

Lebanon 2007: Old Realities, New Uncertainties

Daniel Sobelman

Several events converged to bring twenty-nine years of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon to a finale: the string of political assassinations, the withdrawal of the Syrian military from Lebanese soil, and of course the Second Lebanon War. The end of this Syrian hegemony also brought to a close what had been an era of domestic stability. Surrounded by regional crises, and with an ever-present threat of civil conflict looming, Lebanon is struggling to recover from the 2006 war and to stem further disintegration. The future status of Hezbollah, at least in the short term, and its political and military room for maneuver will be largely determined by the way in which Lebanon resolves the current crisis.

Internal Strife

In an inconspicuous column entitled “Secrets of the Gods” in late 2003, the Beirut newspaper *al-Nahar* – at the time the Lebanese newspaper most outspoken in its criticism of Hezbollah – published a one-line item that “one of the prominent organizations” was engaged in digging in towns along the border in order to lay the infrastructure for a private phone system. The report noted that “official and civil authorities” objected to the operations.¹ Four years later, Hezbollah’s operational telephone infrastructure is no longer a guarded secret but rather an openly debated topic on the agenda of the Lebanese government, which in recent months has been exposing and dismantling the Shiite organization’s telephone infrastructure in Beirut and other parts of the country.²

Moreover, the Lebanese media continues to feature reports on the fortifications that

Hezbollah is building along the Litani River and the increasing strength of the organization. In early 2007, the Lebanese military officially announced that it had seized a truck with ammunition belonging to Hezbollah; it also informed Hezbollah that it would bar and confiscate all subsequent arms shipments.³ At the same time, a newspaper report cited a senior Lebanese security source listing the names of the pro-Syrian groups allegedly training in Hezbollah training camps.⁴ Even Hezbollah’s purchase of a large quantity of Lebanese army and security forces uniforms found its way into the local media.⁵ Lebanese newspapers’ disclosure of information that Hezbollah undoubtedly views as sensitive from a security perspective reflects the profound change that has altered the country’s political climate and the rules of the game within Lebanon to the disadvantage of Hezbollah.

Daniel Sobelman,
visiting research
associate at INSS

Last year, the Lebanese political system confronted the most serious crisis it has known since the end of the civil war and the Ta'if agreement of late 1989. On the eve of the Second Lebanon War, the country's main political forces were engaged in a national dialogue aimed at resolving some of the country's fundamental problems, including Hezbollah's military capability; demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border; establishment of an international court to try suspects in the murder of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri; and election of a new president. The war of July-August 2006 completely shattered the mutual trust that the sides had attempted to forge. The cross-border operation in which Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev were abducted was carried out despite prior warnings by al-Mustaql party leader Sa'ad al-Din al-Hariri to Hezbollah. Yet from Hezbollah's perspective, while Shiite fighters worked to repulse the Israeli attack, their political adversaries operated behind their back, hoping in fact for their collapse.

Throughout 2007, the possibility of deterioration into renewed civil war became a regular theme of discussion among politicians and in the media, as government leaders spoke of the need to "save the country." Dialogue between the sides became virtually impossible. After several months of rumors and reports of the arming of civilians and political groups⁶ and the smuggling of weapons out of Iraq onto the Lebanese black market, the Lebanese government officially confirmed that groups from both sides of the political divide were indeed undergoing military training.⁷ The threat of renewed descent into civil war was a recurring subject in political discourse, appearing in countless articles and caricatures that repeatedly featured the well known bus that was attacked

in 1975 by Christian militiamen as it drove through the Ein al-Rumaneh neighborhood in East Beirut. This attack was the spark that ignited the Lebanese civil war.

Lebanon's chronic internal weakness has fostered a persistent pattern: one power base within the country seeks the assistance of an external power in order to restrain its domestic rivals and establish a new political order as per its own interests (see the role of the United States in 1958, Syria in 1976, and Israel in 1982, in addition to the traditional role played by France as patron to Lebanon's Christians).⁸ In the fall of 2007, Lebanon was in the throes of an accelerated process of "Lebanonization" in the old and negative sense of the term, with each political group (the "March 14 camp," the anti-Syrian government camp, versus the "March 8 camp," i.e., the opposition) viewed as acting on behalf of a larger regional or international power such as Syria, Iran, the United States, France, and to a certain extent Israel.

At present, Lebanon's domestic political situation is worse than it has been in years, with the two major blocs counterbalancing each other, each incapable of deciding the outcome of the struggle. The parliamentary session of September 25, during which the two sides were supposed to meet to choose a new president to replace Emile Lahoud, never even took place due to the absence of an agreed upon candidate. The March 14 camp threatened to select a president by means of a simple majority (65 of Lebanon's 128 members of parliament). In response to this, Hezbollah deputy secretary-general Na'im Qasim countered with warning "to fill the constitutional vacuum," that is, to establish a rival parallel government.⁹

The armed roadblocks and street fighting that had characterized the Lebanese civil

Lebanon's domestic political situation is worse than it has been in years, with the two major blocs counter-balancing each other, each incapable of deciding the struggle.

war cannot be found in Lebanon today. The Lebanese military is united and for the time being enjoys broad support. However, the atmosphere in the country is ominous, with neither side of the domestic political split having anything to gain from a further decline. Lebanese newspapers have reported land purchases by wealthy Shiite sponsors in Druze and Christian regions.¹⁰ It appears that many thousands of Christians have emigrated from Lebanon during the past year, although the exact scope of this phenomenon is unknown.

A respected Lebanese columnist summed up the state of affairs as follows: "The situation is confusing because history is supposed to move forward, while for a number of years it seems as if it has been moving backwards.... No one today remembers what happened in the years 1975 and 1976, but we are now reminded that we might be on our way to a similar situation," that is, civil war.¹¹

At the end of the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah declared a "divine victory." Over the past year, however, it appears that the Lebanese state has been too fragile to shoulder this victory. Lebanon's primary task in the coming months and thereafter as well will be to stop the country's internal deterioration and prevent the disintegration of the regime's institutions and hence the dissolution of the state.

Domestic Confrontation in the Shadow of Regional Tension

Lebanon today is in the midst of a process that began with the pullback of IDF forces from southern Lebanon in May 2000 and was accelerated by the ignominious May 2005 withdrawal of the Syrian military presence, after three decades of Syrian control of

domestic and foreign policy in Lebanon. As long as Syria controlled Lebanon, the country had no option but to be part of the "resistance camp" and to keep its distance from the policies of moderate Arab states, most of which enjoy relations of some type with Israel. Yet on the eve of the Second Lebanon War, the country was in the throes of a struggle over its political identity in the aftermath of the absence of Syrian hegemony.

As far as Syria (the main suspect in the political assassinations that continued to plague Lebanon during the past year as well) is concerned, the key to stability in Lebanon lies in Beirut's alignment with the resistance camp. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who patently retains significant influence in Lebanon, clearly advocated this approach when he argued that Lebanon became stable only "when it went in the Arab direction and supported resistance – that is to say, when it was against Israel...When Lebanon deviates from this logic, it becomes an unstable country, as does any other country in the Arab world that deviates from this logic."¹²

More than one year after the end of the Second Lebanon War, public opinion in Israel seems focused on the military aspects of the Israeli campaign against Hezbollah. Nasrallah observed this correctly, pointing out that "Israelis see Lebanon as nothing more than the ammunition of the resistance."¹³ But today the outcome of the war must be measured not simply by the number of rockets that Hezbollah succeeded in firing into Israel for thirty-three days, or the organization's success in rehabilitating its military capacity. It is impossible to ignore the domestic Lebanese and regional contexts of the war: in Lebanon (and subsequently throughout the Sunni Arab world), the campaign of July-August 2006 was viewed as an expres-

sion of the Shiite drive to realize local and regional ascendancy. One result of the war was the beginning of an internal process within Lebanon whose outcome is thus far undetermined. The regional and international actors involved in Lebanese affairs today will also have an effect on the final direction of this internal process, which could significantly impinge on Hezbollah's room to maneuver, both politically and militarily.

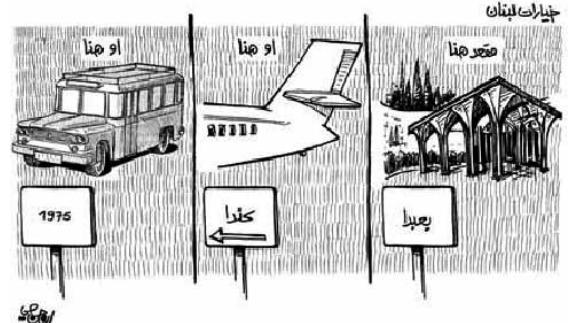
In interviews granted after the two previous campaigns against Israel – "Operation Accountability" in July 1993 and "Operation Grapes of Wrath" in April 1996 – Hassan Nasrallah indicated that he measured success primarily according to Hezbollah's ability to continue firing rockets into Israel until the end of the campaign; the success, as he saw it, in dictating the rules of the confrontation to the IDF; and the success in preventing Israel from driving a wedge between Hezbollah and the Lebanese public.¹⁴ From Hezbollah's perspective and according to these parameters, the organization defeated Israel. However, in contrast to 1993 and 1996, the ceasefire of August 14, 2006 left Hezbollah much less protected than in the past. Neither Operation Accountability nor Operation Grapes of Wrath unleashed internal processes in Lebanon. Nor could any internal process against Syria's vital interest have developed in Lebanon as long as the reigns of the Lebanese political system remained firmly in the hands of Damascus. In addition, the destruction caused by the IDF shelling in Shiite areas in Lebanon, Hezbollah's primary domain, was much greater than the organization had experienced in the past. The reconstruction process is likely to take years, especially if a political stalemate continues. Hezbollah's ability to act in the domestic Lebanese arena has thus narrowed significantly over the past

year. This has also largely been due to inter-community tensions, with Siniora's government enjoying the clear support of Arab countries in general

and of the two countries that set the tone of the Arab world – Egypt and Saudi Arabia – in particular.

On December 1, 2006, the Hezbollah-led Lebanese opposition launched a popular mass initiative aimed at forcing Siniora to yield to its demands. The initiative, which began when hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, quickly subsided into a number of symbolic protests in central Beirut. Hezbollah sources acknowledged that in assessing the situation after a few weeks, the organization's leadership reached the conclusion that "one of the weak points that emerged during the first month [of the demonstrations] was the transformation of the political struggle into an inter-sectarian struggle." During a meeting with Hezbollah activists, Nasrallah was quoted as saying that "this issue had a negative impact on the initiative, among other reasons because it made it necessary to set some kind of limit to the popular escalation."¹⁵ On the first anniversary of the war, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, the senior Shiite clerical authority in Lebanon, denounced the portrayal of the "victory of resistance" in specifically confessional colors.¹⁶

With the support of the United States, France, and the Sunni Arab bloc, the government of Fouad Siniora succeeded in withstanding the opposition's attempts to create the public critical mass necessary to force the



Typical contemporary caricature, which appeared widely in Lebanese newspapers at the height of the crisis surrounding the selection of a president. The caricature presents "Lebanon's alternatives" (r-l): "here – the presidential palace in Baabda," "or here – a plane to Canada," "or here – 1975" (al-Nahar, October 6, 2007).

The campaign of July-August 2006 was viewed as an expression of the Shiite drive to realize local and regional ascendancy.

government to accede to the joint demand of Hezbollah, Amal, and Christian leader Michel Aoun, which insisted that the government endow the opposition with a controlling bloc of the government in the form of one-third of the cabinet ministers. In Hezbollah's view, the opposition's initiative was aimed at "adjusting internal political administration and preventing additional influence of the July aggression [the Second Lebanon War], particularly in light of the serious indications pertaining to the implementation of resolution 1701, the besieging of the resistance, the role of the international force in Lebanon, and deviations from the content of resolution 1701."¹⁷

At the same time, the government scored another accomplishment by dislodging the Fatah al-Islam group from the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, one of a dozen refugee camps in Lebanon. These camps are considered extraterritorial areas in Lebanon, and therefore provide a breeding ground not only for criminal activity, but for global jihad forces as well. The Lebanese army's military campaign against the Islamic group, which is considered to operate under the inspiration of global jihad, incurred a high price: nearly 200 soldiers were killed in a three-month campaign that enjoyed American and international support.¹⁸ The campaign also boosted the image of the Lebanese military and its public support, as the operation in the camp was the first of its kind to be carried out in Lebanon in four decades. Over the past few months, the government and the pro-government media ran an information campaign touting civilians' respect for the national military. The government presents the Lebanese army as the true defender of Lebanon, including against Israel. This is important because in recent years Hezbollah

has argued that its reason d'être is justified primarily against the backdrop of the inadequacies of the Lebanese military.

Reviving the Idea of Integrating Hezbollah into the Lebanese Military

During the months following the assassination of al-Hariri, the possibility of integrating Hezbollah into the Lebanese armed forces appeared on Lebanon's political agenda. This would be part of a "defensive strategy" based on a limited institutionalization of Hezbollah that would preserve the group's unique character as a guerilla force – after years of Hezbollah's self-marketing as a defensive force with the strategic goal of defending Lebanon from Israeli aggression. Although opponents ascribed responsibility for the outbreak of fighting in the summer of 2006 to Hezbollah, the organization nonetheless maintains that its ability for defending the country was surely vindicated during the war.

Due to the absence of a credible force in Lebanon, both willing and capable of disarming Hezbollah as required by Security Council resolution 1559, the possibility of integrating the Shiite group via a "defensive strategy" has been raised repeatedly in recent months. Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general addressed the March 14 camp as follows: "We call on you to design a defensive plan that will turn the Lebanese army into a central component of the strength of Lebanon in such a way that the resistance plays a role in assisting this force... You should know that there will be no defensive plan without resistance. When we speak of a Lebanon that is strong due to its army, its people, and its resistance, this means a Lebanon that is able to prevent and deal with the incursion of Israeli troops. When you think about a real and

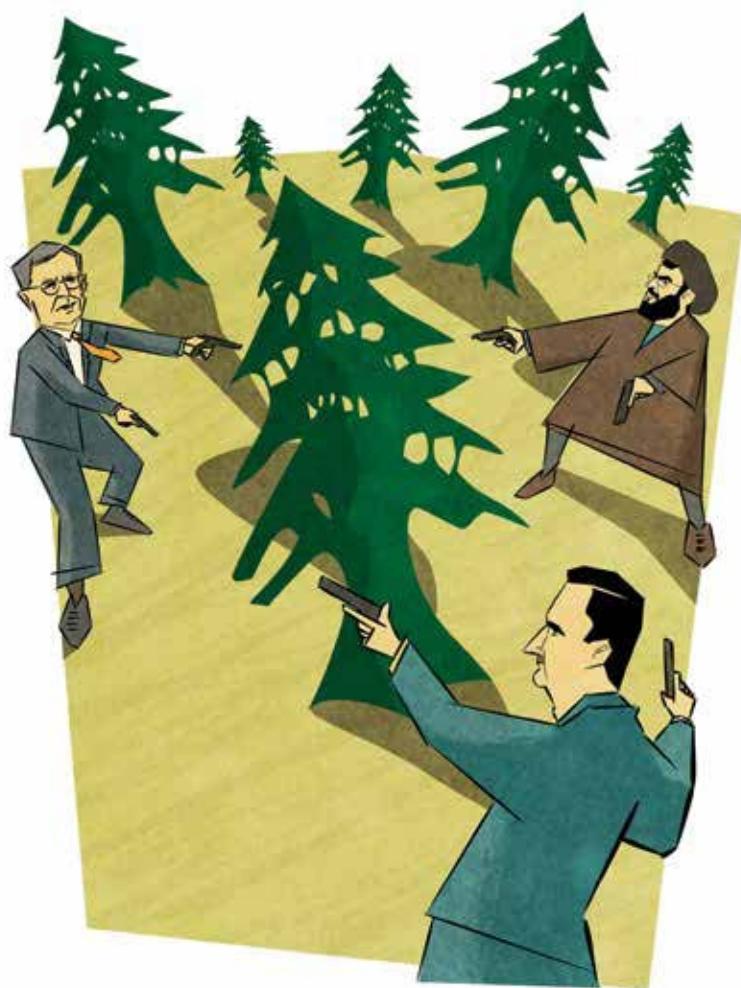


serious defensive plan, we are ready for it, and everything at the disposal of the resistance will be subordinated to the defensive plan.”¹⁹

Muhammad Ra’ad, chair of the Hizbollah faction of the Lebanese parliament, linked (albeit indirectly) the “resistance” and securing the rights of Lebanon’s Shiite population: “We are not concerned with the name of the next president, how he looks, his color, or his taste. We are concerned with his intentions regarding the defense of the resistance and the protection of the public of the resistance, its rights, and its future.”²⁰

When asked if he was the most qualified person “to deal with Hizbollah’s weapons and to integrate the organization into the state,” Michel Aoun responded affirmatively. “I built trust with Hizbollah,” he explained, “and I believe that this trust can lead us to the solution. We have already thought of a mechanism to settle this issue. Everyone knows that this mechanism cannot be implemented in an hour or two, and that it will require perseverance and gradual implementation. This is because it depends not only on us the Lebanese, but first and foremost on Israel and the UN.”²¹

On the one hand, it is true that the March 14 camp includes personalities such as Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Christian leader Samir Geagea, who articulated uncompromising maximalist positions vis-à-vis Hizbollah, Syria, and election of the next president. On the other hand, it appears that this camp’s leadership includes some who are willing to listen to Aoun. Prime Minister Siniora has said that “we do not want to replace the Syrian presence with an American presence, an Iranian presence, or any other presence. Lebanon can only be an open country. We have a common enemy, which



is Israel...The Lebanese do not want to give up the resistance, and whoever gives up the resistance is a traitor.”²² Nasib Lahud, one of the March 14 camp’s presidential candidates, called for “making use of Hizbollah’s defensive capabilities within the framework of the Lebanese state in a manner that will place its arms under the control of the Lebanese government.”²³

Assessing the Situation

The current state of affairs in Lebanon is best characterized by fluidity. The disintegration of former arrangements and balances of power has left the two sides struggling over how to mold Lebanon’s new order. The Lebanese agenda still includes the same issues that were being discussed during the

Hizbollah's freedom to maneuver is much more limited, not only geographically, but also politically and diplomatically.

Lebanon is not only in the midst of a domestic crisis but is also in the eye of a regional storm.

national dialogue of 2006, but the Second Lebanon War and the events of the last year have expanded the already wide gap between the positions of the various blocs. The thirty-three days of war launched processes and dynamics in Lebanon that could push the country in a number of potential directions.

Lebanon is not only in the midst of a domestic crisis but is also in the eye of a regional storm, fueled by tensions between Israel and Syria and between Sunnis and Shiites, as well as by the possibility that the crisis surrounding the Iranian nuclear program could escalate into a regional military confrontation. This being the case, Lebanon will have a hard time solving its core problems. Perhaps the most it will be able to achieve is to delay dealing with them until a later date when the situation is more stable. The intense suspicions between the political and communal camps in Lebanon will make it difficult for the sides to agree upon solutions regarding the fundamental issues.

Regional realities also influence the parties' positions. When asked about the region's future, Hizbollah's deputy secretary-general recently said that "not only Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, but other countries as well" are likely to be involved in future developments.²⁴ The organization, it seems, perceives some of the initiatives of its opponents as steps aimed against and impacting on all regional Shiite populations in general. At present, and especially since the Shiite organization has not been the only sector in Lebanon to arm itself over the past year, Hizbollah's weapons are meant for securing broader interests, including ensuring that the Shiites in Lebanon do not revert to their former downtrodden status of the past. In principle, the organization acknowledges that something might have to

change with regard to its military posture. At least for the short term, although Hizbollah will certainly not surrender its weapons, it may display a willingness to increase its coordination with the government and perhaps even to embed the "Islamic resistance" gradually into the state. This will necessitate forging trust between Hizbollah and the rest of the Lebanese establishment.

At this point, it is difficult to identify a viable authority in Lebanon capable of commanding order through a durable central government such as existed during Syria's presence in Lebanon. Neither of the sides can force a solution of any weight on the other, and this includes disarming Hizbollah, a venture that the government in Beirut would never consider pursuing. On the one hand, the administration of Lebanon by a weak and unstable central government could lead to the appearance of dangerous groups, such as global jihad and others. In June, six UNIFIL soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in southern Lebanon. In August, it was reported that the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates were forced to leave the country due to death threats.²⁵ On the other hand, the Lebanese military has now dealt decisively against forces working to undermine the country.²⁶

With regard to the resumption of Hizbollah military activity, leaders and senior officials of the organization have stated repeatedly that they are not interested in another war.²⁷ Hizbollah is busy reinstating and upgrading its military capabilities, as well as renovating and rebuilding thousands of homes and apartments that until July 12, 2006 housed the organization's political and public base of support. Furthermore, the organization is not receiving the government and regional assistance in the latter project that

it expected.²⁸ While declaring that Hezbollah possesses weapons that could decide the outcome of the next war, Nasrallah made sure to point out that his statement was actually intended to prevent war.²⁹ Hezbollah, which needs significant additional time to recover from the last war and rebuild the homes of its constituencies, has reached the conclusion that it should lower its profile with regard to the armed struggle against Israel.

Much depends on regional developments. In the past, Hezbollah has operated according to relatively defined rules from which it deviated only when it estimated it could do so either unharmed or with acceptable consequences. Today, Hezbollah's freedom to maneuver is much more limited not only geographically, but also politically and diplomatically. The atmosphere within Lebanon has changed as well, and the organization risks emerging compromised domestically if it reengages in conflict with Israel. In contrast, an extreme upheaval in strategic circumstances – possibly including hostilities involving Syria or Iran – could increase Hezbollah's own margins to operate and persuade it to undertake new military action. In the event of an Israeli military operation in Lebanon, Hezbollah will likely be expected and prepared to try to repulse it. In any case, in recent years Hezbollah has proven that it can adapt to changing conditions, even when this has meant somewhat tempering its ideology. Today Hezbollah is again checking its limits and, as always, remaking itself. The results of this process will be determined to a great extent by the solution to the current crisis in Lebanon.

Notes

- 1 *Al-Nahar*, December 23, 2003.
- 2 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 13, 2007.

- 3 *Al-Mustaqlal*, February 9, 2007; *al-Manar*, February 8, 2007.
- 4 *Al-Nahar*, September 10, 2007. Also see Nasir al-As'ad's September 30, 2007 report in *al-Mustaqlal*, indicating that Hezbollah is training pro-Syrian organizations and factions it regards as allies in training camps in the Beqaa valley and the Baalbek region. During the same period, on October 4, 2007, the front page of *al-Akhbar* quoted George Khoury, the Lebanese military's intelligence chief, as saying that both sides of the political split were engaged in military training and accelerated weapons acquisition. Khoury revealed that Hezbollah possesses missiles with a range of 250 km. The same report cited the testimony of a senior official in Lebanon's internal security forces before the government, which included details about the training and armament of the "March 14 camp."
- 5 *Al-Nahar*, December 10, 2006.
- 6 See for example the al-Jazeera report of October 7, 2007, which describes a dramatic increase in the scope and price of illegal weapons transactions in Lebanon during the last two years as a result of the political tensions.
- 7 *Al-Nahar*, September 25, 2007.
- 8 Compare Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p 72.
- 9 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 18, 2007. A Lebanese opposition source was quoted as saying that the opposition camp would treat a president elected by a simple majority as a "reprint" of Sa'ad Haddad, Israel's ally in southern Lebanon after Operation Litani in 1978, *al-Akhbar*, October 16, 2007.
- 10 For example, see *al-Nahar*, January 5, 2007.
- 11 Faisal Salman in *al-Mustaqlal*, October 24, 2007.
- 12 *Al-Shuruq*, October 11, 2007.
- 13 *Al-Manar*, October 5, 2007.
- 14 For Nasrallah's statements following the two operations, see Nicholas Noe, *Voice of Hezbollah* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp. 100-15, 144-68.
- 15 *Al-Mustaqlal*, January 5, 2007.
- 16 *Al-Akhbar*, June 16, 2007.
- 17 *Al-Mustaqlal*, January 5, 2007.

- 18 According to Sa'ad al-Din al-Hariri, the Lebanese army experienced ammunition shortages about one week after the beginning of fighting in the refugee camp. "But thanks to the United States and a few of our allies, such as the Europeans, the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, and the Emirates," he explained, "the military was able to complete its task," *al-Nahar*, September 26, 2007.
- 19 *Al-Nahar*, September 27, 2007.
- 20 *Al-Safir*, September 29, 2007.
- 21 *Al-Khalij*, September 29, 2007.
- 22 *Al-Hayat*, May 16, 2007.
- 23 *Al Sharq al-Awsat*, September 14, 2007.
- 24 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 18, 2007.
- 25 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 28, 2007.
- 26 For example, on October 15, 2007, the discovery of a new Palestinian group that planned additional attacks against UN forces in southern Lebanon was reported, *al-Safir*, October 16, 2007.
- 27 Against the growing number of assessments of the possible outbreak of war in the summer, Na'im Qasim declared that Hezbollah estimated that there would not be a war, *al-Mustaqqbal*, May 5, 2007.
- 28 See for example, *al-Akhbar*, February 27, 2007; *Daily Star*, May 15, 2007; *al-Akhbar*, May 19, 2007.
- 29 Nasrallah repeatedly declared that his organization is not interested in war and that his statements that Hezbollah is now in possession of "the great surprise" were meant to deter Israel and prevent war, *al-Manar*, August 14, 2007.