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HIZBULLAH – (AGAIN) AT A CROSSROADS**Anat Kurz****Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies**

Hizbullah can be accurately described as at a crossroads ever since the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces from southern Lebanon in 2000, and even more so since the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005. Both events sharpened the choice between two paths that the movement has tried to follow since its inception: the Lebanese path, embodied in its political-parliamentary activity, and the regional/universal Islamist path, expressed in independent military action. Absent a decisive test of force between the movement and its domestic and regional rivals, Hizbullah's leaders could continue to pursue both tracks simultaneously. But as the direct confrontation with Israel unfolds in July 2006, it may well become a real test of Hizbullah's margin of maneuver. And if its military capabilities even partially survive the massive Israeli assault, the movement will at the end of the campaign still stand at the intersection of the two worlds in which it operates.

In recent years, Syria's military and political weakness and direct Israeli deterrence imposed constraints on Hizbullah's military assertiveness. Moreover, the movement was attentive to the limits of domestic Lebanese political consensus and of Israeli patience, and after the Israeli withdrawal, Hizbullah focused on consolidating its political status. Military action, and especially the struggle against Israel, had

buttressed the support it cultivated through its educational and welfare activities, and Hizbullah consciously defined itself as a "national resistance" movement in order to stress both the Lebanese and the militant dimensions of the character it wanted to legitimize. And because of the political capital it gained for its role in bringing about Israel's withdrawal, Hizbullah could afford to strengthen the "national" aspect of its two-track strategy, even at the expense of the "resistance" aspect.

With the passage of time, however, the usefulness of direct conflict with Israel as a means of mobilizing support began to diminish. In this respect, the outbreak of the *intifada* was a welcome development for Hizbullah because it provided the movement with a way to continue its action against Israel and preserve its regional relevancy. But even that was not enough. Economic and political liberalization in Lebanon was accompanied by growing calls to dismantle Hizbullah's militia in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1559. To reverse declining Lebanese tolerance of Hizbullah's special status (and serve Iran's interest in escalating the Arab-Israeli confrontation), Hizbullah had to revive the active struggle, which it did by crossing the frontier and abducting Israeli soldiers.

That action, in turn, served as a catalyst for a far-ranging Israeli operation aimed at weakening


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Hizbullah's military infrastructure, forcing it to desist from further provocations and encouraging further domestic Lebanese resistance to it. And while casualties and property damage caused by attacks in Lebanon do prompt harsh criticism of Israel in Lebanon and around the world, that criticism is not translated into endorsement of the role Hizbullah has arrogated to itself of defender of Lebanon and the Palestinians against Israel.

For years, Hizbullah has enjoyed steady support among Lebanon's Shi'ites, expressed mostly in its "natural" zone of influence – the south, the Beka'a, and the southern districts of Beirut – where Hizbullah shares (and competes for) Shi'ite support with the larger and relatively more liberal Amal movement. But following the halt to economic reconstruction resulting from the Israeli offensive, it will be difficult for the movement to broaden its current base of support, which instead will almost certainly shrink once the dust of battle settles.

Iranian and Syrian support have strengthened Hizbullah's military base and helped deter efforts by others to disarm it. But in every other respect, Hizbullah is an international pariah. Because of its militant Islamist character and its identification with Tehran and Damascus, it has for many years been on the "black list" of governments interested in stabilizing the Middle Eastern scene. The G8 summit that convened in St. Petersburg on 15-17 July blamed Hizbullah for the recent escalation of violence (while expressing support for the Government of Lebanon), and though the Arab world has witnessed demonstrations of popular support for Hizbullah, governments in Riyadh, Cairo and Amman have severely criticized its "adventurist" policies and obliquely condemned Iran for encouraging the kind of recklessness that is bringing disaster on Lebanon.

The notion of "Lebanonization" has two meanings. One refers to the process of integration of Hizbullah into Lebanese national institutions and implies growing pragmatism on its part. The other describes a failed state

following the collapse of central government and raging ethnic/confessional conflict of the sort that afflicted Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s. Hizbullah's participation in Lebanese politics has often been interpreted as a signal of its potential moderation. But if this meaning of Lebanonization ever had any grounding in reality, the process has now been cut short, and Lebanon again faces the prospect of intensifying Lebanonization in the other sense of the term.

The Israeli assault has already produced unprecedented difficulties for Hizbullah and Israeli military pressure is aggravated by political pressure from Lebanon's official leadership, which in any case hopes to limit the movement's power. Because of its role in sending years of economic reconstruction down the drain, it will probably also witness a decline in popular support. However, the Lebanese government alone is unable to finish the job that Israel has started.

To further weaken the hold on Lebanon that Iran and Syria maintain via Hizbullah, the movement's Lebanese rivals will need international assistance. Saudi Arabia has already promised to help repair the economic damage. But dispatching a multinational force to back the deployment of the Lebanese army along the country's southern border is a much more complex challenge. Unless and until that challenge is met, the weakness of the Lebanese army will encourage Hizbullah to persist in its path of "resistance" and its rejection of any efforts to deprive it of its territorial strongholds, and it will do that with whatever military force it retains, reinforced again by Syrian and Iranian support. In such circumstances, even a substantial degrading of Hizbullah power by Israel will not make Lebanon immune to the kind of ethnic/confessional conflict it has experienced many times before.

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