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**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST, CONFLICTS OF IDENTITY:
ARAB REACTIONS TO THE ISRAEL-HIZBULLAH CONFRONTATION**

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In addition to the release of the two soldiers abducted by Hizbullah, the declared objectives of Israel's military campaign in Lebanon include the dismantling of Hizbullah's militia and the deployment of the Lebanese armed forces up to the common border. Achieving these objectives in the face of Hizbullah opposition will ultimately require some cooperation, if not from Shi'ites who provide Hizbullah's base of support, then at least from the other main Lebanese communities: the Sunni Muslims, the Christians and the Druze. It is not clear whether material support will be forthcoming – much evidence suggests a strong reluctance on their part to confront Hizbullah lest that reignite the Lebanese civil war – but it is clear that the goals themselves resonate in the non-Shi'ite sectors of the Lebanese population. That should not be surprising. Those sectors formed the bulk of the popular movement calling for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon – which Hizbullah opposed – and their representatives have pressed for the disarmament of Hizbullah and the reassertion of government authority throughout the country in the "National Dialogue" carried out since the Syrian withdrawal.

More surprising are the regional reactions to the Israel-Hizbullah confrontation. In contrast to its behavior in every previous clash between Israel

and an Arab adversary, the rest of the Arab world this time has not lined up unanimously behind the Arab protagonist. True, the "Arab street" has reacted to scenes of destruction in Lebanon with demonstrations of fevered hostility to Israel and, as always, fevered adoration for anyone who dares defy it, and Arab governments have had to adjust their declaratory positions to these emotions. But they (and parts of the religious establishments) have also expressed reservations of one sort or another about Hizbullah and coupled support for its demand for a ceasefire with support for the disarming of its militia and the extension of Lebanese government authority throughout the country – which happen to be Israel's stated objectives but which are vigorously opposed by Hizbullah itself.

All of this suggests that Israel's current battle with Hizbullah is much more than simply another round in the long Arab-Israeli war. Part of the difference stems from the challenge that Hizbullah, as a non-state actor, poses to governments determined to preserve their monopoly on power and especially on questions of war and peace. Saudi Arabia, undoubtedly reflecting the perspective of other governments, reacted to the July 12 Hizbullah attack on Israel's northern border by officially condemning "rash adventures carried out by elements inside the

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state and those behind them without consultation with the legitimate authority in their state.”

But that concern is only part of the picture. Another and perhaps larger part relates to the particular identity of the non-state actor. Saudi Arabia reacted far less negatively to an earlier Hamas attack that was similar to Hizbullah’s (and had similar consequences), and even if that attack was not truly a “non-state” operation because Hamas has controlled (or at least shared control of) the Palestinian government since early 2006, Saudi Arabia was also far more indulgent of Hamas attacks launched from Fatah-ruled Palestinian territories before 2006. The real difference lies less in the nature of the action perpetrated than in the identity of the perpetrator.

Unlike Hamas, Hizbullah represents a Shi’ite constituency and has longstanding and intimate ties with Iran. Indeed, Hizbullah in Lebanon was originally created as a mirror of Hizbullah in Iran. Its leaders have personal ties with the Iranian leadership and its militia has been supplied by Iran and trained and supported by an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps contingent in Lebanon. This link feeds Arab suspicions of Shi’ite/Iranian power that have been growing for some time. Last year, Egyptian President Mubarak charged that Shi’ites in Iraq are more loyal to Iran than to their own country, and the year before that, King Abdullah of Jordan publicly warned against the emergence of a “Shi’ite crescent” in the Levant. Saudi concerns are aggravated by the fact the substantial Shi’ite minority in Saudi Arabia is concentrated almost entirely in the oil-producing Eastern Province, just across the Gulf from Iran. Because of the suspicion that Hizbullah acts as a proxy for Iran - a powerful state with undisguised hegemonic ambitions -- the natural inclination of Arab governments to side with any Arab protagonist in conflict with Israel has been tempered by concern that a Hizbullah success in the current confrontation, however defined, would encourage further Shi’ite assertiveness in other

countries and promote Iranian power and influence throughout the region.

Thus, familiar geopolitical interests supplement the desire of governments to avoid having their agenda hijacked by sub-national groups. But these are not just objective interests defined by geography or the conventional balance of power. In an important sense, the perceptions of interests that shape attitudes toward the Israel-Hizbullah conflict are filtered through the prism of identity, and attitudes in the region are divided along communitarian/sectarian lines in much the same way as are attitudes within Lebanon itself. Hizbullah is actively supported only by Shi’ite Iran and by Syria, a Sunni-majority country but one dominated for decades by Alawites (long suspected of heresy by orthodox Sunnis and certified as authentic Muslims only by Musa as-Sadr, the founder of the Shi’ite Amal movement in Lebanon).

This division is consistent with a pattern that has persisted in the Middle East at least since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (and which has played out in other places as well, such as Pakistan, where mosque bombings and bloody clashes between Sunnis and Shi’ites are a frequent occurrence). It was manifested during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, when Syria was the only Arab country to back Iran. And it has been manifested in attitudes to the civil war roiling Iraq since the American-led coalition, in the face of fierce Arab criticism but Iranian reticence, crushed the mechanism that had enabled a Sunni minority there to dominate the Shi’ite majority. This pattern does not preclude short-term alliances for shifting tactical purposes, but in the longer term, the domestic Lebanese and regional Arab alignments surrounding the confrontation between Israel and Hizbullah may well come to be seen as another chapter in an unfolding clash of civilizations within the Muslim world.

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