A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship

Abbas William Samii

Iran and Syria were instrumental in the creation of Lebanese Hizbullah 25 years ago, and although all three actors have faced significant outside pressures during that time, their relationship has endured. Yet the relationship has evolved, too, with Hizbullah now a major player in Lebanese politics due to its constituent outreach and its maintenance of a militia that rivals the national army. This article examines the evolutionary process and assesses its implications for policymakers.

Israeli and American officials expressed a great deal of concern over Iranian and Syrian assistance to Lebanese Hizbullah during its Summer 2006 war with Israel. There were not only allegations that Tehran was supplying Hizbullah — which the US government classifies as a foreign terrorist organization — with weapons and other military supplies, there also were claims that Iranian personnel were fighting on Hizbullah's behalf. There were even accusations that Tehran directed Hizbullah to act in order to distract attention from its suspicious nuclear program. There was little publicly available evidence to support such allegations: Hizbullah denied that it was acting on any but its own behalf, and Tehran and Damascus also rejected the accusations.

However, the accusations persisted after the war. A top US State Department official testified before Congress in April 2007: "Hizbullah and its allies, with support from Syria and Iran, have mounted a growing campaign to overthrow Lebanon's legitimate, elected Government."[1] The official went on to say that this campaign has "effectively paralyzed the Lebanese Government and is further eroding the Lebanese economy." In an apparent reference to the bloody civil war that began in 1975 and continued for some 15 years, he warned of "growing concerns about a return of civil conflict."

Many Lebanese political figures have voiced similar concerns over the years, but Hizbullah consistently has denied that it is an instrument of Iranian or Syrian policy. Indeed, categorization of Hizbullah is not straightforward — in its two-and-a-half decade existence Hizbullah has gone from being a marginalized group of radicals to having members serve in the cabinet and the legislature, while simultaneously maintaining an armed militia. Yet Hizbullah could not have reached its current level of significance without the support of Iran and Syria, and the July 2007 meeting in Damascus between Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nas-

The author is an analyst with the US Department of State. Views expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of the State Department or the US government. Previously, the author was a member of the Project Iran team at the Center for Naval Analyses, and before that he was an analyst at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc. Ken Gause, Michael Eisenstadt, and Alan Eyre made very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article, but any errors are the author's responsibility.

1. US Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David C. Welch, testimony before the US House of Representative's Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, April 18, 2007, http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/wel041807.htm.

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rallah demonstrates that strong ties continue to exist.[2]

This article analyzes the relationship among Hizbullah, Iran, and Syria, and it examines the roles of Tehran and Damascus in the Lebanese organization's decision-making and actions. The research reveals strong military and financial ties, as well as ideological and political connections, which appear to preclude any sort of serious or lasting break in the relationship. Nevertheless, the relationship among the three actors has evolved and it is not accurate to describe Hizbullah as an Iranian or Syrian proxy. Indeed, it would be more useful to consider Hizbullah as an autonomous actor in the Lebanese context and shape US policy accordingly. Internationally, Hizbullah worked closely with Iran for many years, but it is far from clear if this is still the case, even though they appear to have shared interests in some circumstances. In terms of sources, this article relies on Iranian, Lebanese, Syrian, and other regional broadcast and print media, statements from leaders of Hizbullah, Iran, and Syria, and the work of Middle East scholars.[3]

ORIGINS OF HIZBULLAH, IRAN, AND SYRIA RELATIONS

With the exception of some powerful and wealthy families, Shi'a Muslims traditionally made up the Lebanese underclass. This marginalization was cemented into law with the founding of the Lebanese state in 1943 and the implementation of the confessional system in which the Shi'a were guaranteed the third most important political office — the speaker of parliament — after the presidency (which went to a Maronite Christian) and the premiership (a Sunni Muslim).

Clerical Activism and Military Training

The evolution of this situation — and the eventual creation of Hizbullah — can be traced to the 1960s and the activities of several Shi'a clerics.[4] One was Imam Musa Sadr (1928-1978), an Iranian-born cleric who moved to Lebanon in 1960 and gained great popularity through his outreach efforts and social activism. In 1975 Sadr acknowledged creating a militia called Amal (*Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya*, Lebanese Resis-

2. Al-Arabiyah television, July 19, 2007, translation by Open Source Center (OSC), reference number GMP20070719648002; Ziad Haidar, "Iranian President Visits Syria," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2007; Ibrahim Humaydi, "Ahmadinejad Informs Palestinian Factions' Leaders in Damascus: He Who Wagers on America Makes a Grave Mistake," *Al-Hayat*, July 21, 2007 (OSC, GMP20070721825001).

3. Among the many commendable works on Hizbullah are: Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In The Path Of Hizbullah* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005); Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Richard A. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Sheikh Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah* (London: Saqi Books, 2005); Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); and Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). For an early assessment of the Hizbullah-Syria-Iran relationship, see Yaakov Amirdor, "The Hizbullah-Syria-Iran Triangle," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (March 2007).

4. Qassem, *Hizbullah*, pp. 14-17.

tance Battalions). In addition to propounding the activism for which Hizbullah came to be known, he also enunciated concepts to which Hizbullah adheres, such as hostility to Israel's existence.

Another influential cleric was Shaykh Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, who was born in the holy Iraqi city of Najaf in 1935 and moved to Lebanon, where his family originated, in 1966. He preached, and also established schools and orphanages, throughout Lebanon. Fadlallah was involved with the development of Hizbullah's ideology and his views continue be similar to those of the organization, but he consistently denies formal involvement with the organization.[5]

Despite the efforts of these individuals, Shi'a political activism was fairly limited when the Lebanese Civil War began in the late 1970s. It was at this time that Israel first invaded Lebanon, although many cross-border incursions had taken place already. Israeli forces invaded in 1978 and again in 1982. The 1982 invasion displaced thousands of Lebanese Shi'a and led to the deaths of thousands of others. Many of those who fled southern Lebanon ended up in Palestinian refugee camps or in urban slums. Events during the civil war radicalized the Lebanese Shi'a.

Although it took place hundreds of miles away, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran had an impact on Lebanon. Some of the Iranian revolutionaries had undergone training in Lebanon in the late 1960s and in the 1970s; members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon conducted much of the training, but connections with Amal also existed. Lebanese clerics, furthermore, had studied in Najaf and Qom with Iranian counterparts who would later be involved with the revolution.

The revolutionary leader in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had made his sympathies known as well. In a February 1978 speech he complained that the US and UK created Israel as a means of harming the Shi'a and had reduced Lebanon to "its present miserable state."[6] He declared in a September 1979 speech, "Israel, that cancerous tumor in the Middle East [is] battering and slaughtering our dear Palestinian and Lebanese brothers."[7] And in a March 1980 speech marking the Iranian New Year, Khomeini announced, "I declare my support for the people of occupied Palestine and Lebanon."[8]

The new Iranian constitution (adopted in 1979) mandated the revolutionary regime's involvement with the Lebanese Shi'a. Article 3 asserts that the government is

5. Fadlallah's support is important to Hizbullah. Fadlallah telephoned his congratulations to Nasrallah for the latter's survival of an alleged assassination attempt in April 2006, and he congratulated Nasrallah again after Hizbullah's kidnapping of Israeli troops in July 2006; see Ali al-Musawi, "Al-Huss Condemns the Conspiracy that Targeted Nasrallah and Cautions against Sedition; Arrest Warrants Issued for Members of the Terrorist Network and the Six Fugitives," *Al-Safir*, April 12, 2006 (OSC, GMP20060412511006), and Al-Manar television, July 12, 2006 (OSC, GMP20060712649001). Nasrallah and Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem have visited Fadlallah occasionally in recent years; see, for example, Qasim Qasir, "In the Hope of Reinforcing the Moderate Trends to Protect Islamic Unity, Untraditional Warmth Emerges in the Relationship between Fadlallah and Each of Hizbullah and Iran," *Al-Mustaqbal*, June 10, 2006 (OSC, GMP20060611611002), and Lebanese National News Agency (LNNA), October 20, 2006 (OSC, GMP20061020647001).

6. *Islam and Revolution – Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 214.

7. Algar, *Islam and Revolution,* p. 276.

8. Algar, *Islam and Revolution,* p. 287.

duty-bound to provide "unsparing support to the dispossessed of the world," and Article 154 says that the government "supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe."

It was around this time — in 1980 — that the son of Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri, who eventually was designated Khomeini's successor, announced that personnel from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) were awaiting deployment from Damascus, and in June 1981 — before the second Israeli invasion — the Iranian legislature voted to dispatch IRGC personnel to fight against Israel in southern Lebanon.[9] Iranian military officials visited Damascus in mid-1982 to coordinate, and the Syrian regime allowed the Iranians to establish training camps in the western Biqa' Valley.[10]

In fact, the Iranian role was far more extensive than the provision of military training. According to Hojatoleslam Ali-Akbar Mohtashami-Pur, Iranian Ambassador to Damascus from 1982-1986, hundreds of Guards Corps members had come to Lebanon by 1982.[11] At that point, Ayatollah Khomeini objected that sending the Iranians to Lebanon was impractical, and it would be more efficient to "prepare and equip them [the Lebanese] to defend their own country against Israel and to retrieve what is the right of the people of Palestine and Lebanon." Thus commenced the training of Hizbullah, Mohtashami-Pur explained, adding that Hizbullah personnel also underwent training in Iran and participated in the 1980-1988 war against Iraq.

The Iranians who came to Lebanon in the early 1980s did not restrict themselves to military activities. Among the Revolutionary Guards were clerics who tried to indoctrinate the Lebanese in the religio-political theories of Ayatollah Khomeini and who engaged in recruitment among Biqa' Valley Shi'a.[12] The Iranians distributed money and worked with prominent local clerics, including Shaykh Abbas Musawi and Shaykh Sobhi Tufayli.

Iran's Centrality in Hizbullah Ideology

Military activities were just one aspect of Iranian involvement in Lebanon, but early efforts to advance Ayatollah Khomeini's religio-political views through contacts with Amal had not borne fruit. Meanwhile, splits among Lebanese Shi'a had emerged, after the political leadership of Amal, represented by Nabih Berri, and the more religious members of the organization — some of whom would go on to leadership positions in Hizbullah — disagreed on how to fight Israel and on the necessity of alliances with Maronite Christians. Some of the Iranian personnel who remained in Lebanon

9. Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon,* p. 33.

10. Qassem, *Hizbullah,* p. 20. Mohsen Rafiqdust, who had pre-revolutionary experience in Lebanon, led the first IRGC contingent. Rafiqdust would go on to head the short-lived IRGC Ministry, but he continued to visit Lebanon frequently because he was responsible for supplying the IRGC contingent. He later headed the Oppressed and Disabled Foundation and now heads the Nur Foundation. One of Rafiqdust's successors is 'Ali Reza Asgari, who disappeared during a February 2007 trip to Turkey amidst allegations that he defected or was kidnapped. Another one, Hussein Dehqan, serves in the administration of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad as Vice-President for Martyrs and War Veterans Affairs, and he heads the Martyrs Foundation, which funds Hizbullah.

11. Mohtashami-Pur interview with Akbar Montajebi, *Sharq*, August 3, 2006.

12. Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon,* pp. 34-35.

after the main IRGC contingent departed helped create the committee that would serve as Hizbullah's first decision-making council (this would eventually become the *Majlis al-Shura*).[13]

The committee's final document, the so-called Manifesto of the Nine, was submitted to the leader of Iran's revolution, Khomeini. Khomeini approved the document, thereby enshrining the theocratic concept of Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult (*Vilayat-i Faqih*) for the Lebanese Shi'a.[14]

The intellectual pillars of Hizbullah were belief in Islam, Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult, and jihad (holy war). The Supreme Jurisconsult's nationality is irrelevant, meaning the Lebanese Shi'a could follow an Iranian, and commitment to him does not preclude working with other Lebanese groups. Therefore, Hizbullah must operate within a Lebanese context and in accord with Lebanese realities, and involvement with pan-Islamic issues does not conflict with nationalist concerns.[15]

Jihad could be a struggle with one's own soul or struggle against an enemy. Hizbullah views defensive jihad — Muslims' defense against aggression or occupation — as a duty. It is up to the jurist-theologian (the *Vali-yi Faqih*) to determine when jihad is required.[16] It is in this context that martyrdom operations (suicide bombings) were deemed acceptable, although Fadlallah would eventually rule against them unless they caused a sufficient number of Israeli casualties. Ahmad Kassir — who on November 11, 1982 drove an explosive-laden car into an Israeli outpost in Tyre and killed or wounded more than 100 people — is described as the "pioneer" in this kind of attack.[17]

It would be another three years — February 16, 1985 — before the release of what is widely considered to be Hizbullah's founding document: The Open Letter Addressed by Hizbullah to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World.[18] This document is built on the earlier manifesto and enunciates Hizbullah's ideology. For the purposes of this article, what is most noteworthy is the leadership role assigned to Iran. According to the Open Letter:

> We, the sons of Hizbullah's nation, whose vanguard God has given victory in Iran and which has established the nucleus of the world's central Islamic state, abide by the orders of a single wise and just command currently embodied in the supreme

13. Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion,* p. 15.

14. Qassem, *Hizbullah,* p. 20. In the early stages of his opposition to the Iranian monarchy, Khomeini advocated that the regime discard its secularization policies and reform itself, and he accepted temporal rule if it was just. His views hardened over time, and the concept of *Vilayat-i Faqih* was spelled out in a 1971 book — *Islamic Government* (*Hukumat-i Islami*) — that was based on lectures he gave in Najaf in January-February 1970. Khomeini argued that all the rules for administering a government are contained in Islam, and the Qu'ran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad suffice as the constitution. The individual with the greatest expertise in Islamic law — the *Faqih* — is therefore the most suitable ruler. See *Islam and Revolution Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980)*, pp. 27-149.

15. Qassem, *Hizbullah,* p. 57.

16. Qassem, *Hizbullah,* p. 39.

17. Qassem, *Hizbullah,* p. 49.

18. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Hizbullah Issues 'Open Letter' on Goals, Principles," *Near East South Asia Report*, JPRS-NEA-85-056, April 19, 1985.

Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini.

The letter cites Khomeini's view that "America is the reason for all our catastrophes and source of all malice." The letter identifies France, Maronite Christians, the Phalange, Israel, and Arab states that cooperate with Israel as its other enemies. In terminology reminiscent of Khomeini's, the letter describes the conclusion of Israel's occupation of Lebanon as a "prelude to its final obliteration from existence," describes Israel as "the ulcerous growth of world Zionism," and adds, "our confrontation of this entity must end with its obliteration from existence." The letter also condemns Arab regimes siding with President Saddam Husayn's Iraq in its war against Iran.

The letter bore a "distinctive made-in-Tehran coloration," a noted scholar of Lebanese affairs writes, and "is reliably reported to have been written by an Iranian who is today [in 2000] very much in the pro-Khatami reform movement."[19] The "inextricable link" between *Vilayat-i Faqih*, the Iranian state, and the Islamic revolution "consecrate" the relationship between Hizbullah and Iran, another scholar asserts.[20]

Iranian officials' participation in the key decision-making bodies of Hizbullah contributed to this closeness. Hizbullah's 17-member Majlis al-Shura, which was created by Iran's Ayatollah Fazlollah Mahallati — a top figure in the IRGC contingent — and which did not hold regular meetings until May 1986, included "one or two" IRGC representatives or officials from the Iranian embassies in Beirut or Damascus.[21] The Majlis al-Shura continues to include at least one IRGC official.

Moreover, the council's membership included Hizbullah figures with close ties to the Iranian clergy. Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, for example, was a student of Khomeini's.[22] Nasrallah and Shaykh Sobhi Tufayli, both of whom would serve later as Hizbullah's Secretary-General, were close to Mohtashami-Pur, the Iranian Ambassador in Damascus, whereas the Iranian rubbed Fadlallah the wrong way.[23]

A Troubled Relationship with Syria

In practical terms, Syria was the dominant partner in the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria relationship during the 1980s. Syria benefited from proximity and control of a major land border with Lebanon, giving it the power to impede Iran's direct contacts with and

19. Augustus Richard Norton, "Hizbullah and the Israeli Withdrawal From Southern Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn 2000), p. 26.

20. Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion,* p. 71.

21. Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon,* p. 45.

22. Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon,* p. 46.

23. Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon,* p. 79. There are occasional rumors of a rift between Fadlallah and Tehran. For example, in early 2003 Fadlallah said that his leadership position among the Shi'a community is causing discomfort in Iran, and he complained of character assassination in which he is accused of hostility to the Shi'a faith and the line of the Prophet Muhammad's family; "Fadlallah: Hizbullah Decided to Follow Iranian Authority, Oppose My Authority with Various Means," *Al-Hayah*, January 25, 2003. Three-and-a-half years later a Lebanese newspaper described "untraditional warmth, which is unprecedented in almost ten years" between Fadlallah, Hizbullah, and Tehran, suggesting an earlier cold spell; Qasim Qasir, "In the Hope of Reinforcing the Moderate Trends to Protect Islamic Unity, Untraditional Warmth Emerges in the Relationship between Fadlallah and Each of Hizbullah and Iran," *Al-Mustaqbal*, June 10, 2006.

provision of supplies to Hizbullah. Moreover, Syrian forces' occupation of Lebanon could be traced to June 1976, when Lebanon's then-President Suleiman Frangieh invited them to enter the country to enforce a cease-fire in the civil war. Finally, Damascus saw Lebanon as part of a Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) that included Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories. Syria's status allowed it to constrain the activities of its partners.

According to Hizbullah Deputy Secretary-General Shaykh Na'im Qassem: "It is only natural that Hizbullah's views concur with those of Syria, for no one is safe from Israel's ambitions."[24] He goes on to say that Hizbullah's relationship with Damascus is not "mandatory or accidental," rather it is based on regional realities — including close Tehran-Damascus relations — and has "so far proven its utility and necessity."[25] In contrast with the praise heaped on Iran by Hizbullah leaders in the past and the support they give Tehran today, these observations come across as a grudging concession borne of necessity.

Links between Syria's President Hafiz al-Asad and Iran preceded the 1979 Islamic Revolution and involved Lebanon. Iranian revolutionaries were put in contact with Damascus through Imam Musa al-Sadr, who had recognized Syria's ruling 'Alawite minority as Shi'a Muslims and effectively legitimized their rule. After the March 1979 Camp David Accords and the emergence of the so-called moderate camp of Arab states, Asad began a quest for external allies. Damascus even approached Baghdad, but this floundered due to continuing intra-Ba'thist rivalries, competition over the Euphrates River's resources, personal hostility between Asad and Iraq's Saddam Husayn, and questions over dominance in the relationship. Contributing to Syria's difficulties were a global oil glut and a fall in oil revenues, a drought that lasted several years and caused serious damage to the agricultural sector, and a reduction in Soviet military aid connected with the drawing down of the Cold War. Asad therefore turned to Iran due to perceived mutual interests, particularly after the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980.[26]

It would have been very difficult for Iranian aid to reach Hizbullah or other Shi'a activists without assistance from Syria, particularly when Syrian forces occupied Lebanon. Indeed, Syria viewed the emergence of Amal and Hizbullah and Lebanese opposition to the Israeli presence in the country as desirable. One scholar referred to Hizbullah as "another arrow in Assad's quiver."[27] In the early 1980s, therefore, Damascus permitted the establishment of an Iranian base in the Syrian town of Zabadani, close to the border, and permitted the transit of IRGC personnel to the Biqa' Valley. The Iranian Embassy in Damascus played a major role in the relationship, and Ambassador Mohtashami-Pur's main contact was Brigadier-General Ghazi Kan'an, the chief of Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) in Lebanon.[28] Although SMI worked closely with

24. Qassem, *Hizbullah,* p. 242.

25. Qassem, *Hizbullah,* p. 243.

26. David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 40-42.

27. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, p. 48.

28. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus,* p. 28. Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 88. Kanaan came to be seen as the kingmaker of Lebanese affairs.

Hizbullah, both Iran and Syria denied involvement in the Islamic Jihad Organization's (IJO is a cover name Hizbullah used in the 1980s) suicide bombings in Beirut at the US Embassy (April 1983), as well as the US Marine barracks and the French paratrooper compound (October 1983).[29]

While Syria facilitated Hizbullah activities on some occasions in the 1980s, at other times it prevented them in order to avoid escalating tensions with Israel. There also were occasions when the Syrians or their allies in Amal clashed directly with Hizbullah. In one such case, three Hizbullah members and two Syrian soldiers were killed in a May 1986 shootout when the Syrians tried to rescue hostages from the Shaykh 'Abdallah Barracks. Hizbullah then kidnapped two Syrian officers, and the Syrians reacted by detaining several Hizbullah members. The two sides released their hostages, but ten more people were wounded the next day, after the Syrians blocked all the roads into and out of Baalbek. Another case arose after Hizbullah's February 1988 kidnapping of the US Marine Corps' Lieutenant Colonel William Higgins. Syria's allies in Amal detained many Hizbullah activists in a fruitless search, and Amal leader Nabih Berri criticized Iranian interference in Lebanese affairs. A video of Higgins' hanging was released a year-and-a-half after the kidnapping, and he officially was declared dead in July 1990 (his remains were recovered in December 1991). Meanwhile, Amal-Hizbullah clashes continued, and in April 1988 Amal managed to expel Hizbullah activists and IRGC members from the south. Clearly, Syria was more interested in its conflict with Israel and in controlling Lebanon than it was in supporting Hizbullah's agenda.

Iran Rescues the Hizbullah-Syria Relationship

Tehran dispatched officials to Beirut in April 1988 in an effort to repair relations between Amal and Hizbullah and to reestablish Hizbullah's southern presence.[30] Amal and Hizbullah clashed again, and Amal leader Nabih Berri accused Iran's Ambassador to Beirut, Ahmad Dastmalchian, of inflaming tensions.[31] The next month, Amal tried to eliminate the Hizbullah presence in southern Beirut, and Syrian Military Intelligence's Ghazi Kan'an and Nabih Berri called for the withdrawal of militia forces and their replacement by Syrian troops. Hizbullah had succeeded in regaining ground and therefore rejected this proposal. When Kan'an threatened to intervene in order to save Amal from elimination, Iran's President 'Ali Khamene'i called on Damascus to resolve the situation.[32] By mid-May, personnel from the IRGC, Syrian military, Hizbullah, and Amal were monitoring a ceasefire in the southern suburbs.

Tehran and Damascus were eager to see calm restored because they feared an

29. Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon,* p. 71. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran,* p. 94 and p. 144.

30. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran,* p. 263.

31. Dastmalchian came to Lebanon in 1987 and later served as ambassador in 'Amman and chargé in Riyadh. "Based on Dastmalchian's background — he served during 1987-90 in Lebanon, where he helped funnel Iranian assistance to Hizbullah — the Jordanians reportedly hesitated to accept his assignment to Amman, fearful he would back Islamist extremists in their country and funnel aid to Hamas;" Ken Katzman, "Hamas's Foreign Benefactors," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 1995). Later ambassadors in Beirut included Muhammad Ali Sobhani, and his successor Masud Edrisi-Kermanshahi.

32. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran,* p. 266.

adverse impact on their bilateral relations, but their goals were at odds. Tehran wanted to see Hizbullah's status in the south restored, ideally so it could fight Israel, whereas Damascus was only willing to tolerate Hizbullah in southern Beirut.[33] Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas wanted to send troops to Beirut to restore calm by force, but Kanaan dissuaded him by warning of the ensuing bloodbath and the possible end of Damascus-Tehran relations. Intensive negotiations involving the Iranians, Syrians, Hizbullah, and Amal took place, and by early June 1988 the situation was resolved.

The October 1989 Ta'if Accords effectively ended the civil war and left Syria as the dominant power in Lebanon. The accords called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Beirut to the Biqa' Valley within two years, but Damascus redeployed just a few of its estimated 35,000 troops. Damascus justified its refusal to comply with this aspect of the agreement by saying that the Lebanese government could not bring about an end to the Israeli occupation of the south.[34] Ta'if also brought about an amended Lebanese National Accord (which serves as the country's constitution) that took into consideration the growth in size and influence of the Shi'a population, although it called for the disarming of all militias.

In the ensuing years, Syria used Hizbullah as a proxy force through formal and informal rules it negotiated with Israel.[35] Syria's objective was to reduce the risk to its own forces when Hizbullah acted against the Israelis in southern Lebanon.[36] In July 1993, for example, Hizbullah launched Katyusha rockets into Israel after Israeli artillery hit Lebanese villages. Israel retaliated with airstrikes against Syrian positions in the Biqa' Valley and the expulsion of Lebanese villagers from the south. An informal agreement between Israel and Lebanon ended the Hizbullah attacks in exchange for an end to the airstrikes. A similar escalation led to Israel's Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996, and a written but unsigned document created a monitoring group and conflict resolution mechanism. Iran and Syria, as well as France, Israel, and the US, were active in the diplomacy that brought about the April Understanding of 1996, through which Israel would not target Lebanese civilians or their facilities, and Hizbullah would not target Israeli civilians.[37]

LEBANONIZATION — HIZBULLAH JOINS THE MAINSTREAM

The 1989 Ta'if Accords coincided with a debate within Hizbullah over its objectives and the desirability of turning Lebanon into an Islamic state. These events came on the heels of Ayatollah Khomeini's death in June and the resulting debate among Iranian leaders over the desirability of a more pragmatic foreign policy course.

It was only after an "extraordinary conclave" in Tehran in October 1989 that Hizbullah decided to go along with the multi-confessional system described in the accords.[38] At this conclave a more radical faction called for increased party discipline and

33. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran,* p. 267.

34. Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial By Fire* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), p. 239.

35. Leverett, *Inheriting Syria,* p. 43.

36. Leverett, *Inheriting Syria,* pp. 239-240, fn. 87.

37. Norton, "Hizbullah and the Israeli Withdrawal From Southern Lebanon," p. 29.

38. Graham Usher, "Hizbullah, Syria, and The Lebanese Elections," *Journal of Palestine Studies*,

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advocated "perpetual" jihad against opponents of an Islamic Lebanon (this group was connected with Iran's 'Ali Akbar Mohtashami-Pur and controlled the Western hostages in Lebanon).[39] The faction that came out on top, however, advocated integration with the multi-confessional system, a position allegedly shared by Iran's President 'Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Shaykh Fadlallah.[40] Hizbullah, therefore, opted to seek the status of a legal party that would "support the resistance in the south and seek to abolish all forms of political sectarianism in Lebanon."[41]

Public Services and Reconstruction

The Lebanese government's inability to provide adequate public services during the civil war led citizens to turn to the local militias, such as the Christian Lebanese Forces and the Druze Socialist and Progressive Party (PSP). In the Shi'a community, Imam Musa Sadr had focused on public needs as early as the 1960s, and clerics throughout the country were running orphanages and performing other philanthropic acts. Iran began to aid these organizations in the early 1980s, and a network emerged as they adopted the Hizbullah name.[42]

Iranian support — with the extensive involvement of parastatal charitable foundations — remains considerable in Hizbullah's focus on building hospitals and schools, as well as aiding widows, orphans, and the disabled. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (*Komite-yi Imdad-i Imam*) opened a branch in Beirut in 1982, and its head described donating more than $96 million to Lebanon through Hizbullah from 1988-2002.[43] Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged in a June 2000 interview with the *Al-Ayyam* daily that Iran's Martyrs Foundation (*Bonyad-i Shahid*) has a Lebanese branch that is one of his organization's sources of finance.[44]

After the 2006 conflict with Israel, the leader of Hizbullah military operations in the south said the organization would pay a year's rent for those who lost their homes.[45] "We have to thank the friendly Arab countries that will help us, with Iran and Syria topping the list," he added. Another Hizbullah official acknowledged receiving money from Iran's Supreme Leader.[46] He explained that the global Shi'a community tithed the

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Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter 1997), p. 63. See also, Nizar Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Hizbullah: From Islamic Revolution to Parliamentary Accommodation," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1993), pp. 323-24.

39. Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Hizbullah," p. 324.

40. Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Hizbullah," p. 323, 325.

41. Hizbullah parliamentarian Mohammad Raad, cited in Usher, "Hizbullah, Syria, and The Lebanese Elections," p. 63.

42. Judith Harik, "Hizbullah's Public and Social Services and Iran," in Houchang E. Chehabi, ed., *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in The Last 500 Years* (Oxford and London: The Center for Lebanese Studies and I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 265.

43. Seyyed Reza Nayyeri, cited in "Imam Khomeyni Relief Committee Supports Poor, Hizbullah," *Open Source Center Analysis*, GMF20060127388001, January 27, 2006.

44. "Bonyad-e Shahid Supports Martyrs' Families, Hizbullah," *Open Source Center Feature*, FEA20051223015617, December 23, 2005.

45. Interview with Shaykh Nabil Qawuq, author identified as "f. caf.", "'We Will Cooperate, but Without Handing In Our Weapons,'" *La Repubblica*, August 17, 2006 (OSC, EUP20060817058010).

46. Bilal Naim, "Hizbullah Official: Our Institutions Are Financed by Iran from Khamenei's 'Sha-

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money to Ayatollah Khamene'i.

Key to this post-war reconstruction effort was the *Jihad al-Bina*, established in 1988 as a construction company with the express purpose of reconstruction and meeting public needs, such as clean water and garbage collection. Jihad al-Bina receives "direct funding from Iran," according to the US Treasury Department."[47] Not only do entities such as the Jihad al-Bina explicitly support Hizbullah military activities in the south, but they identify with the Iranian revolution.[48] In some cases, the NGOs are branches of ones based in Iran, reporting to Iran and adopting policies dictated from Iran.

Participating in Elections

The other aspect of Hizbullah's "Lebanonization" entailed participation in elections. This was not a smooth process, however, as Shaykh Sobhi Tufayli headed a minority opposing participation on the grounds that it would lead to cooptation and the loss of ideals.[49] Nevertheless, competing in the August-September 1992 legislative race paid off for Hizbullah, and in a grudging alliance with Amal and the PSP, eight Hizbullah members were elected to the 128-seat legislature.

Damascus influenced Hizbullah's role in the 1996 elections. Amal's Nabih Berri had tried to impose candidates on Hizbullah and also limit the number of seats available to it. Hassan Nasrallah responded by announcing at a rally that the party would field independent candidates to run in the south. Within a week both Berri and Nasrallah were

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riah Fund,'" *Al-Hayah*, December 15, 2006 (OSC, GMP20070130825018).

47. "Treasury Designates Hizbullah's Construction Arm," US Department of Treasury, http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp271.htm, February 20, 2007. Iran's Bank Saderat also is accused of involvement with Hizbullah. According to US Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey, "Bank Saderat facilitates Iran's transfer of hundreds of millions of dollars to Hizbullah and other terrorist organization each year." Since 2001, a Hizbullah-controlled organization allegedly received $50 million from Iran through Bank Saderat. See "Treasury Cuts Iran's Bank Saderat Off From U.S. Financial System," US Department of Treasury, htttp://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp87.htm, September 8, 2006.

48. Mona M. Fawaz, "Agency and Ideology in the Service Provision of Islamic Organizations in the Southern Suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon," paper presented at UNESCO's "NGOs and Governance in Arab Countries" conference, March 29-31, 2000. This paper was later published as "*Action et idéologie dans les services: ONG islamiques dans la banlieue sud de Beyrouth*," in Sarah Ben Néfissa, Nabil Abd al-Fattah, Sari Hanafi, and Carlos Milani, *ONG et Gouvernance dans le monde arabe* (Paris: Karthala et Le Caire, 2004).

49. Norton, "Hizbullah and the Israeli Withdrawal From Southern Lebanon," p. 28. Tufayli's party membership was revoked in 1997 after he created a Movement of the Hungry and staged events that clashed with Hizbullah's. The Lebanese authorities issued a warrant for his arrest in early 1998 after his followers fought the army. Tufayli and his men escaped to his hometown of Brital after Syrian military intelligence intervened on their behalf. He is openly critical of Hizbullah's relationship with Iran. In January 2007 he said, "Al-Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah executes the policy of Ali Khamenei in Lebanon to the last detail," and six months later he added, "Hizbullah's arms ... are used for the interests and purposes pertaining to Iran, and therein lies the disaster;" see LNNA, January 27, 2007 (OSC, GMP20070127637001), and "Al-Tufayli: Hizbullah's Arms Are Used for the Interests of Iran; The Stands of 8 March Are a Loose Cover for All the Crimes," *Al-Mustaqbal*, June 20, 2007 (OSC, GMP20070621611003).

summoned to Damascus, and a day later Hizbullah radio announced that Hizbullah and Amal would run a joint list for the south and for the Biqa‘ Valley.[50] The outcome of the elections saw a reduction in the total number of legislators affiliated with or supportive of Hizbullah.

Hizbullah next fielded candidates in the 1998 municipal elections, the first to take place in 35 years. Hizbullah fared well in the predominantly Shi‘a parts of the country due to well-organized campaigning and the creation of alliances with other political organizations.[51]

Hizbullah hoped to translate the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon into success at parliamentary polls in August-September of that year. It would appear that the Iranian government shared this sentiment — Hassan Nasrallah visited the Iranian capital in July 2000, and Amal's Nabih Berri arrived in early August. The timing suggested that Tehran was trying to heal rifts between the two groups before the elections, hoping that the role of a unifier would give Iran greater influence over Lebanese affairs. At the end of July, Berri announced that Hizbullah must participate in the next government.[52]

Syria again persuaded Hizbullah to share its list with Amal, and Hizbullah agreed to just 12 seats in the coalition. Had there been an open competition, Hizbullah probably could have fared better.[53] In a back-room deal, Hizbullah backed Rafiq Hariri in Beirut, rather than the Syrian favorite, Selim al-Hoss.[54] Nevertheless, Hizbullah gained at least two more legislative seats, and the Hizbullah/Amal ticket won 23 seats.

A DYNAMIC NEW CENTURY

The Israeli withdrawal in May 2000 and the parliamentary elections later that year were not the only events that affected the relationship among Hizbullah, Iran, and Syria. Other events in the first decade of the new millennium also had a profound impact on the region and changed the balance of the relationship. These would include the death of President Hafiz al-Asad, who had ruled Syria for 30 years, the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States and the subsequent Global War on Terror, and Lebanon's Cedar Revolution.

Tehran Takes Charge

The death of President Hafiz al-Asad on June 10, 2000 could have seriously disrupted the relationship among Syria, Iran, and Hizbullah, but all three sides worked hard to ensure continuity. Asad prepared the grounds for his son Bashar beforehand by introducing him to his future interlocutors. In 1999, for example, Bashar met with Has-

50. Usher, "Hizbullah, Syria, and The Lebanese Elections," p. 59.

51. A. Nizar Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Islamists and local politics: a new reality," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (2000), p. 750.

52. *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, July 28, 2000, pp. 30-31.

53. Howard Schneider, "In Lebanese Vote, Signs of Change," *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2000.

54. John Kifner, "Opposition Leader Scores Upset in Lebanon Elections," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2000.

san Nasrallah at least three times (in January, May, and November), President Emile Lahud twice (in February and November), Nabih Berri in May, and President Muhammad Khatami in May. Afterwards, Khatami attended the funeral in Damascus, and in a meeting with the new president expressed the hope that Bashar "would proceed with his father's policy line."[55] Khatami assured Bashar that the Iranian government and people would stand by and support him.

In fact, Syria's new leader ending up giving ground to the Iranians and to Hizbullah, whose confidence had been greatly bolstered by the Israeli withdrawal. Just a month after the change of leadership in Damascus, Hassan Nasrallah was in Tehran, and he said after meeting Khatami:

> Our views are completely identical on the continuation of the Resistance and the need for weapons to remain in the hands of Hizbullah or in the hands of the remaining parties as part of the broad resistance, because Israel will remain a threat to Lebanon's security and stability.[56]

Nasrallah added:

> The Resistance will continue and we will remain in our positions even after the completion of the withdrawal because a new file will be opened, which is the file of Palestine and holy Jerusalem, which concerns the entire Islamic world. [57]

Supreme Leader Khamene'i expressed similar views when he met with Nasrallah, describing the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon as "the first stage of struggle against Zionism" and advising Hizbullah to "maintain its vigilance to pass the next stages to achieve the final victory over the Zionist enemy."[58] Later that month, a special envoy for the Supreme Leader traveled to Beirut to meet with Nasrallah and Fadlallah. The envoy advised, "Jihad against the Israeli enemy is the only way for lifting the injustice and ending the occupation of Palestine."[59]

In March 2001 Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi visited Beirut and Damascus and met with Hizbullah's Nasrallah, Lebanon's Prime Minister Hariri and President Emile Lahud, and Syria's President Asad and Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara. Kharrazi explained after returning to Tehran, "Iran is seeking a broad alliance of Arab and Islamic countries to drive Israel out of occupied Arab lands ... just as Hizbullah drove the Israelis from Lebanon last year."[60] On the same day in Beirut, Nasrallah said that Hizbullah would not disarm and suggested that Hizbullah would continue its operations even if Israeli forces withdrew from the Sheb'a Farms.[61] The timing of these statements probably was not a coincidence.

55. Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), June 13, 2000.

56. Najah Muhammad Ali, "Nasrallah Views Talks With Khatami," *Al-Mustaqbal*, July 10, 2000.

57. Najah Muhammad Ali, "Nasrallah Views Talks With Khatami."

58. Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, July 4, 2000.

59. Ali Akbar Velayati, "Velayati Calls for Protecting the Victory and Urges the Palestinians to Resort to Jihad," *Al-Hayah*, July 27, 2000.

60. IRNA, March 21, 2001.

61. "Hizbullah Leader Says Israeli Confrontation With 'Resistance' Means Regional War," *Al-Safir*, March 21, 2001.

Approximately one month later — on April 24-25, 2001 — Tehran hosted the Support for the Palestinian Intifada Conference (Tehran would host these events again on June 2-3, 2002 and April 14-16, 2006).[62] Hassan Nasrallah and other Hizbullah officials attended this event, as did representatives of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. Anonymous Iranian sources claimed that a Hizbullah-Hamas reconciliation would take place on the sidelines of the conference, and unnamed "top sources" in Hamas and Hizbullah said the Iranian government wanted reconciliation so the two organizations could focus on fighting Israel.[63] Later that year, a Beirut journalist wrote that a pro-Iranian wing in Hizbullah would like hostilities against Israel to continue, whereas the pro-Syrian wing was advocating restraint.[64] Syrian calls for restraint related to a fear of being targetted as a state sponsor of terror by the US military after 9/11. As a result, Hizbullah did not inform Syria of at least two pending attacks against the Israelis in the Sheb'a Farms. An anonymous source told the journalist that Hizbullah worried that Damascus would betray it in exchange for security from a US attack.

The Global War on Terror

The al-Qa'ida attack against the United States in September 2001 had a profound, albeit short-lived, impact on Tehran. President Muhammad Khatami expressed his condolences on the same day the attacks occurred, and for two weeks the "Death to America" chant was not heard at the congregational Friday prayers, which are broadcast nationally. Iranian officials reportedly played helpful roles in the actual conflict against the Taliban and in talks in Bonn on post-conflict Afghanistan, even though Supreme Leader Khamene'i publicly denounced the US and dismissed the possibility of Iranian cooperation against the Taliban and al-Qa'ida.

Iranian cooperation at the time most likely resulted from a fear of the United States and recognition that being viewed by Washington as the leading state sponsor of terrorism could have dire consequences for the regime. However, the level of cooperation had its limits. In January 2002 the Israeli navy seized the Karine A, a ship carrying rockets, mines, explosives, anti-tank missiles, rifles, and ammunition. These supplies allegedly were bound for the Palestinian Authority rather than one of the groups with which Iran is usually identified, but many of the weapons were of Iranian origin and the vessel's last stop was on Kish Island in the Persian Gulf. Further hindering hopes for improvements in Tehran-Washington relations was President George W. Bush's January 2002 State of the Union address, in which he said Iran, as well as Iraq, North Korea, and their terrorist allies, "constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."

Curiously, the White House expected that Tehran would be responsive to its April 2002 request to rein in Hizbullah's military activities. Yet at an April 11 press conference, which took place after his meeting with Hassan Nasrallah, Foreign Minister

62. These events were covered by IRNA, as well as state radio and television.

63. Jihad al-Idan and Nidal al-Laythi, "Differences between Palestinian and Lebanese Islamists; Al-Zahhar Tells *Al-Zaman*: Islamic Jihad Is to Blame for Problems with Hizbullah," *Al-Zaman*, April 25, 2001; Matt Rees, "The Terror Twins," *Time*, April 30, 2001.

64. Nicholas Blanford, "Cracks emerge in Hizbullah's relations with Damascus," *Daily Star*, October 30, 2001.

Kamal Kharrazi called for continued resistance against Israel and condemned the US.[65] Kharrazi also called for "care and self-restraint in order to prevent the Zionist regime from causing intrigue in the region," which led a reporter to ask if this applies to "resistance operations at the Shaaba Farms." Kharrazi explained: "The call for self-restraint in my previous statements refers to the Israeli provocation. This is because Israel is the party that seeks to expand the circle of war and seeks provocation in this regard. The Lebanese resistance in the rest of the occupied Lebanese areas is considered a legitimate right for Lebanon." In late April, furthermore, the head of the Iranian Supreme Leader's office told a gathering in Damascus about the importance of jihad as exemplified by Hizbullah, and he added that Iranian policy is to "strengthen and support the front line of resistance against the Zionist regime."[66]

Killing a Leader and Ending an Occupation

On September 2, 2004 the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1559, which called on foreign forces to leave Lebanon and cease their interference in the country's affairs, and also called for the disarmament of the country's militias. "Foreign forces" referred to Syrian troops that had occupied the country for some two decades, and "militias" referred mainly to Hizbullah, although smaller armed groups, mainly Palestinians, did exist. Damascus moved quickly to protect its position by extending the presidential term of ally Emile Lahud, elected in 1998 to what is normally a one-time, six-year term. By depending on its allies and by using coercion, Syria persuaded the Lebanese legislature to extend Lahud's term by three years on September 4.

Some legislators and cabinet members resigned in protest over the extension, and one of them, Marwan Hamade, became the target of a near-fatal October 1 car bomb. Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was urged to resign because he objected to the extension, and he left office in October. The Iranian government and Hizbullah, however, saw the extension as a favorable development: President Khatami telephoned his congratulations to Lahud, and a delegation of top Hizbullah officials visited Lahud to convey Nasrallah's congratulations.[67] Khatami also voiced support for Syria during an October visit to Damascus, saying that Syria, Iran, and Lebanon are coordinating their activities to withstand pressure from the US and Israel.[68] Later that month, an Iranian presidential adviser met with Nasrallah, his deputy Na'im Qassem, and Lahud in Beirut and vowed that Iran always has and always will support "the Lebanese people and their resistance."[69]

Pressure for a Syrian withdrawal picked up after Hariri was murdered in Beirut in a February 14, 2005 bombing. A statement from an opposition movement made up of Druze and Sunni Muslims and Christians attributed responsibility to Syria, "given that it is the *de facto* authority in Lebanon."[70] Large rallies in Beirut in the following days brought together an unlikely sectarian mix that was united by its anger with Syria. Thus

65. Tele-Liban, April 12, 2002.

66. Hojatoleslam Gholam-Hussein Mohammadi-Golpayegani, cited by Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, April 27, 2002.

67. LNNA, September 7, 2004; LNNA, September 6, 2004.

68. Al-Manar television, October 7, 2004.

69. Mohammad Sadr, cited by Al-Manar television, October 25, 2004.

70. Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 142.

emerged what came to be known as the "independence intifada," referred to as a "Cedar Revolution" by the White House to equate it with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia.[71]

Hariri's death barely elicited a mention from Damascus, and Syrian state-controlled media blamed Israel.[72] Hojatoleslam 'Ali Akbar Mohtashami-Pur, Iran's former ambassador to Syria, pinned the blame on al-Qa'ida acting on behalf of the US, with the objective of starting a civil war that could be blamed on Syria.[73] Regardless, Mohtashami-Pur and two Iranian vice-presidents attended Hariri's funeral.

The international pressure on Syria picked up, prompting Iran to show its solidarity. When Syrian Prime Minister Muhammad Naji al-Utri visited Tehran on February 16 and 17, cooperation guarantees were provided. Supreme National Security Council Secretary Hojatoleslam Hassan Rohani emphasized that Lebanon-Syria relations are not the problem; rather, the problems are the Israeli occupation of the Sheb'a Farms, the Lebanese civil war, and Israeli hostility.[74]

Hizbullah responded to the domestic opposition with a March 8 rally in Beirut that attracted hundreds of thousands, making it the largest in the country's history.[75] Nasrallah told the crowd that Lebanon and Syria are inextricably bound: "No one can get Syria out of Lebanon or out of Lebanon's mind, heart, and future."[76]

After the March 8 rally in Beirut, the Friday Prayer sermon in Iran, dictated by the Supreme Leader's Office through the Central Council of Friday Prayer Leaders, also emphasized support for Hizbullah. In Tehran, for example, the preacher claimed that the US and Israel killed Hariri in order to force a Syrian withdrawal and weaken Hizbullah.[77] He went on to hail the March 8 rally and tell the US and Israel, "This is the awake Lebanon that you see before you."

Hizbullah's pro-Syrian rallies did not cow the Lebanese opposition, however, and it organized a counter-rally on March 14 in which approximately one million people — including Sunnis, Druze, and Christians — participated.[78] Events such as this compounded with the international pressure were too much for Damascus, which also was being criticized by the US for permitting Islamist combatants to enter Iraq. President Asad first announced in early February that Syrian troops would withdraw from the capital to the Biqa' Valley, as required by the 1989 Ta'if Accords, and in March, United Nations envoy Terje Roed-Larsen received a promise of a complete withdrawal by the end of April.[79]

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71. Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, p. 154.

72. Open Source Center, "Syrian Media Accuse Israel of Al-Hariri Assassination to Benefit U.S.," *Foreign Media Note*, GMF20050216000269, February 16, 2005.

73. IRNA, February 20, 2005.

74. Randah Taqiy-al-Din, "Rowhani: We Are Ready to Discuss French Efforts to Persuade Syria to Withdraw," *Al-Hayah*, February 25, 2005.

75. Neil MacFarquhar, "Leader of Hezbollah Discovers a New Fray: Lebanese Politics," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2005.

76. "Key Points of Hizbullah Leader Nasrallah's Speech at Pro-Syria Rally," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Report*, GMP20050308000252, March 8, 2005.

77. Ayatollah Mohammad Emami-Kashani, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Radio 1, March 11, 2005.

78. Neil MacFarquhar, "Big Beirut Rally Wants Syria Out," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2005.

79. Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, p. 162. Steven R. Weisman, "Lebanon Needs to Act First For

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In what could be seen as a show of support, Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi made two trips to Syria in April, warning that the "political vacuum" in Lebanon is not in the country's or the region's interest and adding that Israel seeks to take advantage of the situation.[80] Nevertheless, the last Syrian troops had withdrawn by the end of the month, ending the most obvious manifestation of Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs. The extent of Iranian and Syrian involvement in Hizbullah activities and ideology, however, precluded a clean break.

Electoral Impact of the Cedar Revolution

Lebanon's May-June 2005 parliamentary elections were the first to take place after the Syrian withdrawal and were therefore relatively free. Consequently, a number of Syrian allies decided against running because they recognized the likelihood of defeat.

Tehran sought to ensure a desirable electoral outcome by meeting with Lebanese opposition figures such as Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader of the PSP. Jumblatt traveled to Tehran in late April, and in a meeting with President Khatami they agreed on "the danger of any new U.S. attempt to target the countries in the region under the banner of democratic change and devised chaos."[81] Jumblatt also defended Iran's involvement with Hizbullah, asking rhetorically, "Is there any liberation movement in history that has not received support from abroad?"[82] He continued:

> I believe that the aim of some colonialist circles will remain to destabilize the Islamic Republic and to strike at the gains of the regime in Iran. Naturally, the purpose is to prevent Iran from supporting liberation movements such as Hizbullah in Lebanon.

Hizbullah went farther than before in creating electoral alliances. Hizbullah candidates were on the same list as Sa'd Hariri in Beirut, as Jumblatt in the eastern Aley-Baabda region, and as the Maronite Michel Aoun's candidates in Kesrouan-Jbeil and Zahleh in the north.[83] The alliance building paid off at the polls. The Resistance and Development Bloc, which consisted of Hizbullah, Amal, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, won 35 out of 128 seats. It earned 80% of the votes in South Lebanon when the second round of voting took place, and slightly less than 50% of the seats in the Biqa' Valley.

At this point it is useful to reflect on Hizbullah's growing enthusiasm for elections. One Lebanese scholar argues that Hizbullah accepts democracy as a political system, but in terms of "intellectual thought," it accepts only the Islamic state.[84] Its participation in elections reflects not just the political reality forced on it by Syrian dominance and Iranian influence, then, but acceptance that democracy is "the next best

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Syria To Exit, Envoy Says," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2005.

80. IRNA, April 14, 2005.

81. LNNA, April 24, 2005.

82. Hassan Fahs, "Jumblatt to *Al-Hayah*: Hizbullah Is Lebanese Affair, No Iranian Efforts To Improve Relations with Syria," *Al-Hayah*, April 25, 2005.

83. Hassan M. Fattah, "Hezbollah Is Focus of Voting in Lebanon," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2005.

84. Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion,* p. 54.

system to Islam."[85] Hizbullah would impose Islamic rule only if a sizable portion of the population wanted this, the scholar believes, and it would overturn the democratic system only if it had a significant parliamentary majority.[86]

Connecting with New Iranian Leaders

The next possible stumbling block in the relationship among Hizbullah, Iran, and Syria was the June 2005 election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as the Islamic republic's president. The three actors did not waste much time in conveying an image of continuity.

Hizbullah and Damascus acted first. Hassan Nasrallah arrived in Tehran on July 31, before Ahmadinejad's inauguration. A Lebanese newspaper described this as reflecting his desire to compensate for the recently departed Syrians and to coordinate activities with the new Iranian leadership.[87] Some Hizbullah leaders are very happy with the outcome of the election, the daily continued: they believe "the new Iranian leadership [will] be more flexible and more forthcoming in supporting the party's strategy," and will take "a hard-line stance when it comes to the subject of Hizbullah since it considers this party a vital political and security arm for the Islamic regime in Iran." Bashar Asad arrived in Tehran on August 7, and Ahmadinejad made a highly publicized visit to Syria in late January 2006.

Five months later, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1680. The resolution reiterated many of the points in Resolution 1559, such as respect for borders, restricting the transit of arms to militias, and "further efforts to disband and disarm all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias." It may have been a coincidence that Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki was in Damascus at the time, but he reacted predictably, saying Resolution 1680 was against international law and represented foreign interference in bilateral Damascus-Beirut relations.[88] The same day, Mottaki met with Hizbullah's Nasrallah and Hamas Political Bureau chief Khalid Mish'al.[89]

Nasrallah's comments one week later suggested strongly that he had received assurances of continuing support from the Iranian and Syrian regimes. Speaking at a rally commemorating the sixth anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, Nasrallah praised Iran for its "key" role in aiding the "resistance."[90] "I thank especially Syria under the leadership of late Hafiz al-Assad," he added, before citing President Bashar Asad, the Syrian people, and the Syrian military.

In mid-June, furthermore, Syrian Defense Minister General Hassan Turkmani traveled to Iran, where he and his counterpart, Mustafa Muhammad-Najjar, signed an agreement to strengthen their "strategic" relationship, provide a vigorous response to "disorder and insecurity" in the region, and form a joint defense committee.[91] At the

85. Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion,* p. 54.

86. Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*, p. 57.

87. Assad Bisharah, "The Iranian Stand Following the Victory of Ahmadinejad Who Is the Most Hardline in Protecting the Arms of the Party; Nasrallah in Tehran to Complete the Development of the Strategy in Support of the Resistance," *Al-Diyar*, August 3, 2005.

88. Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), May 18, 2006.

89. IRNA, May 18, 2006.

90. Al-Manar Television, May 25, 2006.

91. Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), June 15, 2006.

subsequent press conference, the two discussed Iran's support for "the Lebanese resistance," and Muhammad-Najjar said, "We shall continue to support the resistance, and the people of Palestine."

The Hizbullah-Israel War of 2006

It was just a short time later — on July 12, 2006 — that Hizbullah initiated a war with Israel by kidnapping two of its soldiers and killing another eight in a cross-border raid. The conflict lasted almost six weeks, and Israel and the US alleged that Iran and Syria were involved. An Iranian C802 shore-to-ship missile that allegedly was operated by Iranians struck an Israeli navy vessel off the Lebanese coast on July 15. The US State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism asserted that Iranian combatants were involved directly in the conflict.[92] He referred to Iran as "the paymaster" who spent "hundreds of millions of dollars" on arms and other forms of support for Hizbullah, and added that Iran is "clearly directing a lot of Hizbullah actions." "Hizbullah asks their permission to do things," he continued, "especially if it has broader international implications."

Iranian and Syrian officials' movements and statements at the time contributed to such suspicions. Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani was in Damascus on the day the war began.[93] Five days later, Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki arrived in Damascus, where he and Syrian Vice President Faruq al-Shara condemned Israel and expressed solidarity with the "resistance."[94] Just a fortnight after his previous visit, Larijani returned to Damascus, allegedly to meet with Hizbullah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah.[95]

Aside from the accusations and denials of Iranian involvement, Tehran seemed satisfied. Supreme Leader Khamene'i said events in Lebanon prove that "the presence of the Zionists in the region is a satanic and cancerous presence and an infected tumor for the entire world of Islam."[96] Iranian Friday prayer leaders' sermons were similarly supportive. In the southern city of Ahvaz, for example, the preacher said Hizbullah has "smashed the myth of [Israeli] invincibility" and described Hizbullah's actions as "a source of pride for the world of Islam."[97] Four of the top Shi'a clerics in Iran said they would allocate a percentage of their tithes to Hizbullah.[98]

Iran gave a lukewarm welcome to UN Resolution 1701 of August 11, 2006, which concluded the conflict. The Foreign Ministry spokesman said Iran was "happy" that the resolution was passed and criticized its failure to condemn alleged Israeli "crimes."[99]

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92. Ambassador Henry Crumpton, cited by Caroline Drees, "Syria, Iran Lack Full Hizbullah Control: US Official," Reuters, July 25, 2006.

93. Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), July 12, 2006.

94. Al-Alam television, July 17, 2006; SANA, July 17, 2006.

95. Mehr News Agency, July 26, 2006. On the alleged meeting, see Yoav Stern, "Nasrallah to Meet Assad, Iranian Security Chief in Syria," *Haaretz*, July 27, 2006, citing Kuwait's *Al-Seyassah*.

96. Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, July 16, 2006.

97. Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Musavi-Jazayeri, Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Provincial TV, July 14, 2006.

98. Grand Ayatollahs Nasser Makarem-Shirazi, Mohammad Fazel-Lankarani, Lutfollah Safi-Golpayegani, and Javad Aqa-yi Tabrizi, according to Mehr News Agency, July 23, 2006.

99. Hamid Reza Assefi, cited by Islamic Republic of Iran News Network Television, August 13, 2006.

President Ahmadinejad described the resolution as one-sided.[100] In a reference to Israel, Ahmadinejad added that "the myth of the invincibility of this contrived and decayed regime crumbled thanks to the faith and self-confidence of Lebanon's Hizbullah."

Hizbullah initially won plaudits from Lebanese citizens for fighting Israel to a standstill and for its subsequent reconstruction activities. The enthusiasm was short-lived, particularly after the organization renewed efforts to dominate national politics. Five Shi'a ministers — two from Hizbullah, two from Amal, and Foreign Minister Fawzi Sallukh, an independent who is close to Hizbullah — resigned in November because the legislature tried to reduce the power of pro-Syrian elements. Sa'd Hariri, leader of the parliamentary majority and son of the assassinated prime minister, described "a Syrian-Iranian plot to topple legitimate rule in Lebanon ... and place this country back under the former [Syrian] mandate."[101] Hizbullah-led demonstrations took place over the following months, and Sunni-Shi'a violence also occurred.

The crisis precipitated by the cabinet walkout had not been resolved by December 2007, and the government and Hizbullah-led opposition could not reach a compromise on a successor to President Lahud. Hizbullah did not restrict itself to political activities or reconstruction in that one-year period; Lebanese officials and Hizbullah members noted Iranian and Syrian help in the organization's rearmament, as well as renewed military training in Iran and the Biqa' Valley.[102] Displaced in the south by UNIFIL peacekeepers and the Lebanese Armed Forces, Hizbullah forces redeployed farther north.

IMPLICATIONS

The complex relationship among Hizbullah, Iran, and Syria has endured a momentous quarter-century, evolving dramatically during that time. That evolution has three important implications for policymakers. The first implication is that the two state actors have broader interests that take precedence over the triangular relationship. For Iran, the eight-year war with Iraq was far more significant than the relationship with Hizbullah, because the war put the regime's survival and the revolution's success at risk. Therefore, the relationship with Syria, its only Arab ally and a frequent interlocutor on its behalf during those years, would not have been endangered by helping Hizbullah. Currently, the support of another country is very important to Iran as it challenges the international community's effort to constrain its suspicious nuclear program. This practical factor is more relevant than the mostly symbolic value of backing Hizbullah.

The second implication is that Hizbullah is pursuing its own agenda in Lebanon, and this increasingly is at odds with the objectives of Tehran or Damascus. Tellingly, Iran worked with Saudi Arabia to resolve the political crisis initiated by the Hizbullah cabinet

100. Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, August 14, 2006.

101. Leila Hatoum, "March 14 Points Finger at Tehran, Damascus," *The Daily Star*, November 13, 2006.

102. Nicholas Blanford, "Ready and Waiting," *Time*, July 11, 2007; Nicholas Blanford, "Danger. Do Not Cross," *Now Lebanon,* August 27, 2007, http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=11526. See also, Nasir al-Assad, "The Coup of the Syrian Regime and Its Allies Is Continuing and the Second Government Is the Headline of Its Current Stage, and the 14 March Group Prepares to Confront it; the Internal Role of Hezbollah's Weapons Has Come," *Al-Mustaqbal*, June 30, 2007.

walkout in late 2006. It can be argued reasonably that the walkout reflected Hizbullah's political ambitions, and it did not serve the short or medium-term interests of either the Iranian or Syrian regimes. As sectarian clashes took place in Lebanon in early 2007, furthermore, Iranian and Syrian officials exchanged visits and discussed the need to avoid Shi'a-Sunni strife. Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani visited Damascus on January 21 — a trip unnamed Iranian sources described as an effort to avoid "falling into the American trap by inciting sectarian seditions among Sunnis and Shiites in the region."[103] Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Mualem visited Tehran the next day, and President Asad came in mid-February — the official *Iran* newspaper predicted the two sides would "adopt a new approach" to the Lebanese conflict.[104]

The new approach predicted by the official daily was not readily apparent. There was speculation in the Lebanese media that a solution to the Lebanese crisis was devised when President Ahmadinejad visited Saudi Arabia in March 2007.[105] Yet in an interview early the next month, the Iranian ambassador to Syria declared that Tehran backs Hizbullah's position on the make-up of the cabinet — at the time, it promoted a formula in which the 11 opposition members in a 30-member cabinet would have veto power.[106] This suggests that Tehran was unable to change Hizbullah's perspective and therefore accepted it.

In the past, Hizbullah personnel operated overseas in coordination with Iran — witness bombings in Paris (1986), a shooting in Berlin (1992), bombings in Buenos Aires (1992-1996), and a bombing in Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia (1996).[107] These events occurred during the period when Hizbullah identified most closely with Iran's revolutionary model and was most dependent on Iranian aid and support. Moreover, Hizbullah's relatively minor stake in the Lebanese political process during those years, as well as the relative insulation from retribution afforded it by the Syrian occupation, meant that it was unlikely to suffer retaliation.

The US military claimed in July 2007 that Iranian leaders directed Hizbullah

103. Ibrahim Humaydi, "Iranian Sources: Larijani's Moves Might Result in 'Calm,'" *Al-Hayah*, January 23, 2007.

104. Interview with Iranian Ambassador to Syria Hassan Akhtari, *Iran*, February 18, 2007.

105. See, for example, Ali Hamadah, "The Positivism ... Fact Or Illusion," *Al-Nahar*, March 6, 2007 (OSC, GMP20070308611001), and Al-Manar Television, March 4, 2007 (OSC, GMP20070304637001).

106. Ambassador Hassan Akhtari, *Al-Akhbar*, April 2, 2007 (OSC, GMP20070403657003).

107. On the Paris bombings, see Ranstorp, *Hizbullah in Lebanon*, pp. 119-120. Shortly after French authorities surrounded the Iranian embassy in Paris in order to question interpreter Wahid Gordji in connection with the bombings, two French hostages in Beirut were threatened with death; see John Greenwald, "The Gulf Showdown on Embassy Row," *Time*, July 27, 1987. It also is possible that the French nationals in Beirut were targeted due to their country's provision of arms to Iraq; see Shireen Hunter, *Iran and The World: Continuity in a Revolutionary* Decade (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p. 1990), p. 150. On the involvement of Lebanese and Iranian operatives in the Berlin bombing, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 290. On the Khobar bombing, see Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 282-286, and Louis Freeh, *My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), p. 222. On the Buenos Aires bombing and an Argentine judge issuing arrest warrants for a number of former Iranian officials, see Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 473-474, fn. 59, and Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran: Argentinean Warrants Urge Rafsanjani's Ex-Officials' Arrests," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 10, 2006.

attacks in Iraq, and members of Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army acknowledged being trained in Lebanon by Hizbullah.[108] As the earlier cases indicate, there are precedents for Hizbullah's acting in coordination with Iran or at Iranian behest. Yet Hizbullah has shown in recent years that it sometimes acts on its own initiative; in the Iraqi case it could be acting to aid coreligionists or increase its own influence, rather than acting on instructions from Tehran.

Hizbullah's willingness to put itself at risk on Iran's behalf under current circumstances is questionable. Hizbullah may act if the survival of Iran's Shi'a regime is at stake — if a war against Iran is launched, for example.[109] Short of that, Hizbullah is unlikely to sacrifice its achievements or endanger its constituency due to its investment in Lebanese politics. Hizbullah is even less likely to endanger itself on behalf of the secular Syrian regime, and for Damascus, Hizbullah has been little more than an instrument for manipulating Lebanese affairs and to use against Israel. Hizbullah Deputy Secretary-General Na'im Qassem's response, when asked in September 2007 about a possible reaction to an attack on Iran or Syria, is noteworthy: "The state that comes under attack is responsible for responding to the attack and defending itself."[110]

The third implication relates to warnings of a "Shi'a crescent:" an arc that includes countries with Shi'a majorities, namely Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and possibly Lebanon, as well as those with sizable Shi'a minorities, such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. When Jordan's King 'Abdullah II raised this possibility in late 2004, he rightly warned that it would alter the regional balance of power and would challenge US interests and allies.[111] It also is accurate that Shi'a Muslims have a shared history of political marginalization, and they are linked to Iran culturally and spiritually. These factors are not enough to overcome the strength of the modern state system. As the preceding pages have shown, events in Lebanon were behind local Shi'a activism, rather than concern about co-religionists elsewhere. Barring a major regional conflict that involves Iran directly, therefore, it is events in Lebanon that will shape the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria relationship.

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108. Scott Petersen and Nicholas Blanford, "A Gauge of Iran's Hand in Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor,* July 5, 2007; Nizar Latif and Phil Sands, "Mehdi Fighters 'Trained by Hizbullah in Lebanon,'" *The Independent*, August 20, 2007.

109. Iranian military doctrine sees liberation movements in this context: "Iran can effectively attack the interests and opportunities of the enemy by relying upon its revolutionary forces and supporters, and by a constant nurturing of their minds and spirits." Mohammad Hussein Jamshidi, *Basis and History of Military Thought in Iran* (Tehran: IRGC College of Command, date unknown); translated by Open Source Center, IAG20021113000150, January 1, 2001. Frank Urbancic, Jr. the principal deputy coordinator of the State Department's Counterterrorism Office, testified on September 28, 2006 before the House International Relations' subcommittees on the Middle East and on terrorism that Hizbullah's extensive support network reaches South America, West Africa, and Central Africa, and he warned that "it can mobilize them on a moment's notice," "Hezbollah 'an Octopus' with Tentacles Around World, Officials Say," US Department of State, http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=September&x=20060928183525adynned0.8449823.

110. Interview with Naim Qassem, *Al Watan*, September 23, 2007.

111. Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan see threat to election from Iran," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2004.