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HIZBULLAH'S STRATEGY FOLLOWING SYRIA'S WITHDRAWAL FROM LEBANON

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The exchange of fire across Israel's northern border in mid-May has once again focused attention on Hizbullah and raised questions about the movement's future in the wake of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. Some analysts interpret the clash as evidence of Hizbullah's intention to escalate tensions and provoke a confrontation; others believe that the movement prefers a period of quiet, if only for tactical reasons, and that what it really wants now is to divert the heavy domestic and international pressure to disarm. Whatever the case, Hizbullah clearly faces hard choices of the sort it has not had to deal with in the past. The next few months will be critical in determining the movement's future course and perhaps even its very existence.

Hizbullah first attracted local and international attention in the early 1980s following a series of bloody attacks on western and Israeli targets in Lebanon. In its manifesto published in 1985, it dedicated itself to very far-reaching objectives, including the transformation of Lebanon into an Islamic republic and the destruction of Israel, and it pursued these aims through a military presence in southern Lebanon and armed struggle against both Israel and Amal, its main competitor for control of the Shi'ite community in Lebanon.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war (and that Hizbullah opposed) confronted the movement with a serious challenge, but it eventually adapted to evolving post-Ta'if realities by redefining itself as a legitimate political party promoting Shi'ite aspirations in the country (though without renouncing the armed struggle against Israel).

But Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000 brought the movement to another fork in the road because it drastically narrowed Hizbullah's room for maneuver. True, it did renew its attacks on Israel in October of that year, especially around the Shab'a Farms (which it portrayed as Lebanese territory still under Israeli occupation). And it did rely on Iranian and Syrian support to deploy an array of at least 10,000 advanced rockets and missiles covering northern Israel as far south as Hadera. But Hizbullah's real objective seems to have been to create a state of mutual deterrence with Israel rather than to put the missiles to active use. And the scope of Hizbullah military activity did decline drastically following the Israeli withdrawal. Instead, the movement focused mostly on entrenching itself in Lebanese politics and it did succeed in consolidating its domination of the Shi'ite community, largely by

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means of economic and social welfare projects in south Lebanon.

In recent years, Hizbullah's leader, Hasan Nasrallah, has adopted the ambitious goal of taking power in Lebanon through democratic means. Under the banner of democratization of Lebanese politics, he has called for adoption of proportional representation instead of the current system that allocates executive and legislative positions according to a complicated ethnic-confessional key. Needless to say, a system in which every vote is counted equally would benefit Hizbullah, which enjoys massive support among the Shi'ites who constitute at least 40% of the population. But Hizbullah's progress was disrupted, ironically, by Syrian bumbling in Lebanon – especially by Bashar al-Asad's maladroitness decision to extend the presidency of Emile Lahoud – and by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, which eventually culminated in the departure of Syrian forces from Lebanon under heavy international pressure.

Following the outbreak of the "Velvet Revolution" in Beirut in February 2005, Hizbullah lined up with the Syrians in an effort to prevent their expulsion, lest attention then shift to the second demand in UN Security Council Resolution 1559 jointly sponsored by France and the United States – the disarmament of all armed militias in Lebanon. And since Syria's withdrawal, that is precisely what Druze, Maronite and Sunni leaders have stressed. True, these forces, along with the French and the Americans, have taken slightly different approaches to the issue. The Lebanese advocate disarmament of Hizbullah in the context of a Lebanese dialogue rather than as capitulation to foreign pressure. The French propose that it be done only after the Lebanese general elections scheduled for this summer. The Americans insist that Hizbullah be disarmed right away. But they

all agree that Hizbullah must eventually dismantle its military wing and transform itself into a purely political-social movement.

In the face of this consensus, Hizbullah has failed to come up with a coherent response. Somewhat surprisingly, however, its leaders have not ruled out the possibility of eventually finding a formula that would include disarmament. The reason for this relatively accommodating stance is that outright defiance might put all the movement's political, social and economic gains of recent years at risk and reduce it, again, simply to the status of a resistance movement, but this time with virtually nothing to resist. The biggest losers in that case would be the Shi'ites who now view Hizbullah as the defender of their interests.

This suggests that there is no logical reason for Hizbullah to escalate tension on the Lebanese-Israeli border. After all, any Hizbullah-initiated escalation would only further aggravate the pressures it already faces and add even more voices to the chorus calling on it to disarm. On the other hand, the organization remains determined to preserve whatever freedom of maneuver it still has in south Lebanon and to prevent Israel from changing the current equation according to which every Israeli action guarantees a Hizbullah reaction. That is what lies behind the brief flare-up on the border that took place in mid-May. The catalyst was actually an attack by Palestinian elements eager to bring about a clash, but when Israel returned fire, Hizbullah felt that it had to respond or risk losing its deterrent reputation.

This confrontation proved to be brief and quiet has since been restored. But the question of Hizbullah's ultimate direction remains unresolved and may only be clarified in the aftermath of the Lebanese elections.

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