

HIZBOLLAH AND THE LEBANESE CRISIS

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HIZBOLLAH AND THE LEBANESE CRISIS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lebanese crisis has receded from the headlines but has not gone away. Today, all eyes are on the presidential election, the latest arena in the ongoing struggle between pro- and anti-government forces. Yet even if a compromise candidate is found, none of the country's underlying problems will have been addressed, chief among them the status of Hizbollah's weapons. If the election is to be more than a mere prelude to the next showdown, all parties and their external allies need to move away from maximalist demands and agree on a package deal that accepts for now Hizbollah's armed status while constraining the ways in which its weapons can be used.

Looking back over the past ten months, Lebanese can feel somewhat relieved. The massive demonstrations in December 2006, followed by a general strike and clashes between pro- and anti-government forces with strong sectarian overtones, as well as a series of assassinations and car bombs, brought the nation perilously close to breakdown. State institutions are virtually paralysed; the government barely governs; the economic crisis is deepening; mediation efforts have failed; political murders continue; and militias, anticipating possible renewed conflict, are rearming. Still, fearful of the consequences of their own actions, leaders of virtually every shade took a welcome step back.

An important explanation lies in Hizbollah's realisation that its efforts to bring down the government carried dangerous consequences. Facing calls for its disarmament and denunciations of its (allegedly foreign-inspired) adventurism in triggering the July 2006 war, the movement concluded that the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and its backers were hostile actors intent on cutting it down to size and further aligning Lebanon with the West. As a result, it carried the fight squarely on the domestic scene, removing Shiite ministers, taking to the streets and pushing for the government's ouster. This resort to street politics was risky and ultimately self-defeating. At almost every social level, Shiite support for Hizbollah has solidified, a result of both the movement's longstanding efforts to consolidate its hold over the community and a highly polarised post-war environment. Former Shiite adversaries are, for the time being, silencing their differences, viewing the movement's weapons as

their best defence in an environment where Shiites feel besieged from both within and without.

But while the movement demonstrated its mobilisation capacity and enjoyed support from an important segment of the Christian community, its use of an essentially Shiite base to bring down a Sunni-dominated government reinforced sectarian loyalties. Sunnis and many Christians were alarmed at Hizbollah's might and ability unilaterally to trigger a devastating confrontation; they increasingly saw it as a Shiite not national movement and as advancing an Iranian or Syrian not Lebanese agenda. In short, while the movement sought to highlight the conflict's political stakes, the street battles quickly morphed into confessional ones, forcing Hizbollah into a sectarian straitjacket and threatening to distract it from its primary objectives.

Hizbollah faces other dilemmas. Deployment of the army and of a reinforced United Nations (UN) force at the Israeli border have significantly reduced its military margin of manoeuvre. The movement's Shiite social base also is exhausted and war-weary, a result of Israel's intensive campaign. Sectarian tensions restrict Shiites' capacity to take refuge among other communities in the event of renewed confrontation with Israel. Hizbollah thus has been forced into a defensive mode, prepared for conflict but far from eager for it.

Hizbollah appears to be in search of a solution that defuses sectarian tensions and reflects its new military posture. Its discomfort presents an opportunity to make some progress on the question of its armed status. Of course, Hizbollah will not compromise at any price. Its priorities are clear: to maintain its weapons and protect Lebanon as well as the Middle East from Israeli and U.S. influence through a so-called axis of refusal that includes Iran, Syria and Hamas. Should it feel the need, it likely would perpetuate Lebanon's political paralysis, even at the cost of further alienating non-Shiites; mobilise its constituents, even at the risk of reducing itself ever more to a sectarian movement; and protect Syrian or Iranian interests, even at the expense of its national reputation.

Lebanese parties and their foreign allies should seek a package deal on a domestic arrangement that, while

postponing the question of Hizbollah's weapons, restricts their usage – in other words, that neither resolves nor ignores the problem. The elements of the deal will be neither easy to negotiate nor a panacea, and they will provide at best a temporary reprieve. Without fundamental political reform, Lebanon's political system – based on power sharing between sectarian factions – inevitably will encourage cyclic crises, governmental deadlock, unaccountability and sectarianism. More importantly, the country's future is intricately tied to the regional confrontation that plunged it into armed conflict with Israel, paralysed its politics and brought it to the brink of renewed civil war. There can be no sustainable solution for Lebanon without a solution that addresses those issues as well – beginning with relations between the U.S., Israel, Syria and Iran.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Lebanese Political Parties and Concerned Foreign Governments, Including the U.S., France, Syria and Iran:

1. Seek a way out of the Lebanese political crisis by negotiating, or encouraging negotiation of a package deal that includes the following elements:
 - (a) a consensual presidential choice (i.e., a two-thirds vote in parliament) to avoid the dangers of a presidential vacuum and the perils of dual government;
 - (b) adoption of a ministerial declaration that meets all sides' core interests by:
 - i. accepting the principle of resistance but only as a transitional phase leading to the implementation of a proper national defence strategy, and restricting its use to defensive purposes (i.e., in the event of foreign aggression);
 - ii. giving diplomacy a chance to resolve the question of the disputed Shebaa Farms area through a moratorium on armed action in that area;
 - iii. accepting UN Security Council Resolution 1701 as well as the international tribunal dealing with the Hariri assassination; and
 - iv. calling for normalisation of relations with Syria through opening of embassies, demarcation of boundaries and resolution of the case of Lebanese disappeared; and

- (c) a collective agreement to freeze the ongoing military build-up and de-escalate the war of words, in particular in the media.

To the Next Lebanese Government:

2. Renew discussions with all political parties on a national defence strategy.
3. Make the Shebaa Farms a priority, focusing at first on a solution involving temporary UN custody.
4. Start addressing the political system's weaknesses by adopting a new, more equitable electoral law and reappointing a constitutional council.

To Hizbollah:

5. Address fears among other communities by:
 - (a) adopting a new charter to replace the 1985 founding document, which calls for the establishment of an Islamic state;
 - (b) clarifying its position vis-à-vis the state and publicising the specific reforms it advocates;
 - (c) unambiguously accepting the above-mentioned package deal, in particular by pledging to act solely in a defensive capacity and abiding by a moratorium on military operations in the Shebaa Farms; and
 - (d) lifting the siege of the prime minister's offices.

To Syria:

6. Address Lebanese concerns by making clear willingness to normalise relations by exchanging embassies, demarcating the boundary, forsaking direct political or military interference and relying strictly on legitimate tools (i.e., its historic Lebanese allies and Lebanon's dependence on Syria for trade) in dealing with its neighbour.

To Israel:

7. Agree to turn the Shebaa Farms over to UN custody as a temporary measure.
8. Avoid intrusions into Lebanese airspace and other provocative acts.

Beirut/Brussels, 10 October 2007

HIZBOLLAH AND THE LEBANESE CRISIS

I. THE CONFESSIONAL DIVIDE

Hizbollah's standing in the Arab and Muslim worlds reached its zenith in the wake of the 2006 war. Nasrallah's picture was everywhere, comparisons abounded with Egypt's former leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and even Sunni Islamists celebrated the movement's military exploits, including in countries whose regimes had been critical.

In Lebanon, however, the situation was mixed. Hizbollah's ability to neutralise and respond to Israel's offensive was a source of pride and relief but its unchecked military power along with its ability to provoke a war unilaterally with devastating consequences alarmed non-Shiites. Increasingly popular within its own community, Hizbollah suffered rapid decline among others. Most significantly perhaps, tensions between Hizbollah's profoundly Shiite culture and its desire to be viewed as a trans-confessional Islamic resistance movement came to the fore. Historically, the movement has been at pains not to espouse a specifically Shiite agenda nor be perceived through a purely confessional lens, subsuming its links to revolutionary Iran into a wider struggle against Israeli and "imperialist" oppression. Over the past few years, however, a rapid-fire succession of events has significantly complicated this task, dragging Hizbollah into a sectarian logic that is undercutting the former consensus over its retention of an imposing arsenal.

A. A DEEPENING SECTARIAN RIFT

An earlier Crisis Group report described the chain of local and regional events that has fuelled Lebanon's growing sectarian divide.¹ Although it is difficult to pinpoint a particular turning point, the 14 February 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri – a larger-than-life Sunni personality – stands out as a defining moment. Reaction to the killing among Sunnis and Shiites differed markedly, a contrast that only grew sharper as its domestic and regional implications became clearer. Sunnis saw it as a clear attempt by Syria to decapitate their community and consequently closed ranks around the slain leader's son,

Saad al-Hariri; as relations between Syria on the one hand, and the U.S. and France on the other, sharply deteriorated, the March 14 coalition formed around the son benefited from significant Western support.²

Shiites (along with many Christians) anxiously watched what they perceived as Sunni triumphalism. They did not feel represented by the Hariri bloc and, though not displeased to see Syrian troops depart, considered harsh anti-Damascus denunciations as part of an effort to shift the regional balance, curb and ultimately dismantle Hizbollah and weaken Shiites. Lebanese reacted broadly along confessional lines to other domestic and regional factors occurring over the last four years (including UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for Hizbollah's disarmament; the investigation into Hariri's assassination; strained relations with Syria; the Iraq war; and increasingly sharp Sunni/Shiite tensions). The July 2006 war and subsequent events accelerated this process. Hizbollah's performance revived other communities' fears about its military potential, just as its decision to launch a kidnapping mission – without governmental approval or forewarning – raised questions about its ability to endanger the country as a whole on the basis of unilateral (mis)calculations.

In the context of mounting regional tensions, many – rightly or not – also saw Iran's or Syria's hand, giving rise to renewed denunciations of a "Shiite axis".³ The ambiguous posture of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt during the war – criticising Hizbollah and, according to some reports, welcoming a prolonged Israeli military campaign – encouraged mirror-image condemnation of a pro-U.S. and pro-Israel axis involving so-called moderate Arab regimes. The war and its aftermath further confirmed Hizbollah in its view that the Siniora government and its allies were hostile and complicit in a U.S.-backed effort to redraw the regional map and disarm the resistance.

Hizbollah's depiction of Lebanon as a possible arena of confrontation was not new; it was a reaction to calls by

¹ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005.

² The coalition took its name from the massive 14 March 2005 demonstrations opposing Syria's presence in Lebanon. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°39, *Syria After Lebanon, Lebanon After Syria*, 12 April 2005.

³ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°57, *Israel/Palestine/Lebanon: Climbing Out of the Abyss*, 25 July 2006.

local political leaders for the movement's disarmament that intensified after Hariri's assassination.⁴ But, embittered by inadequate governmental and March 14 solidarity during the confrontation with Israel, and stung by criticism afterwards, Hizbollah escalated its political attacks. In short, the 2006 war split the nation and political system in two: most Shiites, who bore the brunt of Israel's military onslaught, saw it as justification for Hizbollah's weapons as deterrence against a real threat; most others, who lamented the scope of destruction, saw it as proof that the main danger came from Hizbollah's recklessness. Not since the end of the civil war in 1990 had the country experienced such a deep and defining divide.

As discussed below, the crisis triggered by opposition efforts to replace the government – through resignation of Shiite ministers (in itself, a sectarian statement), massive demonstrations and a prolonged sit-in that paralysed parts of Beirut – reflects Hizbollah's determination to neutralise a cabinet seen as adversarial. As Mahmoud Qumati, vice-president of its political council told Crisis Group, the movement wants to "be able if need be to secure the decision-making process".⁵ But resort to street politics was a risky and ultimately self-defeating proposition for it rapidly turned into a sectarian fight. However much the movement sought to emphasise political stakes (e.g., the legitimacy of the resistance, the role and rules of engagement of UN forces in South Lebanon,⁶ the government's pro-Western leanings), the street battles quickly took on a confessional hue, pitting Shiite against Sunni, while Christian supporters of Samir Geagea, the most prominent Christian leader in the March 14 coalition, clashed with Christian General Michel Aoun's. Political issues inevitably were converted into confessional ones, in behaviour that was reminiscent of the country's darkest periods and a reminder of the deep-seated nature of a civil war mentality.

Despite highly provocative and inflammatory pronouncements on its television and radio stations,⁷ Hizbollah by and large tried to moderate sectarian tensions. It called for a step-by-step political escalation:

⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit., p. 18.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, Beirut, 11 October 2006.

⁶ The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been present since 1978 to prevent an escalation along the Israeli-Lebanese border. It was significantly strengthened in the wake of the 2006 war, when UN Security Council Resolution 1701 authorised its expansion to 15,000 soldiers. It currently comprises 13,000.

⁷ Hizbollah is not the only party guilty of such incitement. Media allied with one side or the other modulate their tone based on the prevailing political climate, becoming less inflammatory during negotiations or after dangerous confrontations.

demonstrations in December 2006, a general strike in January 2007 and civil disobedience in March, hoping that sooner or later the government would be compelled to give in. It strived to maintain ties to Sunni Islamists and include Sunnis in its rallies, organising a joint Sunni-Shiite prayer on 8 December 2006. It rejected a December 2006 suggestion by Aoun and pro-Syrian political leader Soliman Frangié who, inspired by the Ukrainian model, were pushing for a march on the government's headquarters.⁸

Ultimately, however, even such calibrated street politics proved counter-productive. They neither toppled the government nor avoided sectarian deterioration. The 23 January strike, coupled with a plan aimed at paralysing important transit roads, mushroomed into armed confrontations in Beirut, Tripoli and elsewhere. Two days later, riots erupted between Shiites and Sunnis around the Arab university. Even in the capital's Shiite southern neighbourhoods, Hizbollah's stronghold, gangs got involved in riots and violent clashes.⁹

This process of street politics ran a real risk of degenerating into civil war.¹⁰ The opposition was largely dominated by Shiites, and its actions (a sit-in in the centre of Beirut, the heart of Rafiq al-Hariri's reconstruction efforts; blocking the prime minister's office) were seen by Sunni members of March 14 as targeting quintessentially Sunni symbols. The opposition's intrusion into Sunni political space rekindled demographic and geographic fears of a Shiite "invasion".¹¹

⁸ Hizbollah also claims to have mediated several inter-sectarian clashes. In the Bekaa Valley, following a dispute between the Shiite village of Labwa and the Sunni village of Ursal, it allegedly asked the army to step in and then tried to resolve the conflict peacefully. Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah militant, Bekaa, 15 April 2007. Likewise, after the murder of a young Shiite, Adnan Chamas, during the January 2007 fighting, Nasrallah is said to have personally asked the family to refrain from seeking vengeance. The party spoke extensively with the victim's family, prayed with it and offered official condolences to prevent a dangerous escalation, according to a member of Hizbollah's political council. Crisis Group interview, Ghalib Abu Zeinab, Beirut, 16 August 2007. According to a Shiite sheikh, in mid-2007 Nasrallah asked Shiite clerics to suggest ways of tempering sectarian tensions. Crisis Group interview, Yusuf Subayti, director of a religious seminar in South Lebanon, Kafra, 27 April 2007.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Beirut's southern neighbourhoods, January 2007.

¹⁰ Referring to the height of the crisis, a Lebanese political observer commented: "We were three hours away from all-out war". Crisis Group interview, Washington, September 2007.

¹¹ This appears to be the subtext of the 23 January 2007 statement by Mohamed Rashid al-Qabbani, a Sunni mufti, criticising the opposition's "anarchy", which is hurting Beirut's "dignity". "We will not allow others to harm Beirut's grandeur", he said,

In short, what began as a political escalation inexorably led to a sectarian one. Hizbollah no longer was master of a confrontation it had planned but which was taking a confessional life of its own. The more sectarian the struggle, the more resonant were March 14 accusations that Hizbollah, far from representing a national resistance, had become a cover for a Shiite militia. Fearing the backlash, the movement called off its general strike¹² and the sit-in at the prime minister's office gradually petered out; Hizbollah had de facto renounced its form of street politics and lost the political initiative.¹³

Yet, even as it sought to defuse sectarian tensions, Hizbollah was caught in a confessional trap. During the 25 January riots at the Arab University, Nasrallah uncharacteristically felt compelled to issue a *fatwa* calling on Shiites to return home, a religious edict directed at his religious brethren rather than a political directive addressed to party members. A member of Hizbollah's political council explained it in these terms:

What was happening was larger than Hizbollah. All Shiites, whether members of Hizbollah or Amal or of no political party at all, took to the streets. A mere command is enough when you are addressing members of your party. It is not enough when Shiites as a whole are concerned. That is why we had to address ourselves to Shiites and not only members of our movement. That's why we issued a *fatwa*.¹⁴

B. HIZBOLLAH'S SHIITE SUPPORT

At war's end, Hizbollah's opponents within and outside Lebanon were hoping to establish an alternative Shiite movement.¹⁵ This rapidly proved an illusion. At almost every social level, Shiite support for Hizbollah has solidified – a result of both the movement's longstanding efforts to consolidate its hold over the community and a highly polarised post-war context. For Timor Goksel, former

United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) spokesman, "today, Hizbollah basically is assuming the function of defender of the community. It is responding to widespread fear among Shiites that they are being targeted more than ever before".¹⁶

1. A Shiite need for security

A key obstacle to efforts to disarm Hizbollah is that the weapons themselves, not just the party carrying them or the ideology justifying them, enjoy significant support among the country's Shiites. In backing Hizbollah, Shiites are supporting a movement that puts a premium on military resistance over political representation.¹⁷ Given their perception of having been economically and politically discriminated against,¹⁸ this would appear somewhat illogical. Some have tried to explain the appeal of a violent organisation operating on the margins of the official system by reference to a presumed Shiite political culture – leery of the state and fascinated by martyrdom.¹⁹ In reality, Hizbollah struck a chord with Shiites because it connected the concept of resistance with their need for empowerment and persuaded them that the former was the best way to attain the latter.

Historically, Lebanon's Shiites have been socially and politically marginalised. As far back as the Mamlouk era in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, they were consigned to the nation's geographic periphery (the South and the northern Bekaa Valley), neglected by the central Mamlouk then Ottoman authority and ruled by large feudal families. The 1943 National Pact, which established the independent state, reflected a bargain between the two dominant communities, Maronites and Sunnis.²⁰ This multi-layered sense of exclusion accounts for the Shiites' early attraction

www.darfatwa.gov.lb. Walid Jumblatt, March 14 leader of the Druze community, also evoked a Hizbollah effort to purchase land with Iranian help in order to consolidate its territorial control and provide "geographic and territorial unity to the 'Hizbollah state'", claiming that "every Shiite village or territory has become a military stronghold", *L'Orient-le-Jour*, 10 January 2007. That said, Jumblatt played a crucial moderating role in late April when two of his supporters were kidnapped and killed, *Daily Star*, 27 April 2007.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, Beirut, 3 February 2007.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Ali Fayyad director of the Consultative Centre for Studies and Documentation, Hizbollah-affiliated think tank, Beirut, 23 March 2007.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, 3 February 2007.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, Washington, September-December 2006.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Timor Goksel, Beirut, 16 April 2007.

¹⁷ See discussion below.

¹⁸ This depiction of the Shiites as having been systematically discriminated against is viewed as an exaggeration by several analysts. They point out that public spending in the predominantly Shiite South has tended to exceed that in the North (particularly the predominantly Sunni region of Akkar). Crisis Group email communication, Lebanese analyst, October 2007.

¹⁹ The March 14 forces appeared to be exploiting such stereotypes when they mounted a campaign based on the slogan "I love life", drawing an implicit contrast between their culture and their opponents' presumed culture of death and martyrdom.

²⁰ See Joseph Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology, Political Ideology and Political Program* (Amsterdam, 2006), p. 20; Augustus Richard Norton, *Hizbollah* (Princeton, 2007), pp. 11-14. That said, although the signatories were a Christian and a Sunni, Shiites were allotted the position of speaker of parliament as well as nineteen deputies (as compared to twenty Sunnis, six Druze and 54 Christians of various denominations).

to radical political parties, communist and Baathist in particular.²¹

Also gaining adherents in the 1960s was a more confessional strand pioneered by Musa Sadr, a Shiite cleric who challenged the power of traditional families and symbolised renewed Shiite assertiveness. Sadr played a decisive role in the Shiite community's political awakening, organising it as an effective and vocal group working to improve its members' lot. He founded the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council in 1967, providing the community with its first autonomous religious structures and adopting a reformist, active political posture in sharp contrast to the practices of traditional clerics and the landed elite.²² The goal was to "catch up with other Lebanese communities. For example, we did not want Maronites to monopolise education. We did not want to let anyone look at us as a group of uneducated people again".²³ In the same vein, Sadr established a political organisation, the Movement of the Deprived (*Harakat al-Mahrumin*), in the early 1970s.

Sadr also laid the foundations for a militia – which would be known as Amal – to serve as an alternative to Palestinian and secular nationalist armed groups fighting Israel. Sheikh Hassan Jounié, a former Amal official in charge of cultural affairs in the South, noted that at the time "the Shiite movement grew out of feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. It was a movement of the disinherited, strongly imbued with Islamic ideology. Imam Musa Sadr provided Shiites with their first religious-based movement. Prior to that, we had our corpses and martyrs – but no one knew what they were fighting for".²⁴ Shiite resurgence was further propelled by the 1979 Iranian revolution, which, one year after Sadr's mysterious death while visiting Libya, gave Amal a boost and led to the creation of another and ultimately more effective armed group, Hizbollah.²⁵

Indeed, Shiite socio-economic and political marginalisation was only one aspect of their condition. Particularly since South Lebanon became entangled in and a primary victim of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the community also has felt militarily endangered and largely helpless, caught between Israeli strikes – whose number steadily increased as of 1968²⁶ – and abusive behaviour by Palestinian armed groups. This intensified in the wake of Jordan's bloody 1970 Black September crackdown on Palestinian groups, which led militants to resettle in South Lebanon with the help of left-leaning Arab nationalist parties.

The establishment of what was then known as Fatah-land – a Palestinian state within the state – presented innumerable problems for the South's local population. Palestinian militants (and militants from leftist nationalist parties as well) acted as overlords, refusing to pay restaurant bills, plundering stores and, confiscating cars.²⁷ This generated intense Shiite resentment and encouraged collaboration with Israel. A former leader of the *Murabitun*, a Nasserite armed movement, said, "every single southern village saw some people switch sides and join the enemy".²⁸ Others interviewed by Crisis Group recalled Shiite villagers greeting invading Israeli soldiers in 1982 with rice.²⁹ The situation rapidly boomeranged, however, as continued Israeli occupation and military operations in the South triggered anger that Hizbollah exploited better than any one else.

Hizbollah's popularity and staying power cannot be properly understood without bearing in mind this collective Shiite experience of victimisation at the hands of more powerful parties, coupled with the state's utter and repeated failure to protect them. Thus, even as Shiites' feeling of economic and political marginalisation abated markedly over the past three decades,³⁰ the feeling of being under threat and

²¹ "Particularly in the case of the Communist organisations and the [Syrian Social Nationalist Party], there was an inherent attraction to parties that condemned the tribal, religious, or ethnic bases of discrimination", Norton, *Hizbollah*, op. cit., p. 15.

²² "Imam Musa Sadr fundamentally altered the role of the cleric with a strong reformist ideology. Before him, a man of religion was merely a man who acquitted himself of his religious duties such as organising prayers and the pilgrimage", Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Hassan Jounié, former Amal figure responsible for cultural affairs in the South, Roumine, 14 April 2007.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Akram Tleiss, former Hizbollah political adviser and former Amal official in the Bekaa, Beirut, 4 May 2007. After the 2006 war, Nasrallah played on this theme, warning that "we will not let anyone bring us back to the days when we shined their shoes", interview on New TV, 27 August 2006.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Hassan Jounié, Roumine, 14 April 2007.

²⁵ Revolutionary Iran helped professionalise the Shiite clerical function by providing religious leaders with monthly stipends,

while also paying armed militants. Crisis Group interview, Hassan Abbas Nasrallah, historian (unrelated to the Hizbollah leader), Baalbek, 4 April 2007.

²⁶ According to Lebanese official sources, between 1949 and 1964, Israel conducted approximately 140 military operations in Lebanon; that number grew to 3,000 between 1968 and 1974. Mahmoud Soueid, *Le Liban Sud face à Israël, 50 ans de résistance et de résilience* (Beirut, 1998), pp. 5, 8.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, villagers, fishermen, employees and clerics in the Saida region, April 2007.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Abu Ali, Beirut, 28 April 2006. Ali claimed, without providing evidence, that some of the excesses were committed by Palestinian militants working for Israeli intelligence in order to create tensions with the local population.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, group of villagers, Roumine, 19 April 2007.

³⁰ This is particularly true in South Lebanon, where conditions have improved, especially after Israel's 2000 withdrawal and the subsequent inflow of investment from Shiites living abroad. The notion of a "deprived" community (*mahrumin*) no longer finds widespread resonance in the area. Instead, Shiites refer to

targeted (whether by Israel, the U.S., the UN or other sectarian groups within Lebanon) did not. Strongly opposed to Israel's invasions and incursions and disgusted by the Palestinians' conduct, Shiites found effective answers in Amal and, even more so, Hizbollah. A Shiite cleric from the South explained that "thanks to Hizbollah, we finally are at peace: we got rid of the parties, the Palestinians and the Israelis".³¹ Abu Ali, a secular Shiite, former member of a nationalist resistance party and staunch opponent of Hizbollah's worldview, nonetheless said, "the difference between the resistance of nationalist and Palestinian parties on the one hand and of Hizbollah on the other is the difference between the earth and the sky. Hizbollah is pure and noble",³² practicing the opposite of the Palestinians' "ostentatious" and "flamboyant"³³ resistance which plundered the South.

Abu Ali is not alone. Throughout the community one encounters Shiites who do not belong to Hizbollah in any organisational sense and may even dislike its religious ethos yet nonetheless feel a part of it. People in the South refer to the "Hizbollah community" (*ummat hizbullah*), "resistance society" (*mujtama' muqawim*),³⁴ or "people of the resistance"³⁵ to describe the broad set of sympathisers unaffiliated with the movement. As they tend to see it, an attempt to weaken Hizbollah is, under current circumstances, an attempt to weaken Shiites. A sheikh who does not belong to the movement said, "Hizbollah is more than a party. It is a general environment in which we live".³⁶

Strongly opposed to Israel's invasions and incursions and disgusted by the Palestinians' conduct, Shiites found effective answers in Amal and, even more so, Hizbollah. "Before, Shiites felt socially marginalised. Now they feel politically targeted".³⁷ In that sense, to be a Shiite today in Lebanon is not so much to be socially dispossessed as politically and militarily targeted. As a consequence – and although the community insists on retaining its positions in

being "targeted" (*mustahdafini*). The Bekaa is a different story, although there poverty appears to be unrelated to religious affiliation. Economic marginalisation affects the region as a whole. Accordingly, a Hizbollah militant from the Bekaa referred to a "poor, angry people" to describe Bekaa residents and not exclusively Shiites. Crisis Group interview, Bekaa, 3 April 2007.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Shiite sheikh, Saida region, 21 April 2007.

³² Crisis Group interview, Abu Ali, former military leader of the Murabitun, an armed group, Beirut, 28 April 2007.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, group of villagers, Ghaziyya, 20 April 2007; head of the fisherman's union, Sarafand, South Lebanon, 17 April 2007.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Nabil Qawuq, Hizbollah official in charge of South Lebanon, Tyr, 17 October 2006.

³⁵ Speech by Hassan Nasrallah, al-Manar, 14 August 2007.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Yusuf Subayti, Kafra, 27 April 2007.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Akram Tleiss, Beirut, 3 May 2007.

the public sector – it has in a way become more important for Shiites to be reassured than to be represented. This, in large part, explains their support for Hizbollah's weapons.

2. The war

In the South as well as the Bekaa, Lebanon's two principal Shiite areas outside *al-Dhahiya* (Beirut's southern suburbs and Shiite stronghold, which Hizbollah media describe as the "capital of resistance"), support for the movement seems to have grown since the July 2006 war. While polling data is scarce and often unreliable, accounts by both members and non-members concur: an imam from a southern village expressed surprise at the eagerness of former Hizbollah critics to aid the movement;³⁸ growing numbers of young Shiites reportedly are volunteering to join,³⁹ often insisting on being in the front lines;⁴⁰ former Shiite leftist militants now claim that "only Hizbollah can protect us";⁴¹ Bekaa tribal leaders who traditionally opposed Hizbollah profess their readiness "to forgive everything because the movement restored the honour of 200 million Arabs".⁴²

For many among them, the war was not so much against Lebanon as against Shiites. Some clerics go as far as to claim that the goal was to "cleanse" the South of Shiites, sending them to Syria or beyond.⁴³ Hizbollah played to that perception, asserting that "to eliminate the weapons of the resistance is to eliminate the Shiites, and to eliminate the Shiites is to eliminate Lebanon".⁴⁴ A former Hizbollah

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Saad Allal Khalil, Qulaili, South Lebanon, 27 April 2007. Funding generally is provided to a Hizbollah-run institution, the "Resistance Support Fund".

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Mohamed al-Jamal, former mayor of Baalbek, Baalbek, 13 April 2007.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Nawaf al-Moussawi, Hizbollah official in charge of external relations, Beirut, 18 August 2006.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Khalil Arzouni, left-leaning intellectual, Shuhour, South Lebanon, 23 April 2007.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, village notable, Bekaa Valley, 14 April 2007. He unsuccessfully ran against Hizbollah in the last municipal elections and remains highly critical of the movement's management of city affairs. Since the war, however, he has provided funds to Hizbollah.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Saad Allah Khalil, Qulaili, South Lebanon, 27 April 2007.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Adib Haydar, Hizbollah political leader and legal representative (*wakil shar'i*) of Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and Iraq's Ayatollah al-Sistani, Budnail, 13 April 2007. Khalil Khalil, a former ambassador to Iran and member of parliament who belongs to a traditional (Shiite) land-owning family in the South argued that "Hizbollah exacerbates the threat perception by raising the fear of an anti-Shiite conspiracy". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 14 May 2007. Walid Charara, a political analyst with close ties to Hizbollah, replied: "This is not a Shiite fiction; it is a genuine fear, stemming from a lucid analysis of U.S. policy". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 29 May 2007. Hassan Nasrallah shot back at those who

adviser argued “the decision to go to war [against Lebanon’s Shiites] already has been made. The question is not if, but when it will begin”.⁴⁵ The feeling of having been let down by Sunnis and the experience of deepening sectarian conflict was an important contributing factor, leading many Shiites to rally around their most powerful defender. Hizbollah’s media outlets played a crucial role in this respect, insisting on the threat faced by the party as a result of the alliance between pro-government forces and its external foes (Israel and the United States).

Shiites also compare the state’s ill-prepared and slow efforts to rebuild war-ravaged communities with Hizbollah’s relative success.⁴⁶ Rather than blame government incompetence, many suspect wilful discrimination against Shiites and an attempt to fuel their anger at the movement, supposedly responsible for their plight.⁴⁷

The war also altered the movement’s relationship with Shiite intellectuals. According to Hassan Abbas Nasrallah,

criticised Hizbollah’s arms: “Those in need of reassurance are the people of the resistance, because they are targeted and threatened with death, exodus and destruction”, *Al-Manar*, 14 August 2007.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Akram Tleiss, Beirut, 3 May 2007.

⁴⁶ Ibrahim Shahrour, director of the Planning and Programming Division of the Development and Reconstruction Council (a government-run institution responsible for reconstruction) acknowledged that the government was not prepared for this task. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 13 October 2007. In contrast, Hizbollah quickly was involved in reconstruction. According to an official at Jihad al-Bina (the Hizbollah-run institution responsible for reconstruction), its engineers already were working on assessments of the destruction during the war. Crisis Group interview, Bilal Naim, Beirut, 13 October 2006. According to several reports, Hizbollah rapidly provided funds to displaced people, helping them pay for one year’s lodging. See *The Independent*, 24 August 2006. Even a number of anti-Hizbollah Shiite intellectuals acknowledge receipt of financial assistance (\$12,000 for residents of Beirut’s suburbs, \$10,000 for residents of the South. Crisis Group interviews, Shiite journalists, September 2006 and September 2007. Ironically, under heavy pressure from Shiite political groups, the central government helped Hizbollah and its allies by channelling assistance through the “Council for the South”, an Amal-dominated organisation charged with assessing compensation for damaged homes which is alleged to favour Amal and Hizbollah supporters. In other words, Hizbollah’s and Amal’s clientelist practices were partly financed by government funds. Crisis Group interview, Riyadh al-As`ad, independent businessman and Shiite politician who heads one of the largest construction companies in the South, Beirut, 15 May 2007. In other instances, donor countries chose where to spend the money, thereby limiting the state’s role and ability to put together a coherent effort. Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim Shahrour, Beirut, 13 October 2006.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Shiite entrepreneurs and Jihad al-Bina leaders, Beirut, October-May 2007; Ali al-Amin, journalist, Beirut, 27 February 2007.

a historian, “prior to the war, Shiite intellectuals were very divided, and few backed Hizbollah. The war changed all that”.⁴⁸ A sheikh formerly in charge of the Martyrs’ Foundation for the Bekaa Valley⁴⁹ commented, “today, all Shiites have become Hizbollah”.⁵⁰ Likewise, Mohamed Ali Hajj, an independent sheikh with ties to Sayed Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah,⁵¹ noted, “Shiites nowadays see Hizbollah’s strength as their own, just as they see its weakness as their own. Even those who claim they are independent will vote for Hizbollah because of a confessional reflex”.⁵²

The solidarity is often circumstantial and a long way from blind adherence. It exists alongside widespread criticism, arguably more acute since Hizbollah got involved in reconstruction assistance. The movement is routinely and at times vehemently accused of favouritism, inefficiency or inability to care for civilians affected by the conflict.⁵³ Particularly in the Bekaa’s poorer regions, Hizbollah’s practices also reflect the kind of partisan, clientelist practices for which the movement typically condemns

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hassan Abbas Nasrallah, Baalbek, 4 April 2007.

⁴⁹ The foundation provides financial support to the families of “martyrs” and organises commemorative events.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Shawqi Kanaan, formerly in charge of the Martyr’s Institution in the Bekaa, al-Alâq, 10 April 2007.

⁵¹ A co-founder of the Iraqi Da’wa party in the 1960s, Fadlallah earned the reputation of being Hizbollah’s spiritual leader (*al-murshid*) until 1992-1993. Since then, relations deteriorated, and Fadlallah mounted theological and political challenges. He opposed Hizbollah’s endorsement of the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (rule of the jurisprudent) and criticised the appeal to religion as a means of directing how Shiites vote. See Joseph Alagha, op. cit., p. 62. He also has been critical of Hizbollah’s close ties to Iran, in particular its relationship to Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini, considered by the movement as its *marja taqlid*. He paid a heavy price for his critique: he was harshly attacked and pressured by Hizbollah and Iran. Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Khanjar Hamiyya, director of *al-Basha’ir* radio station, Kfar Ata, 26 April 2007. For more on Fadlallah’s relations with Hizbollah, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°7, *Hizbollah: Rebel Without a Cause?*, 30 July 2003, pp. 12-14.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mohamed Ali Hajj, Beirut, 2 August 2007.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, South Lebanon, April-May 2007. Hizbollah has been criticised for favouring reconstruction firms based on political/cliental criteria and, together with Amal, exercising a de facto monopoly. Riyadh al-As`ad, a prominent figure in the South, claims that Hizbollah systematically denied his firm an opportunity to work as a result of a veto by Amal’s leader, Nabih Berri. Crisis Group interview, Riyadh al-As`ad, Beirut, 15 May 2007. That said, several Christians praised Hizbollah’s equitable compensation policies. Crisis Group interviews, Bekaa Valley, May 2007. See also *Libération*, 19 September 2006.

others.⁵⁴ Many are aware that, although political motivation continues to play a key role, some militants join for more prosaic reasons – a salary, technical training, and so forth.⁵⁵ An independent Shiite cleric said, “for now, people are terrified and so they are silencing their views. Who knows about tomorrow”.⁵⁶

But there is little reason to believe a Shiite political alternative will emerge any time soon. Critics have been given a platform by the March 14 movement (including the Free Shiite Current led by Mohamed Hajj Hassan; Mohamed Ali al-Husseini; Hani Fahs; and the former Hizbollah Secretary General, Subhi Tufayli). Others with some influence on the ground have vocally criticised Hizbollah (Ali al-Amin, the *mufti* of Tyr; members of formerly important families, such as Khalil Khalil and Ahmad al Asa’d; as well as political newcomers, such as Esam Abu Derwish, a businessman who established a successful humanitarian assistance network in the South). So far, however, they do not represent a coherent force; they are, rather, individual, divided personalities with scant support among Shiite rank-and-file.

3. The rallying of other Shiite forces

The sense of sectarian polarisation and communal isolation also has (at least temporarily) quieted differences among Shiite groups that now view Hizbollah as the only one capable of defending them. The trend led by Sayyed Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah is the most apt illustration. After years of tensions, Fadlallah’s relations with both Hizbollah and Iran have improved. An expert on Hizbollah said, “before, Fadlallah began each of our meetings by attacking Hizbollah, claiming to be the Arab *marja*’ as opposed to the Persians’. That is now over. The turning point was less UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which in his view would never be implemented, than Rafiq Hariri’s death”, which accelerated the confessional split.⁵⁷ For Sheikh Khanjar, head of Fadlallah’s radio station, *al-Basha’ir*, though ideological and theological disagreements clearly remain:

Today there are other priorities, and these have brought us together. I am referring to heightened confessional tensions, passage of Security Council Resolution 1559 and the July 2006 war. We ask ourselves: why suddenly such American interest for our small country? The answer is clear: as we see it, the United States wants to put an end not only to Hizbollah, but to resistance. We may differ with Hizbollah on ideological grounds, but not on the principle of resistance. In the current context, Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah believes the priority is to preserve the resistance. Of course, if the threats and fears were to recede, the differences between the two Shiite currents would come back to the fore.⁵⁸

In return, since the end of the war, Hizbollah has given greater coverage to Fadlallah’s Friday sermons on its television station, *al-Manar*.

A similar dynamic, fed by fear of a common foe, is at play in relations between Hizbollah and the other principal Shiite party, Amal. Open warfare between 1988 and 1990 was followed by the cold peace of the 1990s. Under Syrian and Iranian pressure, the rival organisations reached a fragile *modus vivendi* marked by bitter electoral contests, notably during the 2004 municipal vote.⁵⁹ Today, they appear “more coordinated than ever”,⁶⁰ as evidenced by frequent meeting between their leaders, presentation of a joint list for the 2005 parliamentary elections, the role played by Amal’s Nabih Berri during the 2006 confrontation with Israel (when, unlike in the past, he served as the channel of communication between Hizbollah and the government); their common positions during the ensuing tug of war with March 14 forces and, most recently, presentation of a joint list at the April 2007 engineering union elections.⁶¹

Hizbollah’s relations with the more traditional Shiite clerical class and religious seminaries (*hawzat*) typically have been ambivalent, though again tensions have ebbed. A pro-Hizbollah Shiite sheikh from the South remembers that, at

⁵⁴ This is particularly true in the impoverished Bekaa, where Hizbollah – along with other parties but on an unparalleled scale – provides salaries to its members, Crisis Group interview, Hassan Abbas Nasrallah, Baalbek, 4 April 2007.

⁵⁵ Several members told Crisis Group they had joined in order to feed their family. Others told of their desire to complete their military training and acquire skills they subsequently would use as civilians (e.g., in construction or carpentry). Crisis Group interviews, reserve Hizbollah fighters, South Lebanon, May 2007.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, independent Shiite sheikh, South Lebanon, 27 April 2007.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Amin, journalist and Hizbollah expert, Beirut, 12 June 2007.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Khanjar Hamiyya, head of *al-Basha’ir* radio station, Kfar Ata, 26 April 2007.

⁵⁹ The two-year war aimed at dominating the Shiite community. It began in 1988 in the Haruf region, near Nabatiyeh, and gradually extended to Beirut and Baalbek. It ended in 1990 as a result of heavy Syrian and Iranian pressure.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Hassan Jounié, former Amal official in charge of cultural affairs in the South, Rumine, 14 April 2007.

⁶¹ According to Sobhi Tufayli, Hizbollah’s former secretary general, the rapprochement began after the 2005 elections when March 14 forces approached Nasrallah with a proposal to replace the head of Amal, Nabih Berri, as parliament speaker – a proposal Hizbollah’s chief turned down. “The March 14 forces have the knack to get others united against them”, Crisis Group interview, Subhi Tufayli, Baalbek, 5 April 2007.

Hizbollah's beginnings, clerics anxiously watched its militants come to Shiite villages, fearing their revolutionary outlook and sometimes going so far as to forbid their youth from joining.⁶² A leader of a religious seminary in the South said, "clerics always fear that Islam will be sidetracked by a political organisation with objectives that are not purely religious. Hizbollah represents a specific current, yet it aspires to represent the Muslim community as a whole".⁶³ Hizbollah's decision in the early 1990s to enter the political fray only further fuelled concerns about mixing religion and politics. According to a sheikh, "if religion is at the service of politics, sooner or later it will be corrupted by politics".⁶⁴ Today, says Yusuf Subayti, who lost a brother in a battle with Israel, "we [independent sheikhs] do not obstruct Hizbollah, despite our disagreements, and it asks that we not oppose it. Our common enemy is Israel, which seeks to eliminate all Muslims".⁶⁵

Of course, familial and tribal allegiances persist, especially at the local level.⁶⁶ This is true even of Hizbollah members: "Whatever else they are, Hizbollah militants and politicians remain the sons of particular families".⁶⁷ As a result, Hizbollah has used different means to soften this competing pull. Where possible, it has found common cause with Amal, thereby squeezing the political space and leaving little room for a potential third way – political party, family or tribe.⁶⁸ Hizbollah also has recruited heavily among

young Shiites, particularly members of large families, and thrown them into local politics, with the aim of gradually lessening the influence of familial, tribal or regional networks (*asabiyat*). Finally, Hizbollah has carefully tended to the needs of local political patrons, providing backing and giving them prominent seats both at official ceremonies and on electoral lists.⁶⁹

On the surface, this strategy appears successful. It has bolstered the movement's local role by co-opting or neutralising powerful families and tribes as well as members of the independent clergy. It has improved relations with Amal and Fadlallah's movement. And, over the past two years, successive political developments – the deepening sectarian schism, Resolution 1559, Syria's withdrawal, the war and the state's ineffective reconstruction – have solidified its status as sole protector of the Shiite community. But the gains have come at real cost.

C. RELATIONS WITH OTHER SECTARIAN GROUPS

Since its second general conference in May 1991, Hizbollah has adhered to a policy (known as *infatih*) of opening up to other communities and political groups.⁷⁰ This reflects the movement's overriding concern with preserving a consensus on its core objective – protecting its armed status to uphold the resistance – by avoiding entanglement in domestic squabbles and bitter sectarian divides. As Hizbollah leaders saw it, it could put its weapons out of reach only by projecting itself as a movement that transcends confessional identity, embodying Islamic (as opposed to Shiite) resistance and being careful not to use its military power to promote a domestic agenda.

Of late, the image has been severely tarnished. This is, in a sense, the flip side of Hizbollah's gains among its own constituency and an index of the difficult political crisis it now confronts. The notion of a trans-confessional ideological front backing the resistance is becoming quickly a thing of the past. Whatever non-Shiite support for Hizbollah exists can be explained in terms less of ideological convergence than of more mundane calculations reminiscent of Lebanon's traditional political games.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Saad Allah Khalil, Qulaili, South Lebanon, 27 April 2007.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Youssouf Subayti, director of a religious seminary in South Lebanon, Kafra, 27 April 2007.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Hani Fahs, member of the legislative council of the Higher Islamic Council, Beirut, 24 July 2007. As an example, one often hears mention of Hizbollah's shifting alliances with other political parties. In 2005, Hizbollah and Amal forged an electoral accord with Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement and their Christian allies (Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces and the Gemayel family's Christian Phalangists). According to Joseph Alagha, Nasrallah, confronted by angry supporters who could not accept an alliance with Jumblatt, threw down his turban and said, "does this not mean anything to you?" Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 23 May 2007. The alliance broke down in January 2006 as political tensions with March 14 forces intensified.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Yusuf Subayti, Kafra, 27 April 2007.

⁶⁶ In the village of Ghazziya, east of Saida, rivalry between the Khalifa and Ghadar families forced Amal and Hizbollah (which in 2004 had agreed to present joint lists) to withdraw from the municipal race to prevent family tensions from becoming partisan ones. Crisis Group interviews, Yahia Ghadar, municipal council head, Ghaziyya, political activists, Ghaziyya, 20 April 2007.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nasser Qandil, pro-Syrian former member of parliament, Beirut, 14 May 2007.

⁶⁸ The greater divisions between Amal and Hizbollah, the more families can play a role. This was true, for example, in Nabatiyeh and Tyr. Crisis Group interview, Nasser Qandil, Beirut, 14 May

2007; Crisis Group interview, Khalil Arzouni, left-leaning intellectual, Shuhour, 23 April 2007.

⁶⁹ As one observer notes, however, the movement does not "include the most powerful elements on the electoral lists out of fear of losing control", Crisis Group interview, Antoine Alouf, Christian member of the Baakbeck municipal council elected on Hizbollah's list, Baalbek, 20 April 2007.

⁷⁰ See Alagha, *The Shifts*, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

1. The split with Sunni Islamists

Of all Hizbollah's relationships, the most severely affected has been with the Sunni community. The Shiites' feeling of being under threat is mirrored among Sunnis. Hariri's assassination was experienced as an "earthquake"⁷¹ and "an assault against all Sunnis".⁷² This added to existing anxiety concerning the perceived strengthening of the Shiite community as evidenced by its increased political role, demographic vigour, growing wealth and, through Hizbollah, dominant military power. Most Salafist leaders in Tripoli – the Sunni stronghold in the North – closed ranks behind Hariri's Future Movement and backed it during the May-June 2005 parliamentary elections.⁷³ The war and its aftermath were the tipping point. In Tripoli, "since the end of the war all Islamist leaders are mobilised around a confessional discourse. Before, they would criticize Saad al-Hariri for his pro-American stance and his economic program. All that has become secondary. Now, they view him as the Sunnis' sole protector".⁷⁴ Others argued that "the death of Rafiq al-Hariri was like an earthquake which pushed us to rally behind Saad al-Hariri".⁷⁵

The change has been most pronounced vis-à-vis Sunni Islamists. Ideologically, Hizbollah was closer to groups such as the *Jamaa Islamiyya* – a Sunni Islamist movement rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood – than to any other non-Shiite movement. Confessional differences aside, both espouse a militant view of Islam as an instrument of political struggle and social reform, and both hold a religious vision of resistance. *Jamaa Islamiyya*'s founders saw much in common first with Sadr's brand of activist Shiism, then with Fadlallah's. *Jamaa Islamiyya* went so far as to participate in a joint demonstration with Shiites in Beirut supporting the Iranian revolution; the present general secretary, Sheikh Faysal al-Mawlawi, participated in a delegation of Muslim Brothers leaders paying an official visit to Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran shortly after the 1979 revolution.⁷⁶ Years of confrontation with Israel further deepened cooperation between Hizbollah and *Jamaa Islamiyya*, culminating in the 1980s in joint operations. Bonds tightened further, as Israel detained leaders of the two groups at al-Ansar camp in 1983-1984.

After Hariri's assassination, relations significantly worsened. For a time, the 2006 war turned back the clock,

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Sunni sheikh, Tripoli, 25 May 2006.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Salafi sheikh, Tripoli, 14 June 2006.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Salafi preachers, Tripoli, June-July 2006.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, activist with close ties to Future Movement, Tripoli, 13 February 2007.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, independent Salafi sheikh, Tripoli, 23 June 2006.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim al-Masri, deputy secretary general of *Jamaa Islamiyya*, Beirut, 20 September 2007.

giving new life to an "anti-imperialist", militant axis transcending sectarian identity and bringing together Shiite movements (Hizbollah and Amal) and Syrian allies,⁷⁷ as well as a range of parties sharing a rough ideological outlook (the Community Party, the Syrian National Social Party,⁷⁸ Islamist movements such as *Jamaa Islamiyya*, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, the pro-Iranian *Tawhid* and Salafists).⁷⁹ During the war, Ibrahim al-Masri, *Jamaa Islamiyya*'s deputy general secretary, told Crisis Group:

Each and every one of Hizbollah's martyrs is one of our own and represents a victory against the Zionist project. If the resistance loses, Palestine loses. That is why our priority today is to support the resistance. Besides, the situation in Lebanon is going to unlock the situation in Iraq, by showing the resistance there that there is something far more important than the sectarian struggle, and that is the struggle against the American project. For the most part, the Salafi movement across the Arab world has now rallied around the resistance, even though it is led by a Shiite.⁸⁰

Whatever ideological solidarity existed did not long survive. Once the war ended, attention shifted back to the domestic front, and the Sunni/Shiite split took centre stage. Concerned at attempts to delegitimise its armed status, Hizbollah demanded formation of a national unity government in which its allies would possess veto power over strategic decisions. By March 2007, Ibrahim al-Masri held a completely different view, saying:

Hizbollah is good at resisting, but bad at politics. It is contributing to the country's confessional rift. The resignation of Shiite ministers, Hizbollah's rejection of the government and the fact that it organised a general strike at the heart of Sunni areas is unacceptable. Hizbollah has become a fifth column that serves foreign interests and we cannot tolerate that. Of course, we support the concept of resistance.

⁷⁷ Including forces affiliated with Omar Karamé, the old Sunni political patron of Tripoli; Soleiman Frangié, a Maronite leader; and Fathi Yakan, a pro-Syrian Sunni Islamic preacher.

⁷⁸ The lyrics of a song by Julia Boutros, a Christian member of the Syrian National Social Party, glorify the "men of God" – in other words, Hizbollah's fighters – and are replete with excerpts from Nasrallah's speeches.

⁷⁹ After initial prudence concerning the war, the Salafists openly backed Hizbollah, some taking their cue from Saudi Arabia's progressively less hostile stance and others from expressions of support by al-Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Crisis Group interviews, Salafist militants and preachers, Tripoli, October 2006.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim al-Masri, Beirut, 28 July 2006.

But now that UNIFIL and the Lebanese army are in the South, there is no need for it.⁸¹

In reality, the wartime alliance itself had been superficial. Abdelghani Emad, a university professor and Islamism expert, argued, “even during the war, *Jamaa Islamiyya* supported the resistance, not Hizbollah per se. It fears Hizbollah, it fears the Shiites’ renewed assertiveness and, in any event, is in broad agreement with March 14 forces on key points: the international tribunal, the need to replace President Lahoud and the fact that the national army must ensure the country’s defence”.⁸²

The pro-Saudi Salafi preachers who backed Hizbollah during the latter part of the war also quickly broke with the movement as a result of its campaign to oust the government and control Beirut’s centre. Nasrallah’s veiled dig at Saudi Arabia – in which he implicitly criticised use of Saudi money to rebuild Lebanon – triggered angry reactions, and Saudi flags adorned the homes of Sunni neighbourhoods to express gratitude for Riyadh’s help. Hizbollah’s opposition to the tribunal, viewed as blind adherence to Damascus, deepened the rift with northern Sunnis, who have particularly suffered during Syria’s military presence.⁸³ Hizbollah officials acknowledge the growing rift with Sunni Islamists, though they attribute it chiefly to the financial assistance they receive from the Future Movement.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim al-Masri, Beirut, 13 March 2007. An ex-*Jamaa Islamiyya* militant said, “when we are at war with Israel, we have to support those who are fighting. But we also know Hizbollah is fighting on a sectarian basis, its objectives differ from our own, and it is trying to monopolise the resistance”, Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, 18 October 2006.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Abdelghani Emad, Tripoli, 3 February 2007. In general, Hizbollah has sought to play down the rift, pointing out that it maintains contacts with *Jamaa Islamiyya*, Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, Beirut, 19 September 2007, and contemplates renewed military cooperation in the South against Israel. On 25 September the organisations published a joint communiqué affirming the need to “reach agreement on a president elected in conformity with the constitution”, *As-Safir*, 26 September 2006. Months earlier, the deputy secretary general of *Jamaa Islamiyya* had explained these continued contacts by a shared desire to prevent further confessional deterioration rather than a shared ideological platform. Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim al-Masri, Beirut, 13 March 2007. However, this has not erased underlying animosity. Sunni Islamists fear Hizbollah attempts to “infiltrate” West Beirut, Crisis Group interview, *Jamaa Islamiyya* member, Beirut, 17 September 2007, while many Hizbollah members do not conceal their distaste for Sunni Islamism. Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah cleric and resistance fighters, Bekaa, 4 April 2007.

⁸³ A Salafist sheikh said, “between a return to Israeli or to Syrian occupation, I would choose the Israelis. At least, they did not kill my mother”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, 28 January 2007. (Tripoli never was under Israeli occupation).

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah political leaders, Beirut, September 2007. Saad Allah Khalil a cleric with close ties to

For the most part, short, confessional allegiances ultimately trumped ideological proximity. There are exceptions which to some extent temper the intensity of sectarian polarisation, though they too have little to do with ideology. Rather, they are a function of either Syria’s role or the weight of local politics. Thus, Hizbollah continues to enjoy the support of pro-Syrian Sunni individuals or groups, such as the Islamic Action Front,⁸⁵ as well as of several local Sunni politicians who are pitted against members of Hariri’s Future Movement.⁸⁶ None of these represents the Sunni community’s centre of gravity, and most are paying the price of the current sectarian divisions; they are a minority and a shrinking one at that, a phenomenon that mirrors the situation among the Druze.⁸⁷

Practically, this means that Hizbollah’s most important non-Shiite ally – and the key to its efforts to avoid a sectarian label – is Michel Aoun.

2. The alliance with Aoun

In more ways than one, the alliance between Hizbollah and Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) defies logic. In 1989-1990, he led a military resistance against Syria, resulting in a fifteen-year forced exile in France from where he continued to defy Damascus. His followers played an important part in the campaign that led to Syria’s 2005 withdrawal. His outlook generally is pro-Western. He has long called for Hizbollah’s disarmament and, upon his return to Lebanon, outraged the Shiite movement by advocating the return of Lebanese who had found refuge in Israel.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, in February 2006 the two movements reached an accord, the FPM-Hizbollah Memorandum of Understanding. It reflects Aoun’s long-standing advocacy

Hizbollah, claimed *Jamaa Islamiyya* has been corrupted and now serves U.S. interests: “It has betrayed its founding principles and agreed to play a confessional game. Its heart is in one place, money in another”, Crisis Group interview, Qulaili, South Lebanon, 27 April 2007.

⁸⁵ The Islamic Action Front includes, among others, Fathi Yakan, a Sunni preacher; Sheikh Bilal Saeed Shaaban’s Movement for Islamic Unity and Abdel Nasser al-Jibri, head of the Islamic Daawa Institute. The Front’s rival is the Independent Islamic Grouping (*liqa islami mustaqill*), a gathering of ulemas and activists sympathetic to Hariri’s Future Movement, including Dai Islam al-Shahâl (head of a Salafist current in the North) and several sheikhs from the Tripoli region, such as Zakariyya al-Masri, Bilal Barudy (both viewed as pro-Saudi) and Khaled al-Dharer, a former *Jamaa Islamiyya* member.

⁸⁶ Intra-Sunni rivalries explain Ossama Saad’s anti-Hariri posture in Saida and Omar Karamé’s in Tripoli.

⁸⁷ We’am Wahab, for example, a former member of Jumblatt’s movement, broke with him in the 1990s and is allied with Syria.

⁸⁸ For an insightful study of Aoun’s movement, see Heiko Wimmen, “Rallying around the renegade”, Middle East Report Online, 27 August 2007.

of electoral reform (to “limit the influence of political money and sectarian fanaticism”); institutional reforms to “eradicate corruption”; return of Lebanese citizens living in Israel; support for the international tribunal;⁸⁹ Syrian respect for Lebanon’s sovereignty (including through the demarcation of borders, revealing the fate of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons; and establishing diplomatic relations);⁹⁰ and a process that “would lead to a cessation of the reasons and justifications for” Hizbollah’s weapons.⁹¹ It legitimises armed resistance,⁹² thus meeting Hizbollah’s core requirement. Thus, while Aoun could claim that the accord contemplates a process aimed at disarming the Shiite movement,⁹³ Hizbollah could point to important preconditions. The accord states that “carrying arms. . . is an honourable and sacred means exercised by any group whose land is occupied” and mentions as “justifications...for keeping the weapons”: Israel’s occupation of the Shebaa Farms, its detention of “Lebanese resistance members” and its threat to Lebanon.⁹⁴

The rapprochement was further facilitated by the movements’ similar positioning as relative outsiders vis-à-vis the political system, and as representatives of social distaste to domination by Sunni and Christian urban bourgeoisies. For Hizbollah, it also was a means of avoiding

a confessional trap by building ties with an influential non-Shiite player. For Aoun, who at the time enjoyed the support of a clear majority of the Christian community, a principal motivation was rivalry with the more traditional Christian leadership, which had joined the March 14 alliance and sought to marginalise him.⁹⁵ Aoun also may have seen in Hizbollah the representative of a community that, like the Christians, is a minority in a heavily Sunni-dominated region. Aoun claimed to be reacting to “attempts to suppress the right of Christians and Shiites”⁹⁶ but he told Crisis Group his purpose was to protect Lebanon’s unity, avoid a confessional clash and find a non-violent, consensual way to achieve his objective of disarming Hizbollah and building a non-sectarian society.⁹⁷

Although inherently fragile given clear ideological differences, the alliance has stood firm in the face of serious strains and challenges, even though Aoun has paid a steep political price.⁹⁸ He did not publicly back Hizbollah’s initial military operation in July 2006, but he steadfastly supported the movement during the war and, importantly, made sure his loyalists provided aid and shelter to displaced Shiites. The next real test in the Hizbollah/FPM relationship will come with the presidential election, which Aoun is determined to win.⁹⁹

⁸⁹ Asked how he could join with Hizbollah given its highly ambivalent posture on this issue, Aoun referred to the document’s clear endorsement of the tribunal and pledged that his allies would vote for it if a national unity government were formed. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 2 December 2006.

⁹⁰ Interestingly, these clearly cross several Syrian redlines. Aoun arguably has been one of the more vocal advocates for the Lebanese detained in Syrian prisons, arguably “because he is one of the rare politicians – having been in exile – who can claim to have neither actively nor passively collaborated with Syria”. Crisis Group interview, Ghazi Aad, head of Solide, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to shedding light on cases of disappeared Lebanese, May 2006.

⁹¹ “Paper of Common Understanding Between Hizbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement”, at www.tayyar.org/files/documents/fpm_hezbollah.pdf. Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Moukheiber, Aounist member of parliament, Beirut, 10 August 2007.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Ghalib Abu Zeinab, Hizbollah political council member and an author of the Paper of Common Understanding, Beirut, 23 July 2007.

⁹³ Aoun told Crisis Group the accord aimed at Hizbollah’s progressive disarmament through a political process, Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 2 December 2006. Unlike Resolution 1559, which speaks of dismantling militias but “offered no practical way of achieving it, no internal process to implement it”, Aounists argue, their agreement with Hizbollah does, Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Moukheiber, 3 July 2007.

⁹⁴ A Hizbollah leader explained: “We know that Aoun wants to disarm us and that his outlook is consistent with Resolution 1559. But we have no problem with this so long as there are no deadlines and no specific mechanisms”. Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah leader, Beirut, 15 September 2007.

⁹⁵ The rivalry was most intense between Aoun and Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces.

⁹⁶ Interview with Al Jazeera, 11 August 2007. An Aounist official argued that this was also Hizbollah’s goal: “The Shiites fear living in a Sunni-controlled state and, in the event the Alawites were to lose power in Syria, being caught in a Sunni sea”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 July 2007.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Michel Aoun, Beirut, 2 December 2006.

⁹⁸ Aounists acknowledge they lost some support, though they argue the Christian community will ultimately back them. In Aoun’s words: “In order to safeguard confessional peace, we were ready to lose some of our popularity”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 20 July 2006. According to most polls, the alliance cost the Aounist movement significant support within the Christian community. Although its candidate won the August 2007 by-elections in the Metn region, FPM support among Christians dropped from 69.6 per cent in May 2005 to 50.06 per cent. That said, the decline is explained in part by other factors. The Aounist candidate, Camille Houry, was far less well known than his opponent, former President Amine Gemayel, whose son was assassinated on 21 November 2006.

⁹⁹ The president is elected by parliament members. Article 49 of the constitution signals preference for a consensual candidate, though this is not mandatory. According to Article 49(2), the “President of the Republic shall be elected by secret ballot and by a two-thirds majority of the Chamber of Deputies. After a first ballot, an absolute majority shall be sufficient”. The constitution also provides that “one month at least and two months at most before the expiration of the term of office of the President of the Republic, the Chamber is summoned by its President to elect the new President of the Republic”, meaning the election must take

Hizbollah faces a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, given his strong support, especially during the war, and the risk of losing their principal non-Shiite ally, it feels it must back Aoun; in the words of its deputy secretary general, he is “the only candidate among the opposition so far”.¹⁰⁰ Another senior Hizbollah leader said, “we cannot be disloyal to him and stab him in the back”.¹⁰¹ A close Aoun adviser warns, “if Hizbollah drops Aoun as its candidate, then Aoun will drop Hizbollah”.¹⁰²

On the other hand, Aoun is neither a realistic nor an ideal candidate. He faces virtually insurmountable obstacles given strong March 14 opposition; as one member put it, “we are prepared to live with Aoun’s platform and outlook, but not with Aoun”.¹⁰³ His “unstable”¹⁰⁴ and unpredictable character worries not only the pro-government alliance, but also Hizbollah. Given his record of opposition to Syrian hegemony, Damascus almost certainly prefers a weaker and more malleable president. As an Aounist deputy remarked, “it is not really in Hizbollah’s interest to bring Aoun to power, because the general genuinely wishes to pursue a state-building and militia-disarming agenda. In a way, Hizbollah is stuck: it doesn’t really want Aoun but, since the July war, it owes him a huge moral debt”.¹⁰⁵ As a political observer with close ties to both groups noted, “Hizbollah supports Aoun as a candidate, but ultimately he is not *their* candidate”.¹⁰⁶

According to various sources, Hizbollah is contemplating a deal whereby Aoun would renounce the presidency in exchange for a major say in choosing the candidate,¹⁰⁷

place between 24 September and 24 November 2007. As support for its view that a two-thirds quorum is necessary, the opposition invokes tradition, arguing that the principle has always been respected. Jurists close to the opposition also invoke the precedent of the 1976 elections, the first in which there was no pre-electoral political deal. Parliament asked two constitutional lawyers, Edmond Rabat and Georges Vedel (a Frenchman), for their views concerning Article 49. They concluded that the election of a president requires the presence of two thirds of the deputies, and parliament endorsed their position. Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Moukheiber, jurist and member of parliament, Beirut, 3 October 2007; see also Emile Bejjani, *L’élection du président de la république* (Beirut, 1987).

¹⁰⁰ Naim Qassem, quoted in *Asharq al-Awsat*, 18 September 2007.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, Beirut, 19 September 2007.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, close adviser to Aoun, Beirut, 20 September 2007.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, March 14 member, September 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 14 August 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Aounist member of parliament, Beirut, 3 July 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 14 August 2007.

¹⁰⁷ In an interview with Crisis Group, Qumati said, “Hizbollah members of parliament will elect either Aoun or a candidate he

important ministerial posts in the future government and an electoral law more favourable to Christians.¹⁰⁸ For now, Aoun’s apparently undiminished determination to become president – somewhat to Hizbollah’s surprise – remains a major complicating factor.¹⁰⁹ That said, the Aounist movement may be in a position to play a crucial role in convincing Hizbollah to accept an eventual compromise. There is little doubt that the alliance has greatly helped Hizbollah (providing non-Shiite legitimacy to its armed status), while significantly weakening Aoun; it is equally clear that while Hizbollah needs Aoun’s support given rising confessional tensions, Aoun would like to prove that his alliance has paid dividends.¹¹⁰ As a result, the Aounists have the opportunity to use their leverage to persuade the Shiite movement to accept a governmental program that would constrain use of its weapons to strictly defensive purposes (see below).

will have designated”. Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, Beirut, 19 September 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Jean Aziz, Beirut, 25 September 2007.

¹⁰⁹ In Aoun’s words, “I will never give it up ... I will feel guilty before God if I backed down”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21 September 2007. This stance was confirmed by Jean Aziz, the head of the news department of Aoun’s television station. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 25 September 2007. A European diplomat closely involved in the process offered a different view, speculating that Aoun’s stance merely was a prelude to a tough negotiation and that the general was fully aware he would not become president. Crisis Group interview, New York, 26 September 2007.

¹¹⁰ Some March 14 members accuse the Aounists of having become a mere instrument of Hizbollah, Crisis Group interview, Michael Young, political analyst, Beirut, 4 October 2007.

II. RESISTANCE AFTER THE WAR

A. A NEW MILITARY EQUATION

In the months following the war, many observers and political actors disagreed over how badly Hizbollah's military arsenal had suffered.¹¹¹ That question has lost much relevance. There is now virtual unanimity that Hizbollah has replenished its stocks. By asserting that the movement has strengthened its military capacity and possesses at least 20,000 rockets, Nasrallah implicitly gave credence to the claims by the UN, Israel and others that weapons had been transferred via the Syrian-Lebanese border in violation of Resolution 1701.¹¹² The Lebanese army also has intercepted weapons shipments allegedly for Hizbollah.

Although strengthened in hardware, Hizbollah finds itself on more difficult strategic terrain. Its self-proclaimed "divine victory" notwithstanding, the war complicated its military posture. In the South, it has lost the impressive network of bunkers and fortified positions it had patiently built since 2000.¹¹³ It also is deprived of much of its margin

of manoeuvre by the presence of 15,000 Lebanese soldiers and 13,000 belonging to UNIFIL, whose means and mandate were reinforced by Resolution 1701, pursuant to which Hizbollah significantly redeployed from the border area to north of the Litani River.

Moreover, Hizbollah realises that the state of inter-sectarian relations means Shiites risk not having a safe haven in the event of renewed confrontation. Nor are Shiites hungry for more fighting. Crisis Group heard numerous complaints from southern residents who, while supporting Hizbollah's armed status as deterrence, criticised its single-minded focus on resistance, aspirations to a regional role and inadequate efforts to help civilians.¹¹⁴ Short of alienating and endangering its own constituency, Hizbollah will find it hard to take unprovoked military action in the South. For now, it has halted the attacks – known as "reminder operations" (*'amaliyat tazkiriya*) – it periodically undertook in the Shebaa Farms.¹¹⁵

Hizbollah is adapting in several ways. The shift from resistance to deterrence – a trend that began with the 2000 withdrawal – has become more pronounced, with much day-to-day activity concentrating on commemorations of past exploits.¹¹⁶ The thickened security presence in the

¹¹¹ It is difficult to quantify the damage suffered by Hizbollah. According to the movement, around 200 of its fighters were killed, Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, 3 February 2007, but the real figure is probably slightly higher. In its latest report, Human Rights Watch assessed that 250 Hizbollah fighters were killed, http://hrw.org/reports/2007/lebanon0907/10.htm#_Toc175028505. The various categories involved (reservists, professionals and armed villagers) make any precise assessment all the more complex. According to some military analysts, Israeli attacks destroyed a significant portion of Hizbollah's military infrastructure, including bunkers adjoining the border and long-range missiles. See Anthony Cordesman, "Preliminary Lessons of the Israeli-Hizbollah War", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 17 August 2006, www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060817_isr_hez_lessons.pdf.

¹¹² Hassan Nasrallah speech commemorating the "divine victory", 22 September 2006, Al-Manar television. In a 23 July interview on Al Jazeera, he claimed Hizbollah now possessed an arsenal of rockets that could reach any corner of Israel, including Tel Aviv. See also "Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006)", UNSC S/2007/392, 28 June 2007. The head of the defence ministry's political-security department, Amos Gilad, told Israel Radio that Syria continues to be a transit point for Iranian weapons and money to Hizbollah. "Syria ... is allowing the Iranians, and is itself arming Hizbollah in a massive fashion", Haaretz, 30 June 2006. The most significant weapons seizure occurred on 8 February 2007, when Hizbollah acknowledged that it owned a truck full of ammunition that was intercepted in an East Beirut suburb. A security official later said twenty Grad rockets and twenty rocket launchers were concealed in bags of straw, Associated Press, 8 February 2007.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Timor Goksel, former UNIFIL spokesman, Beirut, 16 August 2007. A UNIFIL officer confirmed

that UN forces can travel unimpeded in their area of deployment, including former Hizbollah bunkers. Crisis Group interview, South Lebanon, July 2007. For Nicholas Blanford, a well-informed Hizbollah watcher, "the conflict forced the Islamic Resistance to expose six years of military preparations, including the underground network of bunkers and firing positions which were far more elaborate than previously thought". "Hizbollah prepares for war", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 11 April 2007.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, South Lebanon, May 2007. According to Timor Goksel, Hizbollah cannot afford another confrontation at this time because "even its own social base would not accept it, given how much it suffered last time around". Crisis Group interview, 3 February 2007.

¹¹⁵ Hizbollah claims these will resume "once the international community will have failed to liberate the farms". Nabil Qawuq, quoted in Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "In their own words: Hizbollah's strategy in the current confrontation", *Policy Outlook*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2007, p. 13.

¹¹⁶ These include, inter alia, ceremonies marking Israel's 2000 withdrawal; *ashura* (commemorating Imam Hussein's martyrdom); the anniversary of the death of two prominent Hizbollah leaders, Abbas al-Musawi and Raghieb Harb; the "week of Islamic resistance"; the "day of the martyr"; the "week of Islamic unity"; the festival in support of the resistance; Jerusalem Day; the day of the wounded; the anniversary of Imam Khomeini's death; and the festival of the "divine victory". In the wake of the war, the movement also produced much memorabilia, poetry, songs and CDs glorifying its militants. In August 2007, it inaugurated an open-air museum in southern Beirut giving its version of the 2006 war and seeking to debunk the notion of Israel's invincibility. It is called the "Spider's House" – the term used by Nasrallah to describe Israel's army as outwardly solid yet inherently fragile.

South is a barrier that hinders but also can protect. A pro-Hizbollah sheikh there described UNIFIL as integral to the movement's defensive strategy. "Of course, publicly Hizbollah says that UNIFIL serves Israel's interests. But we have extensive contacts with UNIFIL, and we trust its local leaders. We know its presence makes any Israeli attack that much more difficult and, in the event of a war, it is inconceivable that UNIFIL will attack the Resistance".¹¹⁷ The view is echoed by Timor Goksel, the former UNIFIL spokesman: "UNIFIL and the Lebanese army in the South are now considered as defensive lines".¹¹⁸

The presence of UN forces also has led Hizbollah to strengthen its position around its second line of defence, north of the Litani River, in the East and in the Bekaa.¹¹⁹ A knowledgeable Hizbollah watcher said:

On the ground, Hizbollah is establishing a new line of defence just north of the Litani River, which marks the northern limit of UNIFIL's area of operations. The Islamic Resistance has expanded and increased the number of positions in the mountains between the Litani River and Kfar Houne village, sealing off valleys and hill-tops to outsiders. New weapons storage facilities are being constructed in the southern Bekaa Valley and in the area around Nabatieh. Training has intensified at the dozens of camps located in Shia-populated areas along the eastern and western flanks of the Bekaa Valley.¹²⁰

Nasrallah's 3 August 2007 speech, in which he paid particular tribute to the people of the Bekaa, should be understood in this context. "The region of Baalback Hermel in particular and of the Bekaa more generally is not a rearguard base. It is a front line just like the regions south and north of the Litani River".¹²¹

Among other lessons Hizbollah learned from the war is the need both to blunt Israel's air supremacy (manifested through aerial surveillance, unmanned drones and other means of detecting ground movement) and to augment the number of armed militants to resist any land incursion. Hizbollah reportedly acquired more sophisticated Russian and Chinese made anti-aircraft material and dispatched

personnel to Iran for training.¹²² At the same time, it is recruiting fighters to help its elite, professional militants, including among non-Shiites who backed it during the war.¹²³ Mahmud Qumati evokes "not hundreds but thousands" of new recruits who are being trained, chiefly Shiite, but also Druze, Sunnis, and Christians.¹²⁴ The purpose of such recruiting and training remains highly contentious. Hizbollah argues that the goal is to expand the resistance to "non-religious" militants.¹²⁵ Its opponents, however, are convinced it has nothing to do with the struggle against Israel but rather is being undertaken in anticipation of a civil war. They point in particular to the fact that Aounists, as well as followers of Wi'am Wahhab (a Druze) and of Usama Saad (a Sunni) are being armed and trained, and "it is hard to convince many Lebanese that this is being done with an eye to fighting Israel".¹²⁶

All that said, the closing of the southern front carries major implications for Hizbollah. In particular, it means that the movement must pursue goals chiefly by focusing on Lebanon's domestic politics.

B. FOCUS ON DOMESTIC POLITICS

Discussions concerning the movement's future often revolve around whether it eventually will become a party like any other, taking part in Lebanon's political game and abdicating its armed status. Some believe the process of accommodation is in train, pointing to its decision to participate in parliamentary elections in the early 1990s and in the government in 2005. Its more recent call for a national

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Saad Allah Khalil, Qulaili, South Lebanon, 27 April 2007.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Timor Goksel, Beirut, 16 August 2007.

¹¹⁹ This does not mean that the movement has abandoned the South; Hizbollah sympathisers and militants abound, many are armed and, according to a UNIFIL officer, light weapons are present in urban areas in anticipation of possible warfare, Crisis Group interview, South Lebanon, July 2007; Crisis Group interview, Timor Goksel, Beirut, 16 August 2007.

¹²⁰ Blanford, op. cit.

¹²¹ *Al-Manar*, 3 August 2007.

¹²² See *Al-Siyasa*, a Kuwaiti daily often critical of Syria, 18 April 2007. According to the report, a first batch of approximately 500 militants was sent to Iran and completed training on 16 April. They have since allegedly returned to Lebanon via Damascus airport.

¹²³ A similar attempt to set up battalions supervised by – albeit not belonging to – Hizbollah, known as *Saraya al-Muqawama* (Resistance Battalions), was made in the late 1990s. It failed for several reasons, including opposition from Damascus (allegedly fear that weapons provided to Sunnis could be turned against them. Crisis Group interview, Abu Ali, former military leader of the Murabitun, a Nasserite armed movement, Beirut 28 April 2007), and the feeling among non-Shiites that they were being treated like second-class fighters.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, vice president of Hizbollah's political council, Beirut, 19 September 2007.

¹²⁵ Ibid. Amin Hotait, a military expert, argues this also is a way for Hizbollah to attract Amal militants who are disappointed in their party. Crisis Group phone interview, Amin Hoteit, former army general with close ties to the opposition, Beirut, 22 September 2007.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group email communication, Lebanese analyst, October 2007. The arming of militias has extended to many other groups, Christian in particular, and is a major source of worry. See *The New York Times*, 6 October 2007.

unity government also could be viewed as a step in gradual “Lebanisation”.

The presumed dichotomy between politics and resistance is misconceived. Far from being a substitute for armed resistance, Hizbollah’s political involvement has become its necessary corollary. Given rapidly shifting internal and external landscapes, the Shiite movement calculates that deeper political engagement is the best way to safeguard its armed status.¹²⁷ As the vice president of Hizbollah’s research centre put it, “paradoxically, some want us to get involved in the political process in order to neutralise us. In fact, we intend to get involved – but precisely in order to protect the strategic choice of resistance and political participation”.¹²⁸ Resistance is and remains Hizbollah’s priority, its *raison d’être*, a means of liberating Lebanese land, unifying Arab and Muslim ranks, protecting Lebanon from attempts to reshape its political identity in a more pro-Western direction¹²⁹ but also, increasingly, of thwarting Washington’s perceived attempts to dominate the region. In this struggle against a U.S.-led regional order, Hizbollah relies on support from Iran, Syria and others in forming an axis of refusal (*jabhat al-mumana’a*).

1. Safeguarding the resistance

Unlike Amal, Hizbollah does not view politics as an end in itself and has not made Shiite representation its priority. For an expert on the movement, “Hizbollah has only two priorities: the Palestinian question and resistance against U.S. regional projects. All other objectives, including Shiite empowerment, are ancillary”.¹³⁰ Likewise, a sheikh sympathetic to Hizbollah said, “What matters to Hizbollah is its culture of resistance. Hizbollah never advocated a strong presence on the local political scene other than in order to allocate services at the municipal level. That’s why Hizbollah parliamentary members rarely are the people the movement truly values”.¹³¹

It follows that the movement’s relation to the central state has always been assessed in terms of its impact on the resistance. At the outset, it steered clear of direct participation in the domestic political game, believing it would be corrupted, dragged into confessional, patron-client relations and forfeit its special status. It evolved gradually and always conceived of politics as an essentially negative activity, designed not so much to promote a specific agenda as to

block hostile ones. Through various steps, it adjusted to Lebanon’s shifting political situation with an eye toward safeguarding its weapons and special status. Thus, in the wake of the 1989 Taef Accords, which among other items called for the disbanding of armed militias, Hizbollah participated in the 1992 legislative elections in order to protect its weapons,¹³² calling its ensuing parliamentary group the “bloc of loyalty to the Resistance” – the name it continues to carry to this day.

In 2005, following Syria’s military withdrawal and passage of Resolution 1559 which, again, called for the dismantling of all militias, the movement for the first time agreed to enter the government. Nawaf al-Musawi, in charge of Hizbollah’s external relations, commented at the time that “Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon created a vacuum in the country’s political scene . . . and international powers are trying to take advantage of this vacuum and impose their tutelage over Lebanon”.¹³³ The view was echoed by Ali Fayyad, head of Hizbollah’s think tank:

During two decades of resistance, Hizbollah approached political authority with militant puritanism, which not only excluded seeking power but also led it to consider access to power as contradicting the rationale and requirements of the resistance. What compelled Hezbollah to take the dramatic step of joining the government was the profound transformations in the Lebanese political balance after the withdrawal of the Syrian troops. Syria’s withdrawal . . . alter[ed] the relative size of the various forces, reveal[ed] some of the key choices in State policies and expos[ed] Lebanon’s vulnerable position in the regional equation.¹³⁴

As a member of the cabinet, Hizbollah insisted the government’s program endorse the right of resistance.¹³⁵

The post-July 2006 war demand for a national unity government in which the current opposition would hold a blocking minority stems from a similar rationale. It was Hizbollah’s response to criticism of its unilateral military action and pressure to disarm coupled with an attempt to halt what it perceived as the government’s slide toward an increasingly pro-American and pro-Saudi stance.¹³⁶

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, vice president of Hizbollah’s political council, Beirut, 11 October 2006.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Abdel Halim Fadlallah, Beirut, 27 April 2007.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Qasem Qasir, journalist and Hizbollah expert, Beirut, 7 March 2007.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Walid Charara, Beirut, 29 May 2007.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, pro-Hizbollah sheikh, South Lebanon, 23 April 2007.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Nabil Qawuq, Hizbollah official responsible for the South, Tyr, 11 October 2006.

¹³³ *Daily Star*, 18 June 2005.

¹³⁴ Ali Fayyad, “Hizbollah and the Lebanese state: reconciling a national strategy with a regional role”, *Arab Reform Initiative*, August 2006.

¹³⁵ For the full text of the ministerial declaration, see *Diary of the Israeli War on Lebanon* (Beirut, 2006), p. 324. The book is the collective work of journalists from the *Safir* newspaper.

¹³⁶ “Immediately after the war, the issue of our weapons and of the resistance were publicly debated. For a short time afterwards, things quieted down. Yet, under U.S. pressure, the March 14

Justifying its call, Hizbollah said it was warranted by its military victory¹³⁷ and that it aspired to be in a position to impede any decision that threatened the resistance and its strategic interests. Nabil Qawuq, the movement's leader in the South, stated:

During the war, we were ready to accept anything to ensure Lebanon was united in its struggle against Israel. Then, in the war's immediate aftermath, we hoped that our political opponents would pull themselves together and take stock of the new situation. And yet, when the war ended, they continued to attack us politically. We decided we had to put it to an end. And for that, we needed a national unity government that could guarantee and protect what the resistance had attained.¹³⁸

As Hizbollah sees it, the political crisis is the war's continuation by other means. Nasrallah put it plainly: "What has happened since the end of the war is an extension of Israel's war against Lebanon. And just as we fought in July and August, so we will fight today but with other weapons and other rules".¹³⁹ Nawaf al-Musawi claims "the government is striving to execute what Israel failed to do".¹⁴⁰ In other words, the principal goal is not to ensure more equitable participation – though Hizbollah argued that Aoun's camp deserved better representation – but to protect the movement's weapons. Qumati put it as follows: "Political participation is not what matters to us. We are doing this to save the country. It is the way to defend ourselves against any decision that might threaten the resistance or affect Lebanon's fundamental strategic and political choices".¹⁴¹

Symptomatically, Hizbollah is not asking that ministers come from its ranks but rather from the ranks of its allies,

forces have brought the matter back to the fore". Crisis Group interview, Abdel Hamid Fadlallah, vice president of Hizbollah's research centre, Beirut, 27 April 2007.

¹³⁷ At an October 2006 rally, Hashem Safi Eddine, Nasrallah's cousin and a prominent member of Hizbollah's leading political body, the *Majlis al-Shura*, explained: "When someone wins a war, he can ask for anything. All we ask for is to enlarge the government for the sake of national unity", Jerusalem Day rally attended by Crisis Group, Nabatiyeh, 20 October 2006.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Nabil Qawuq, Tyr, 17 October 2006. Nasrallah said the same, arguing that the March 14 forces "want to remain in power, which has become a real problem because they do not want power for the sake of power but rather because they made a number of political and economic commitments and promises. If we have a blocking third (*thulth muatal*), they will not be able to carry them out". Interview with Al Jazeera, 12 September 2006.

¹³⁹ Interview on *al-Manar* television, 16 February 2006.

¹⁴⁰ Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "In their own words", op. cit., p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, Beirut, 3 February 2006.

thereby allowing it to both control the government indirectly and maintain some distance from it. Nor have Hizbollah's leaders offered any clarity as to how they would wish to alter the government's policies, other than a vague rejection of U.S. influence.¹⁴² At the local level, involvement in politics has come at a cost – indeed, precisely the cost that had kept Hizbollah away in the first place. It has forged alliances with odd bedfellows and engaged in clientelist political practices.¹⁴³ For Antoine Alouf, a Christian elected on Hizbollah's list in Baalbek, "the conversion of a militant and disciplined movement, adept at allocating services within its own institutions to a political movement that serves citizens through local institutions has proved difficult".¹⁴⁴ For others, Hizbollah's appeal as a resistance movement coexists with criticism of its local management.¹⁴⁵

More broadly, if it wishes to preserve its image as a different kind of political movement, Hizbollah will need to implement a genuinely reformist, state-building agenda. That is a tall order unlikely to be met since it would mean alienating virtually all actors currently controlling the Lebanese system. More importantly, it would seriously undercut the party's two core assets: resistance (insofar as an independent armed force is incompatible with the building of a strong central state), and its cliental relationship with the Shiite community (insofar as a truly reformed state would do away with or at least mitigate such loyalties).

2. Containing U.S. influence

In July 2003 Crisis Group noted that Israel's 2000 withdrawal, by drying up one of the principal justifications for the resistance, had "created [Hizbollah's] first true strategic dilemma".¹⁴⁶ Although occupation of the Shebaa Farms, Israel's detention of Lebanese prisoners and continued Israeli infringement of Lebanese sovereignty resonated, they were far less effective at mobilising national support for armed resistance. Crisis Group suggested the movement increasingly was turning to "the struggle between Islamism and Arab nationalism on the one hand, and U.S. and Israeli domination on the other" as the rationale for its continued existence as an armed resistance group.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² According to Ali Fayyad, the movement has drafted a plan for institutional reforms but will await resolution of the political crisis before publishing it. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 30 May 2007.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, local politicians allied to Hizbollah, Hizbollah experts, Beirut, Bekaa, April-July 2007.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Antoine Alouf, Baalbek, 23 April 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, tribal leaders, al-Nabi Shiit, Bekaa Valley; local politician, Baalbek, April 2007.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group Briefing, *Rebel Without a Cause*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 18.

Clearly that is now the case. Since the 2006 war, Hizbollah has concluded that the paramount conflict is with the U.S. and the central goal is to thwart its efforts to reshape the Middle East. The U.S. in this view is less Israel's instrument than Israel is America's. A political council member said, "we do not want to belong to America's sphere of influence. We want ours to be a sphere of resistance to America's project".¹⁴⁸ *Muqawama* (resistance) against Israel is now complemented – some would say superseded – by *mumana'a* (refusal) of U.S. military, political, economic and cultural influence. In this, Hizbollah's allies are Iran, Hamas and Syria.

For Hizbollah, therefore, Lebanon's identity and attitude towards neighbours and international actors is at stake in the current domestic tug-of-war. Hence its insistence on increasing the movement's political influence and being in a position to obstruct decisions inconsistent with its world view (whether relating to armed status, the configuration of national armed forces or relations with the West, Israel or Syria).

III. HIZBOLLAH'S ISLAMIC IDENTITY

Hizbollah's focus on the political scene and demands for a greater voice have renewed fears regarding its domestic intentions. One concern in particular is that the movement will sooner or later revert to its primordial Islamic identity and seek to impose Islamic rule.

The fear is not unfounded. Despite claims that the ultimate goal is now social justice rather than religious governance, Hizbollah has yet to amend its founding document, the 1985 "Open Letter", which calls, inter alia, for establishment of an Islamic state and presents the party as an "Islamist Jihadist movement".¹⁴⁹ Although it concedes that this can only be a result of the people's free choice, several aspects of its behaviour are cause for disquiet. Hizbollah's culture is profoundly religious, and its relationship with the nation-state remains ambiguous. Its name and origins – as an outgrowth of the Iranian revolution – aside, the movement continues to display several Islamist characteristics. Insofar as it embraces the principle of *wilayat al-faqih*,¹⁵⁰ acceptance of which is a precondition for joining the party, it acknowledges the authority of Iran's Supreme Leader at both the political and religious levels.

By the same token, the party continues to be essentially led by clerics who also play a key role in the political and religious education of the rank-and-file. Militants are

¹⁴⁹ For an analysis of the Open Letter, see Joseph Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbollah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program* (Beirut, 2006), pp. 36-37. Despite claims it is already written, Hizbollah does not seem to be in a hurry to publish the new document, Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah political leaders, Beirut, September 2007.

¹⁵⁰ The 1985 Open Letter says, "we address all the Arab and Islamic peoples to declare to them that the Muslim's experience in Islamic Iran left no one any excuse since it proved beyond all doubt that bare chests motivated by faith are capable, with God's help, of breaking the iron and oppression of tyrannical regimes", quoted and translated in Norton, op. cit., p. 36. Hizbollah adheres to the Iranian revolution's principle of *wilayat al-faqih* (rule of the jurispudent, which subjects the government to both the religious scholar's supreme authority and Islamic law (Sharia)) and follows the guidance of Iran's Supreme Leader. Naem Qasem, Hizbollah's deputy secretary general, describes in detail the Supreme Leader's authority over the movement, including his religious and worldly authority, giving him decision-making power on questions of war and peace, *Hizbollah, The Method, the Experience, the Future* (Beirut, 2004), pp. 74-78 (in Arabic). For a fuller explanation of the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* (*velayet-e fakih* in Farsi, as the concept is known in Iran), see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, pp. 22-23; also Middle East Report N°5, *Iran: The Struggle for the Revolution's Soul*, 5 August 2002, and Middle East Report N°55, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11 July 2006.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ghalib Abu Zeinab, Beirut, 13 September 2006.

called “sons of Mohammad and Ali”,¹⁵¹ and those killed in combat are celebrated as jihadist martyrs and examples to be followed.¹⁵² At key events – such as funerals for “martyrs” – Hizbollah waves the party’s banners, not the country’s flag.¹⁵³

At the local level, there is yet more concrete evidence of a profoundly Shiite outlook. Although Hizbollah did not initiate the community’s re-Islamisation,¹⁵⁴ it has deepened it through various means – providing financial support to clerics, establishing religious schools and foundations and, albeit less aggressively over time,¹⁵⁵ imposing moral norms in certain predominantly Shiite areas – especially

¹⁵¹ See in particular the latest CDs produced by Hizbollah on the July 2006 war.

¹⁵² That said, and although some suicide attacks are known to have been orchestrated by Hizbollah, they are neither its hallmark nor evidence of an Islamist agenda. Suicide attacks in Lebanon originated with secular organisations; according to a Lebanese researcher, out of 38 carried out by Lebanese organisations between 1982 and 1999 against the Israeli army and the Lebanese militia it set up, only thirteen were by Hizbollah. See Kinda Chaib, “Le martyr au Liban”, in Franck Mermier et Elisabeth Picard, *Liban: Une Guerre de 33 Jours* (Paris, 2007), p. 131. A former Hizbollah fighter said the organisation was reluctant to engage in suicide attacks because it did not wish to unnecessarily expend its manpower. Crisis Group interview, former Hizbollah fighter, Nabatiyeh, 20 October 2006.

¹⁵³ There are exceptions, particularly during events directed at a foreign audience. That was the case during the huge December 2006 demonstrations, where the leadership ordered its supporters to display the national flag. As crowds approached downtown Beirut, Crisis Group witnessed Hizbollah militants deployed on all major thoroughfares methodically substituting Lebanese flags for party banners.

¹⁵⁴ The process began in the 1940s and 1950s under the leadership of charismatic clerics such as Abdel Hussein Charaffedine and Mohsen al-Amin. This was followed in the 1960s and 1970s by the efforts of Moussa Sadr, but also Mohamed Mehdi Chamseddine and Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah. Crisis Group interviews, Sheikh Mohamed Ali Hajj and Sheikh Adib Haydar, Beirut, April-May 2007. According to several accounts, Amal in particular imposed strict rules in some areas under its control, including banning alcohol and destroying establishments that served it. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Ayta Chaab and Shuhour, April-May 2007. A communist militant from a village bordering Israel claimed Fadlallah’s supporters took advantage of Israeli and Syrian repression of leftist and nationalist groups to expand their influence. “By going after nationalist Lebanese and Palestinian militants, Israel and Syria opened the door to religious forces and confessional parties. As these militants were forced to flee their villages in the mid-1970s, Fadlallah’s supporters came in and began to expand their influence over the Shiite community”. Crisis Group interview, former militant from the Organisation of Communist Action, Ayta Chaab, 25 March 2007.

¹⁵⁵ Between 1985 and 1991, under Subhi al-Tufayli’s leadership, Hizbollah carried out an assertive program of Islamisation. Crisis Group interviews, politicians and students, Baalbek, April 2007.

in uni-confessional villages in the South and the Bekaa Valley. The latter category includes coercing women into wearing headscarves, forbidding cultural events deemed contrary to Islam and segregating men from women. How much pressure actually is exercised depends on the local Hizbollah leadership; there are great disparities and contradictory conduct, as well as evidence that the more hardline stance often is adopted without central leadership approval.¹⁵⁶

That said, Hizbollah’s strategic outlook would seem to rule out an attempt to impose Islamic rule. As seen, the movement’s interest in internal politics does not stem principally from a domestic agenda, whether reforming institutions or imposing its religious vision. Its stated goal, rather, is to protect Lebanon from what it considers dangerous outside involvement. The claim, of course, is questionable: Hizbollah, as can be expected, denounces U.S. but not Syrian interference, and it expresses far more concern for prisoners detained by Israel than by Syria. But the point is that its own self-proclaimed priorities have little to do with any Islamic let alone Shiite agenda for Lebanon.

More importantly, Hizbollah is keenly aware that any forceful imposition of Islamic rule would provoke immediate and intense inter-confessional clashes, a *fitna* that would fatally tarnish the movement’s image, end any pretence it may have to represent a broad Arab and Islamic resistance and reduce it to a purely Shiite party. That explains both its attempts to reach out to other confessional groups (in particular by adjusting its behaviour and denying any religious ulterior motive)¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ In some Hizbollah-controlled villages, Crisis Group encountered a majority of unveiled women; in others, such women faced ostracism or worse. Such pressure is less intense in Beirut’s southern neighbourhood; the number of unveiled women attending Nasrallah speeches is markedly higher. Even there, however, residents told Crisis Group of enforced gender segregation in sports centres as well as more widespread attempts by Hizbollah militants to impose their norms. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut’s southern neighbourhoods, March-April 2007. Elsewhere, Hizbollah militants have disrupted events such as a musical ceremony known as *dabke*. Crisis Group interview, researcher working on Shiite community, Beirut, January 2007.

¹⁵⁷ Invoking political exigencies, Nasrallah broke with Shiite rules in allowing a Sunni imam to lead prayers at the 8 December 2006 rally, which brought together Shiites and Sunnis who were followers of Fathi Yakan. Other such compromises in the name of political expediency occurred during the war. Hizbollah’s television station repeatedly aired the song “Keep Your Weapons at the Ready” by Egyptian romantic crooner Abdel Halim Hafez, even though the movement generally prohibits such music. In this instance, it felt it was useful to appeal to a broader Arab audience by using cultural products that resonated with them. Crisis Group interview, Nabil Qawuq, Hizbollah’s leader in South Lebanon, Tyr, 17 October 2006. More generally, Hizbollah

and its efforts to avoid internal violence. As seen, it has played a relatively moderating role within the opposition. From the outset of the political crisis, it rejected forcefully ousting the prime minister, explaining that “the Lebanese game does not allow such behaviour. It inevitably would lead to a united front of all communities against us. And it would lead to a civil war”.¹⁵⁸

While the current crisis has accentuated sectarian polarisation and thereby limited Hizbollah’s trans-confessional appeal, it has not led the movement toward a more Islamic agenda. Paradoxically, it may have added another reason for religious moderation: because Hizbollah depends more heavily on the Shiite community, it must reach out to and reassure all Shiites, including those (such as the exiled bourgeoisie whose financial support it needs) who do not espouse a militant or religious view.¹⁵⁹ A Shiite and former Nasserite who now grudgingly backs Hizbollah said, “the day Hizbollah starts asking questions like ‘why isn’t your daughter veiled?’ or ‘why don’t you pray’, I will be the first to oppose it”.¹⁶⁰ Nabil Qawuq commented that this trend began with Israel’s withdrawal in 2000: “The enemy left, Hizbollah is increasingly visible, and it is beginning to reach out to a public that is not necessarily religious”.¹⁶¹ Thus, while within the movement strict religious codes endure (at Hizbollah-only events, women are almost invariably veiled), to the outside world it is careful to project a less confessional and more political face.

None of this rules out a potential turn to a more radical, religious stance but this likely would require far greater polarisation of the domestic scene. In the final analysis, political constraints and Hizbollah’s own sense of priorities – rather than any theological conversion – are the best safeguards against such a pronounced drift. The result is a somewhat ambiguous posture that feeds and explains fear of a possible hidden agenda: a profoundly Islamist ethos at the local level coupled with careful avoidance of a religious program on the national scene.¹⁶²

has proved pragmatic in its imposition of Islamic norms: more aggressive where the population is overwhelmingly Shiite, less so where it is mixed. Crisis Group interviews, villages in the South and in the Bekaa Valley, mid-2007.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, 14 June 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Nabil Qandil, former Shiite pro-Syrian legislator, Beirut, 14 May 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Abu Ali, former military leader of the *Murabitoun*, Beirut, 29 April 2007.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Nabil Qawuq, Tyr, 17 October 2006.

¹⁶² Norton writes: “The result is that sceptics and opponents of the party are left with a picture of ambivalence and, perhaps, dissimulation, which have only been sharpened by Hezbollah’s behaviour in the early twenty-first century”, op. cit., p. 46.

IV. HIZBOLLAH AND THE NEW “AXIS OF EVIL”

Born in the wake of the Iranian revolution, openly embracing its fundamental ideological tenets, heavily reliant on Iran’s assistance and enjoying a strategic partnership with Syria, Hizbollah from the outset has been part of an intricate regional set-up. Yet, rather than being a relationship of proxy to master, the ties to Iran and Syria are complex, subtle and changing.

A. A RELATIVE AUTONOMY WITH RED LINES

Hizbollah came into being between 1982 and 1985, both a consequence of Israel’s invasion of South Lebanon in 1982 and an extension of Iran’s 1979 revolution. Indeed, at its origins, the movement was very much a by-product of that revolution;¹⁶³ several thousand Iranian revolutionary guards are said to have been dispatched to the Bekaa Valley to help train its militants. Ideologically, Iran still was in the midst of its most revolutionary phase, driven by the desire to export its model and adhering to a far-reaching vision of *wilayat al-faqih* which demanded total allegiance (*wilaya mutlaqa*) to the revolution’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁶⁴ In these early years, according to Subhi Tufayli, the party’s first secretary general between 1989 and 1991, Iran had a say in all Hizbollah’s consequential decisions.¹⁶⁵

Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989 set in motion a process through which Hizbollah gained some independence from Tehran. The nature of the relationship was changing as Iran’s regime itself was being transformed; Tehran’s objective became less to export its revolutionary model than to maintain tight political ties. For Sheikh Yusuf Subayti, head of a religious school and close to Hizbollah, now “it is a political relationship that no longer is rooted in the religious concept of *wilayat al-faqih*”.¹⁶⁶ Hizbollah’s autonomy is relative; it still relies heavily on Iranian military and financial assistance, training and overall support. Its leadership also feels deeply loyal to the Iranian revolution, whose safeguard is a priority. But Tehran is no longer as intrusive and meddling as it once was.

Hizbollah over time sought to develop independent sources of funding, which have allowed it to develop an impressive

¹⁶³ Qasem Qasir, a journalist and Hizbollah expert, says that Hizbollah was organically attached to the Iranian revolution. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 March 2007.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Mahmud Qumati, Beirut, 3 February 2007.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Subhi Tufayli, Baalbek, 5 April 2007.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Yusuf Subayti, Kafra, 27 April 2007.

social network for the Shiite community's benefit (including charitable institutions, schools, hospitals and allowances provided to the families of "martyrs"). The decision of the present Iranian supreme leader, Khamenei, to delegate some of his powers enabled Hizbollah to levy the religious tax (*khums*), amounting to 20 per cent of one's annual revenue, which must be paid to the religious leader (*marjaa al-taqlid*).¹⁶⁷ This includes amounts paid by the Lebanese Shiite diaspora which, relatively speaking, is more affluent than the local population.¹⁶⁸ To this must be added voluntary contributions which, in the aftermath of the 2006 war, allegedly were quite high and came mainly from expatriate Shiites, both Lebanese and non-Lebanese.¹⁶⁹ Hizbollah also requests donations on special occasions and encourages self-financing among its members; the large hospital centre in Beirut's southern neighbourhood (*al-rasul al-a'dham*), for example, is said to be paid for by its own revenues. Still, the flow of Iranian money remains extremely significant. For instance, the reconstruction of Shiite areas destroyed during the 2006 war and civilian compensation have been almost entirely an Iranian affair.¹⁷⁰

Relations with Syria also have evolved, in this case a function of shifting ties between Damascus, Tehran and Beirut. In 1990, when the international community essentially agreed to turn Lebanon – emerging from a brutal fifteen-year civil war – into a quasi-Syrian protectorate, Hizbollah was forced to adapt. Syria viewed the movement as a card to be used in the context of on-again, off-again negotiations with Israel. Damascus's influence over Hizbollah was at its peak, with tight control over military operations and continuous interference in political decisions. Concerned that any Lebanese party might gain excessive strength, Syria played the Shiite movements against one another, pressured Hizbollah to concede parliamentary seats to Amal and provided support to Sheikh Tufayli after he fell out with the movement. In 1993, the Lebanese army and ISF (Police), then under Syrian control, violently repressed a Hizbollah-led demonstration protesting the Oslo Accords, killing thirteen and wounding dozens.¹⁷¹

Syria's 2005 military withdrawal from Lebanon and the end of its direct political control opened a new chapter in

the relationship. Although Hizbollah clearly depends on Syria as the only transit route for Iranian weapons, it has expanded its margin of manoeuvre. Politically, it acts with greater autonomy, as illustrated by its 2005 electoral deal with the strongly anti-Syrian March 14 coalition and subsequent rapprochement with Michel Aoun.¹⁷² The end of its tutelage over Lebanon reduced Syria's freedom of action while simultaneously inducing Hizbollah to play a different domestic game to protect its interests. On these and other matters, the movement acted in ways that differed from Syria's more traditional Lebanese allies, more prone, for example, to encourage instability and chaos in Lebanon.¹⁷³ Hizbollah's enhanced status in the Arab and Moslem worlds also helped fortify its position. According to Akram Tleiss, former Hizbollah and current Amal adviser, "ever since Syria withdrew from Lebanon, it intervenes with Hizbollah only when its vital interests are at stake. It no longer meddles in daily matters".¹⁷⁴

Yet, it would be mistaken to view Hizbollah's expanded autonomy as representing an end to or even a crisis in its alliance with Iran and Syria. Nor should it be read – as some observers have suggested – as an inversion in power relations with Syria, with the Shiite movement now having the upper hand. It is, rather, the occasion for a reallocation of power and reassignment of roles in a complex, pragmatic and fluid three-way relationship that is constantly being renegotiated yet remains remarkably solid.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Syria appeared initially to be quite sceptical about the alliance with Aoun. "His return to Lebanon came as a shock to the Syrians. The speech he gave on arrival at the airport, in which is definitely turned a page on his most aggressive opposition to Syria by stating that Lebanon was now sovereign and that times were different, reassured them somewhat. But he is still seen as a bit of a wildcard. He hardly ever was featured in Syrian official media until after he proved his solidarity with Hizbollah during the clashes in early 2007, and even now he is strikingly absent in comparison with pro-Syrian figures such as We'am Wahab. All Lebanese visits to Damascus tend to be either officially reported or leaked to the Arab media, and it seems that Aoun has never sent anyone to Syria". Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, September 2007.

¹⁷³ After President Bashar's inflammatory 15 August 2006 speech accusing Siniora's government of being an "Israeli product", Syria's closest allies (e.g., the Current of Lebanese Unity, Lebanese Democratic Party, National Social Syrian Party) immediately followed his lead and lashed out at the prime minister. Hizbollah, by contrast, initially acted with greater restraint.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Akram Tleiss, Beirut, 3 May 2007.

¹⁷⁵ An Arab observer noted that the Syrian-Iranian relationship has been the "most stable relationship in the Middle East over the past quarter century", Crisis Group interview, August 2007. Though it is of slightly more recent vintage, much the same can be said of the relationship between the two and Hizbollah.

¹⁶⁷ Until 1995, the tax was given to Iran's Supreme Leader; it is now given to his Lebanese representatives, Hassan Nasrallah and Mohammad Yazbek. See Joseph Alagha, op. cit., p. 286.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Abdel-Halim Fadlallah, Beirut, 27 April 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Nasser Qandil, former pro-Syrian member of parliament, Beirut, 14 May 2007.

¹⁷⁰ Officially, Hizbollah claims it provided \$380 million for reconstruction assistance and financial compensation to the families of victims of Israeli attacks. Crisis Group interview, Abdel-Halim Fadlallah, 23 September 2007.

¹⁷¹ Joseph Alagha, op. cit., p. 286.

B. THE NATURE OF THE ALLIANCES WITH SYRIA AND IRAN

Descriptions of the Iranian/Syrian/Hizbollah alliance often veer into exaggeration and caricature. It is not, to begin, a religious affair, the expression of a burgeoning militant Shiite axis. That depiction gained particular prominence after the 2006 Lebanon war and in the context of Shiite gains in Iraq.¹⁷⁶ Iran, its Iraqi allies, Hizbollah and even Syria are considered by some as central members of a coalition based in part, at least, on a common sectarian bond.

Reality is far more nuanced. Syria is ruled by its Alawite minority, a creed and culture that have little in common with Shiism. Shiites tend to view its members as miscreants; few Alawites in Syria's political elite are practicing; and most have a relatively secular and modern outlook on life. Regime opponents sometimes describe it as Shiite because this is viewed as an effective insult, not because it is a truthful one.

Likewise, deepening Iranian-Syrian ties have led to all manner of reports on Syria's so-called "Shiitisation". Some are true but exaggerated (Iran has engaged in more active proselytising but it is narrowly focused on poorer Syrians and is far less widespread than claimed); much is pure fabrication (the Syrian regime has not promoted recent Shiite converts to positions of responsibility in the security apparatus).¹⁷⁷ If anything, the regime is tolerating ever more ubiquitous manifestations of Sunni religious practice in order to shore up its legitimacy among a public that is showing increasing receptivity to Islamist discourse.¹⁷⁸ It is true that in the immediate aftermath of the Lebanon war, the regime highlighted its alliance and plastered walls with pictures of Assad alongside Nasrallah and Iranian President Ahmadi-Nejad. Yet, as Hizbollah's standing in Syria fell victim to heightened sectarian polarisation

throughout the region, this too came to a relatively abrupt end.¹⁷⁹

Iran currently shows scant signs of seeking to dominate Lebanon's Shiite community as a whole, preferring to focus on building political-ideological ties with Hizbollah. This is a far cry from earlier years when Tehran meddled in the domestic religious scene.

The three-way relationship is not without tensions either. Conversations with Hizbollah members reveal deep and abiding mistrust of the Syrian regime. Some highlight its brutal repression of the Muslim Brothers in the 1970s and 1980s as evidence of its anti-Islamist agenda;¹⁸⁰ others are highly critical of its authoritarian leanings. Syria's passivity during the 2006 war, followed by the speed with which it claimed an important role in Hizbollah's "divine victory", caused significant bitterness among the rank and file. Denying any emotional bond, a member of the party's political council said, "our relationship is strictly political".¹⁸¹ For its part, Syria, given its pressing desire to counter an international tribunal which it sees as an instrument of a hostile U.S. policy, likely would have preferred to see the Shiite party adopt an even more unyielding stance in Lebanon as a means of thwarting the judicial process and bringing down the Siniora government.

Contradictions between Iran and Syria run deeper still and are at play in all major regional theatres. Whereas Iran has ruled out any dealings with Israel and openly calls for its destruction, Syria repeatedly asserts its willingness to negotiate and, should a peace deal be reached, normalise relations. Since the Iraq war, Iran has heavily supported Shiite groups and militias; Syria, though it recently has strengthened ties with the central government, has provided aid to Sunni insurgent groups and former Baathists who view Tehran as a principal foe. Finally, the two countries have divergent priorities in Lebanon. Syria, intent at stopping the international tribunal at virtually any cost, appears willing to destabilise its neighbour even if it means greater polarisation and, therefore, Hizbollah's further identification as a sectarian party. Iran's aspiration to pan-

¹⁷⁶ King Abdullah of Jordan first evoked the notion of a "Shiite crescent" stretching from Iran to Lebanon in an 8 December 2004 interview in *The Washington Post*. It has become a catchphrase for Hizbollah opponents, used chiefly by Sunni religious leaders. Crisis Group interview, Salafist leaders and clerics, Tripoli, June-July 2006, May 2007. Iran's reportedly growing influence over Damascus has given rise in Syria and among outside observers to speculation concerning the country's "Iranianisation" or "Shiitisation". See Andrew Tabler, "Catalytic Converters", *The New York Times Magazine*, 29 April 2007.

¹⁷⁷ "Eye of the Storm: The 'Iranisation' of Syria", *The Jerusalem Post*, 1 November 2006.

¹⁷⁸ In the run-up to the May 2007 parliamentary elections, for instance, numerous candidates tapped into religious sources of legitimacy to compensate for the fact that they had no political program.

¹⁷⁹ In the months following the war, the Syrian people – who had acclaimed Hizbollah's military performance – rapidly and stunningly turned against the Shiite movement. This almost certainly is due to the intensified sectarian polarisation emanating out of Iraq. Gruesome images of Saddam Hussein's execution (and his taunting by Shiite guards) were a turning point in solidifying hostility toward Shiites. A number of Syrian Sunnis, previously indifferent to Saddam Hussein and supportive of Hizbollah, suddenly turned radically anti-Shiite after viewing the footage. Crisis Group interviews, January 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah members, Beirut, Bekaa Valley, South Lebanon, February-June 2007.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah political council member, Beirut, 23 November 2006.

Islamic leadership along with its desire to salvage its years-long investment in Hizbollah require avoiding a dangerous domestic, confessionally-based confrontation. Tehran also wished to repair relations with Riyadh by launching a joint mediation effort – an effort that presumably foundered because it disregarded Syria's concern over the tribunal. Although relations between Hizbollah and Iran form the strongest link in this three-way alliance, Syria remains indispensable to both.

Ultimately, despite often difficult negotiations and compromises, the three appear able to put aside differences and contradictions when necessary to promote shared strategic priorities. The relationship has been remarkably resilient, holding together for different reasons at different times; today, what binds them is their common struggle against Israel and, more importantly, the U.S.'s perceived hegemonic aspirations. In Hizbollah's parlance, they are the pillars of a "Front of Refusal" (*jabhat al-mumana'a*) that, in theory, is open to anyone willing to challenge U.S. influence in the Middle East, be it Hamas, small pro-Syrian Lebanese parties, Syria or Iran.

Key determinants of the relationship, therefore, are regional dynamics, not Lebanese. The arms provided by Iran to Hizbollah do not aim at establishing an Islamic Republic, and its financial and material assistance is not designed to improve the Shiite community's social or economic lot. Even when it promotes Syrian interests – for example by opposing the international tribunal – Hizbollah is not seeking to re-establish Syrian tutelage over Lebanon. The three parties have their own interests but the central consideration in a highly polarised regional environment is to strengthen the alliance against their common foes. The outcome is not always self-evident, and they are involved in a continuous series of implicit bargains.

Recent events surrounding Lebanon's political turmoil are an apt illustration. In 2005, Hizbollah organised massive demonstrations to thank Damascus and express gratitude for its military presence because vital Syrian interests were at stake, even though this came at a serious domestic cost. Hizbollah's subsequent efforts to block the tribunal's establishment undermined its image, making it appear to be doing Syria's bidding, costing it much of the sympathy it had earned among non-Shiites as a result of the 2006 war and contributing to the country's sectarian divide. Iran's unwillingness to disregard Syrian objections likewise doomed the mediation effort it undertook with Saudi Arabia, thereby impeding one of Tehran's regional goals. Because the tribunal is seen by Syria as a red-line, a transparent U.S. effort to destabilise the regime and thereby fatally weaken the Front of Refusal, Hizbollah and Iran were prepared to subordinate their interests to the superior goal of blocking it by perpetuating Lebanon's political stalemate.

The relationship can work the other way as well: in August 2006, Syria felt compelled to accept Resolution 1701, despite great concern at the prospect of UN troops deployed at its borders,¹⁸² largely because Hizbollah needed to end the war before it exacted too heavy a toll.¹⁸³ The question, for now unanswered, is whether the relationship would survive if and when two of the parties' vital interests were to clash – in the event of an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement, for instance. Less uncertain is that their ties will strengthen in a climate of regional confrontation.

¹⁸² Syria threatened to close its border with Lebanon if UN peacekeepers were deployed there, an act which it stated it would see as a declaration of war. "Syria Warns over UN Peacekeepers", BBC, 24 August 2006.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Nawaf al-Musawi, Hizbollah official in charge of external relations, Beirut, 18 August 2006.

V. CONCLUSION

Contradictory signs are emanating from Lebanon. On the one hand, the cycle of destabilising violence and inflammatory rhetoric resumed with the 19 September 2007 assassination of a March 14 member of parliament, Antoine Ghanem. March 14 forces, echoed by Washington and Paris, immediately saw Syria's hand. The Lebanese majority accused Damascus of seeking to erase its parliamentary advantage through the step-by-step physical elimination of legislators; the French foreign minister cancelled a scheduled meeting with his Syrian counterpart, explaining he was "extremely shocked by this latest assassination".¹⁸⁴ Saad al-Hariri went further, saying the regime in Syria would never stop its killings, because "it is their way", and concluding that "the solution is not in getting rid of the regime of Saddam only, but of the regime of Bashar also".¹⁸⁵ Militias also are rearming at an alarming pace, particularly among the various (and rival) Christian groups.

On the other hand, prospects remain for a deal on the most urgent task, electing a new president. Even after the assassination, voices from both sides express hope that a compromise can be found, while external actors (France, Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular) appear eager to find a way out by focusing on a consensual candidate rather than one that perfectly suits their agenda.¹⁸⁶ The initiative, spearheaded by Nabih Berri – in which the opposition would drop its demand for a national unity government at this stage on condition the parties agree on a consensus candidate by a two-thirds majority – was welcomed by parties across the political spectrum.¹⁸⁷ It also certainly

had Syria's benediction, as it is hard to imagine Berri launching such a high-profile initiative otherwise. Contacts between majority and opposition have redoubled.

The relative softening of the opposition's position has several potential explanations. It may simply reflect that there is no more utility in a unity government, since a new government will be appointed after the election. The opposition also may have concluded its alternative strategy – blocking the election and, if the March 14 forces elected a president by simple majority, creating parallel government institutions – was too risky: such a government would have scant authority and likely be recognised only by Syria and Iran, thus underscoring its isolation; any resulting chaos would be extremely costly to Hizbollah and, by extension, Iran. A Western diplomat even saw in this a skilful Syrian move: "Through Berri's initiative, Syria maintains a veto on the president. At the end of the day, it could get a president it is comfortable with, a subsequent government with a strong opposition presence and accolades from the international community for its cooperation".¹⁸⁸ As a result, and as former Prime Minister Najib Mikati put it, "finding a solution used to be an impossible mission. It has now become merely a difficult one".¹⁸⁹

Beyond identifying an acceptable president, of course, any solution will have to deal with the issue of Hizbollah's weapons, which can be neither fully resolved (disarmament currently is unachievable) nor wholly ignored (too many local and regional actors fear the movement's military power). Rather, it needs to be addressed in a manner that take into account the fact that one part of the nation sees these weapons as a shield and the other as a threat.

Hizbollah faces its own dilemma. To protect its weapons and vision of Lebanon's regional role, it has chosen to take on the government; by doing so, it deepens sectarian rifts, and by deepening sectarian rifts, it endangers both its weapons and its vision. This presents an opportunity. By most accounts, the movement is seeking a way out of the impasse to which it heavily contributed. It will not do so at any price. It will not sacrifice its weapons (certainly not

¹⁸⁴ *Naharnet*, 27 September 2007. Asked whether his government had evidence of Syria's involvement, a French diplomat replied: "No evidence. No doubt". Crisis Group interview, New York, 26 September 2007. The opposition and Syria rejected the charge, arguing the murder aimed at torpedoing Nabih Berri's initiative to find a compromise candidate.

¹⁸⁵ *Naharnet*, 27 September 2007.

¹⁸⁶ According to a March 14 leader, Walid Jumblatt, Riyadh is pressing Hariri to accept a compromise presidential candidate. Jumblatt did not conceal his distaste at this prospect, arguing that only an "independent" president willing to defend Lebanon against Syria could protect the spirit of the Cedar Revolution. He warned he would not back a decision by March 14 to elect a president unwilling to rid Lebanon of any remaining Syrian influence. "We have to hold firm, and we cannot betray our ideals, our independence-minded positions or the people who believe in them. Only by being steadfast can we win; any compromise risks placing Lebanon in a Persian sphere or an Iranian-Syrian axis". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 17 September 2007.

¹⁸⁷ This represents an opposition reversal. In July and August 2007, according to both Saudi and French sources, an attempt to convince Lebanese parties to give the opposition a blocking

minority in a national unity government while simultaneously agreeing on a presidential candidate failed when Hizbollah – echoing views heard in Damascus and Tehran – stipulated it would consider the presidential elections only after the new government was formed. This was unacceptable to March 14 forces, which feared the presidential question would remain unresolved, and by bringing down the government, the opposition could create an institutional vacuum. Crisis Group interviews, Saudi and French officials, Riyadh and Paris, July-August 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, New York, 26 September 2007.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Najib Mikati, Beirut, 13 September 2007.

while sectarian fears and regional tensions are rising),¹⁹⁰ the principle of the resistance or its alliance with Syria and Iran, which is rooted in material necessity and ideological proximity. A peaceful solution that allows Lebanon once again to govern itself, therefore, will have to take account of those interests, while simultaneously curbing Hizbollah's freedom of action.

Proposals advanced by local actors, the French and other international as well as local mediators include important elements of a possible package deal. A formula based on these would entail:

- agreement that the president must be chosen by consensus, i.e., by two thirds of the parliament. This is important because the alternative – a president elected by a simple majority – could lead the opposition, as it has threatened, to establish a parallel government. It would be a major concession to the opposition, in return for which the opposition would need to agree with the March 14 forces on a suitable president; and
- adoption of a government platform that addresses the needs of all sides. Such a platform would reiterate the preceding government's endorsement of the principle of resistance (on a temporary basis) in order to achieve national goals (release of Lebanese prisoners and liberation of Lebanese land), while imposing strict constraints on its use. Hizbollah would agree to take a strictly defensive posture and to suspend military actions in the Shebaa Farms in order to give diplomacy a chance.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ In an interview with Crisis Group, a Hizbollah leader made this point clearly, emphasising the risks of raising the disarmament question at this time. He complained bitterly about army confiscation of weapons "at Siniora's request", in violation, he claimed, of the government program recognising the legitimacy of armed resistance. Some analysts argue that pressure on Hizbollah to disarm would significantly increase if some of its grievances with Israel were addressed, such as restitution of the Shebaa Farms, the release of prisoners or the end of Israeli overflights. They have a point; such steps certainly would make Hizbollah's arguments less tenable. But they are unlikely to lead it to lay down its arms. These "direct threats" – as Mustafa al-Hajj Ali, a member of Hizbollah's political council calls them – are one thing; just as important are the "indirect threats", which include Israel's "inherently expansionist nature". In other words, justification for Hizbollah's armed status also has to do with maintaining the "front of refusal" and resisting both Israeli and U.S. so-called hegemonic aspirations. Crisis Group interview, Mustafa al-Hajj Ali, Beirut, 23 July 2007. Timor Goksel added: "Since 2000, Hizbollah knows that justifications for the resistance are becoming increasingly weak. So it hangs on to the arguments it has. Today, it is the Shebaa Farms. But if that problem were resolved, they would find other causes: water, the Palestinian issue, something else". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 16 August 2007.

¹⁹¹ Interestingly, Syria recently indicated that it was prepared to

In other words, Hizbollah needs to be made publicly accountable for its weapons use, avoid what its opponents label the "adventurism" of July 2006 and focus on a deterrence strategy. Although reticent, some Hizbollah leaders expressed willingness to Crisis Group to consider such a formula in the framework of a unity government that recognised the legitimacy of the resistance until such time as a national defence strategy has been adopted.¹⁹²

Moreover, the platform would call for peaceful relations with Syria, including normal diplomatic ties, delineation of boundaries and resolution of the question of Lebanese disappeared. Finally, it would call for respect for international law, in particular the tribunal established by the Security Council for dealing with the Hariri assassination and Resolution 1701.

Given the depth of the political crisis and the need to strengthen the legitimacy of state institutions, the government also should focus on two important tasks. The first is to ratify a new electoral law that would be more equitable toward minority groups.¹⁹³ The second is to reappoint members of the constitutional council in order to minimise the risk of institutional paralysis in the event of conflicting constitutional interpretations. Its mandate should be as prescribed by the Taef Accords: interpreting the constitution, reviewing the constitutionality of laws and ruling on disputes involving challenges to presidential or parliamentary elections.

There should be no illusion. Even these ambitious steps would only scratch the surface and, at best, offer Lebanon a chance for greater calm and resumed effective governance. It is impossible today to disentangle the Lebanese question from the question of U.S./Israeli/Iranian/Syrian relations. At best, one can try to immunise the country from the regional confrontation's most destabilising and costly effects.

Beirut/Brussels, 10 October 2007

have the UN take custody of the Shebaa Farms as an interim measure – a stance that, if confirmed, could provide an important opening. *Haaretz*, 26 September 2007.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah leader, Beirut, 17 September 2007. Naim Qasem called for "a national defence plan that would turn the Lebanese army into the central pillar of Lebanon's forces; in that context, the resistance would be in a back-up position. *Al-Nahar*, 27 September 2007. Nabih Berri, speaking on behalf of Amal, said: "The southern borders are not only for Shiites, Amal or Hizbollah. They alone cannot be in charge or national decisions or impose their veto on strategic decisions". Transcript obtained by Crisis Group from Amal foreign relations office, Beirut.

¹⁹³ One option would be the electoral law recommended by the government-appointed Boutros commission that would combine winner-take-all and proportional representation systems.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF LEBANON



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