment of the Lebanese army and UNIFIL forces south of the Litani River as part of the implementation of resolution 1701, a new system of understandings was created between the Lebanese army and Hizbollah based on the principle of (in)visibility. Hizbollah combatants will maintain a low profile, will not circulate in uniform, and will not openly display their weapons.⁷ In contrast, the Lebanese army flaunts its presence and may confiscate arms carried in public and arrest anyone in uniform. So far, except for minor incidents, this new arrangement has been observed.⁸

- **The Lebanese army as a symbol of fragile unity.** The Lebanese national ethos perceives the army as an organization of the republic that rises above sectarian divisions, notwithstanding the trauma of the civil

4 Beyond Hizbollah's combatant nucleus, the organization can also call upon Palestinian terrorist organizations active in bases within Lebanon (i.e., thousands of additional armed personnel) and arm pro-Syrian militias.

5 According to Oren Barak, the percentage of Shiite officers in the Lebanese army stood at 27.2 percent in 1991-2004. The total percentage of Muslim officers (including Sunni, Shiite, and Druze) was 52.9 percent. The share of Christians was 47.1 percent. See Oren Barak, "The Transformation of the Lebanese Officer Corps since 1945: Towards a Representative Military?" *The Middle East Journal* 60 (winter 2006): 89.

6 Barak notes that the increase in the number of Shiite officers in the Lebanese army may indicate a process of greater identification of Shiites with the Lebanese state (beyond perceiving military service as a means of social mobility); Barak, p. 91.

7 Nasrallah interview with *al-Safir*, September 5, 2006

8 AP agency, September 27, 2006.

war and the deep political-sectarian rifts that beset Lebanon. The army has earned this status with the efforts of its commanders, who since the end of the civil war have avoided any involvement in domestic political-sectarian disagreements in Lebanon's fragile system of balances, and have generally demonstrated sensitivity in times of political stress.⁹

• **Hizbollah's central position in Lebanon's political system.** Hizbollah enjoys considerable political clout in Lebanon by virtue of its being the largest Shiite party (at the expense of its rival, Amal) and its military might. The organization's presence in government and parliament, the support accorded to it by pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud, and the support of Syria and Iran combine to make Hizbollah a full-fledged partner, whose consent is required in the decision-making process on major issues in the country, including the decision to deploy the Lebanese army to the south.

Hizbollah's Perspective

Hizbollah rejects any scenario of voluntary disarmament or any other creative solution proposed to it whereby Hizbollah submits to the government's authority (e.g., incorporation of its units or combatants within the Lebanese army).¹⁰ On multiple occa-

sions Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has presented the organization's (clearly impossible) conditions for discussion of disarmament: removing the Israeli threat to Lebanon (i.e., destruction of Israel's existence) and establishing a strong state with a strong army, capable of deterring Israel from attacking Lebanon.

To be sure, the situation created in southern Lebanon, with the deployment of the Lebanese army and reinforced UNIFIL troops, requires Hizbollah to adapt to the new circumstances, which are less convenient than in the past. Yet even under these

reason why Nasrallah agreed to the deployment of the Lebanese army to the south of the country as part of resolution 1701, though he had opposed it since the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon. From his vantage, this is a calculated risk, since he already knows how to cope with the Lebanese army and also has means to put pressure on Siniora's government should it exceed the scope of the understandings regarding acquiescence to Hizbollah's covert presence in southern Lebanon.

As early as September 2006 Nasrallah outlined the "do's and don'ts"

The resistance has not disappeared and it will be present, according to Nasrallah, to assist the Lebanese army covertly and unofficially.

circumstances Hizbollah does not see any real option whereby the Lebanese army, as the executive arm of the government, will proceed to disarm it. On the contrary, Hizbollah seems to believe its power of deterrence in the domestic arena remains unscathed, with the Lebanese army not posing a significant threat to it, rather, at most an inconvenience. On more than one occasion Nasrallah has referred to the Lebanese army in a patronizing and scornful manner.¹¹ This was also the

governing Hizbollah and the Lebanese army under the new conditions. According to these rules, the Lebanese army is tasked with responding to any Israeli violation (as Hizbollah did in the past). But – and there's the rub – the resistance has not disappeared and it will be present, according to Nasrallah, to assist the Lebanese army covertly and unofficially. As for the "don'ts," Nasrallah clarified that the army may not disarm the resistance, spy on it, or raid locations where Hizbollah stores its arms.¹² Later, for the sake of clarity, Nasrallah conveyed a message (to the state as well) accompanied by a

more by Defense Minister al-Murr. See www.naharnet.com, September 23, 2006.

11 For instance, after the Lebanese government agreed to deploy the army in the south, Nasrallah explained that thus far Hizbollah has opposed such a move because of its "concern" for the

Lebanese army, *al-Manar*, August 8, 2006.

12 *Al-Safir*, September 5, 2006.

9 For example, during the mass protests in Lebanon following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri (February 14, 2005).

10 This proposal has been made in the past by different politicians in Lebanon, and was recently raised once

threat, which said that no army in the world could disarm Hizbollah.¹³

Nonetheless, Hizbollah has cause to worry due to two perilous trends: the focus in Lebanon's domestic discourse on the future of Hizbollah's arms and the continuous erosion in the legitimacy of its bearing arms; and the resolve shown by Prime Minister Siniora in promoting, via the Lebanese army, processes aimed at revoking Hizbollah's prerogative to "defend Lebanon" from Israel.

Therefore, Hizbollah leaders have clarified in a series of defiant statements that not only will the organization maintain its covert presence in the south (as Nasrallah underlined) but it will also renew attacks against Israel should it violate Lebanon's sovereignty at sea, on land, and in the air.¹⁴ In any case, at this stage it would seem that Hizbollah prefers to avoid friction with the army, and aims its criticism at Prime Minister Siniora and at the "March 14 camp."

The Lebanese Army: An Agent of Change, not Disarmament

Since its establishment (August 1, 1945), the Lebanese army, along with other state security organs, has fulfilled an important role in safeguarding domestic stability, and the state of

the army has largely mirrored Lebanon's stability, sovereignty, and independence. It seems that following the recent war, the Lebanese army has again assumed a significant position as the executive arm of the Lebanese state.

Under the current circumstances it is unlikely that the Lebanese government will instruct its army to disarm Hizbollah, and it is highly doubtful if the Lebanese army – with or without assistance from UNIFIL troops – will act on the full implementation of resolution 1701, especially vis-à-vis disarming the area south of the Litani of all non-government arms. Nevertheless, the deployment of the Lebanese army to the south of the country cultivates two emerging trends that, if realized, will have a positive impact on Israel's security and match the strategic objectives of Siniora's government:

- Reinforcing the idea of the Lebanese state with all that implies for establishment of central government authority, gradual realization of state sovereignty throughout its territory, and responsibility for hostile activities in and from its territory.
- Containment of Hizbollah, as part of the attempt to revoke its unauthorized power to manage conflicts with Israel and to use force against it. Even at this early stage this is expressed by the increased involvement of Siniora's government in issues at stake with Israel: Shab'a Farms, the prisoners, and the readiness to defend Lebanon against Israeli operations.¹⁵

The primary condition for these trends is a strong Lebanese army, effectively deployed (alongside a reinforced UNIFIL) along the border with Israel and thereby rising to the challenge that Nasrallah posed to the state with regard to establishment of a strong, capable army as a prerequisite to discussing disarmament. Such an army will not only serve as a clear state-level address for Israel in any case of security deterioration, but may even serve as a deterrent in the domestic arena against Hizbollah.

Nevertheless, realization of these trends is not merely a function of military might – improved as it may be – under the authority of the Lebanese government, but primarily the resolve of this government to use the Lebanese army to promote its strategic goals and its ability to surmount the many obstacles facing it from within and without. It is, indeed, likely that Hizbollah and its patrons in Damascus and Tehran will object to attempts at weakening the organization's status in Lebanon and at revoking its "legitimate right to fight against Israel" by bolstering an already emergent effort to weaken

that the Lebanese army needs anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank missiles, and helicopters for deterring Israel, *Daily Star*, September 25, 2006. Elsewhere the defense minister mentioned that the government has already decided to acquire such equipment in order to preempt Hizbollah's argument that the army is incapable of protecting Lebanon, www.naharnet.com, September 23, 2006.

13 See Nasrallah's "victory speech" of September 22, 2006 (English version) at: http://www.moqawama.org/english/_amen222.php?filename=20060926170043026.

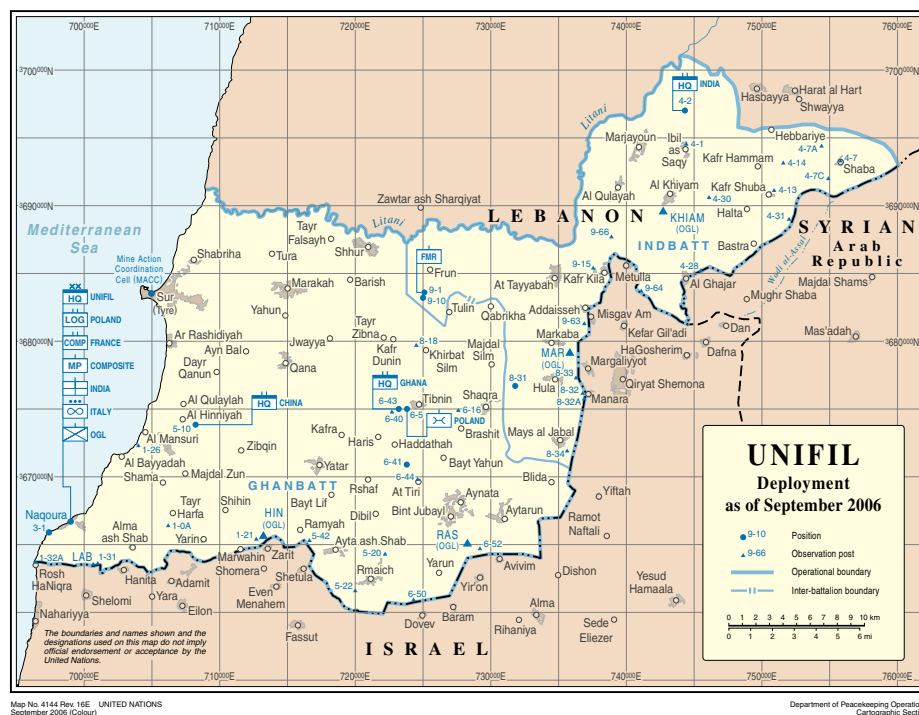
14 Attributed to organization senior activist, Sheikh Hassan ez al-Din, www.naharnet.com, October 2, 2006.

15 See, for example, Lebanese defense minister Elias al-Murr, who said

Siniora's government and thereby undermine Lebanon's domestic stability.

Accordingly, international commitment and assistance to Siniora's government at the practical levels is highly important, including aid to upgrade the Lebanese army and promote its ability to fulfill its complex tasks, both internally and along the borders with Syria (to preventing arms smuggling) and with Israel. Yet the real tests, those for the Lebanese government, still lie ahead, and its resolve will be tested when the first terror attack is launched from Lebanese territory.

This long and complex process is not enough to forcefully disarm Hizbollah or to convince it to willingly disarm, but this process may, over time, reduce the organization's ability to maneuver. As far as Israel is concerned, it is precisely the lack of an effective, available military solution to the problem of Hizbollah's arms that dictates a clear interest in encouraging such processes centered on the Lebanese army. The idea of a Lebanese army, equipped with advanced means and deployed along the border, may raise some objections within Israel, especially in view of the unsuccessful precedent of providing arms to the Palestinian Authority (though the two cases are distinctly different). Yet here Israel should in fact wager on the Lebanese army (ostensibly under UNIFIL observation): it should not object to providing it



UNIFIL Forces Deployment – September 2006

Source: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/dpko/unifil.pdf>

with advanced weapons (although each case should be reviewed on its own merits) and perhaps it should even covertly encourage countries such as the US and France, already involved in plans for upgrading the Lebanese army, to increase their aid. The alternative may be a weakened, ineffective Lebanese army with an unmotivated UNIFIL, while Hizbollah rebuilds its status in the south as "the protector of Lebanon," thereby nullifying resolution 1701.

But in any case, the physical presence of Lebanese soldiers in the south is not enough, and the state should inject practical content into restor-

ing its status, effectively applying its sovereignty, and creating an attractive alternative to Hizbollah. This is true not only at the security level, but also at the social level. For example, government institutions should be upgraded to overshadow Hizbollah institutions and become the preferred associations for south Lebanon inhabitants with regard to their social needs, particularly regarding all that relates to reconstruction of the south. In any case, even in the initial period, this nascent trend of creating alternatives to Hizbollah should be deemed one of the significant achievements of the recent war in Lebanon.