

SHIITES IN LEBANON: THE KEY TO DEMOCRACY

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President George W. Bush said after a late-January 2006 meeting with visiting Lebanese parliamentarian Saad Hariri, "It will be very important for the region for Lebanon's democracy to be able to reach its full potential." The significance of democracy promotion became abundantly clear in mid-March, when the White House released *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. That document stated that American "statecraft" aimed to create "a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system." The reason for doing so?

Because democracies are the most responsible members of the international system, promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability, reducing regional conflicts, countering terrorism and terror-supporting extremism, and extending peace and prosperity.

Washington's seriousness about democracy promotion in Lebanon will compel it to deal with the country's Shiite Muslims. Ignoring the Shiites may have been feasible some 50 years ago, when they tended to be the poorest and least influential segment of Lebanese society. At that time there were just a few exceptions — some wealthy and powerful Shiite leaders known as *zaim*, and, according to the confessional system created in the 1940s, a Shiite speaker of parliament (a Maronite Christian holds the office of president and a Sunni Muslim that of prime minister).

The traditional administrative arrangement still holds for the top three leadership positions in Lebanon, but the Shiite community has made a great deal of political progress in addition. This progress can be attributed to three factors. The first is the sense of community and subsequent political mobilization on the part of the Shiites, which began in the early 1960s and was encouraged further by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. The second factor is the role played by armed Shiite

organizations in the conflict with Israel from 1982 onward, culminating in the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. The third factor in the Shiite political emergence is the 1989 Taif accords, which ended the system that gave 60 percent of the parliamentary seats to Christians and the rest to Muslims.

Now, Lebanese Shiites serve in the cabinet and hold approximately one-third of the seats in parliament. In a show of power that led to a governmental crisis, Shiite cabinet members suspended their participation from late December to early February. Settlement of this crisis — which centered on the touchy issues of disarming the country's most powerful Shiite organization and on international involvement in the country's affairs — calmed the situation temporarily, but it is not likely that this will satisfy the Shiite political movement. The Shiites' ultimate objective is far from clear — whether the current Lebanese democracy, an Iranian-style theocracy or something else — but there are steps Washington can take to affect the issue and produce a mutually beneficial final outcome.

AMAL AND HIZBALLAH

Amal is the oldest of Lebanon's Shiite political organizations. It was created as a militia that worked with the Harakat al-Mahrumin, a popular mass movement launched in March 1974 by the Iranian-born cleric Imam Musa Sadr. Sadr is widely credited with urging the Shiites, a generally downtrodden minority, to work together to promote their interests. Sadr disappeared during a 1978 trip to Libya, but it would be hard to forget him: posters of his smiling face are still visible in Beirut, the Bekaa Valley and the south.

The 1978-79 Iranian revolution inspired

many Lebanese Shiites, but they disagreed on the desirability of emulating that model. Divisions emerged within Amal over the issues of political moderation and relations with Iran and Syria; a number of people left the party to create more militant groups. Hizballah emerged in 1982 with cells in the Bekaa Valley and in Beirut. These cells received support from the Iranian government and from Islamic Revolution Guards Corps units in the Bekaa Valley.

The differences between the founding documents of Amal and Hizballah, which describe the organizations' objectives, are striking. The Amal charter addresses God, economic justice and equal opportunities for all Lebanese, but what stands out is its focus on Lebanese issues. Indeed, Hizballah has been critical of what it perceives as Amal's excessive focus on domestic affairs and the pursuit of power. Nevertheless, the Amal charter does also address international issues, referring to Israel as a "present and future danger to Lebanon and the Arab World." It also warns of Zionist plans, Israeli economic competition with Arab states, "expulsion of the Palestinian people" and "desecration of holy places."

The Hizballah equivalent — the Open Letter Addressed by Hizballah to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World — came out in February 1985 on the first anniversary of the death of one of Hizballah's founders. This document also touched on Lebanese issues, such as giving people the right to choose their own government. The overall tone of the letter was more aggressive than the Amal charter. It criticized the United States, France and Israel, as well as the mostly Maronite Christian Phalange and the

Lebanese government. Hizballah also criticized “defeatist Arab regimes” that seek to reconcile with “the Zionist enemy,” as well as those that support Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran.

Hizballah’s Open Letter defined as its objective an end to Israel’s occupation, “as a prelude to its final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation.” It warned of a Greater Israel that wants to spread from the Euphrates to the Nile, and it denounced treaties, truces and ceasefires with or involving Israel. The letter described a desire for a “Lebanon ruled by Islam and its just leadership.” Elsewhere in the letter, the leader is identified as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the father of Iran’s Islamic Revolution. Given the absence of what it sees as the Utopian Islamic state, Hizballah sought to emulate the Iranian system of Islamic government (*vilayat-i faqih*, or leadership of the Supreme Islamic jurist). It called for an Islamic republic within Lebanon until there is Islamic rule in the whole world.

JOINING THE NATIONAL SYSTEM

Although Hizballah rejected the existing political system and held the Lebanese government in low esteem in the mid-1980s, by 1992 its attitude appeared to have changed. That was when it fielded parliamentary candidates for the first time. It has continued to participate in elections, and in the May-June 2005 race, the Amal/Hizballah bloc earned 35 out of 128 legislative seats. Hizballah has become the main representative of Shiite interests in the country’s affairs, while Amal’s relevance is mainly connected with parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri and the party’s ability to add numbers to the

Hizballah bloc.

Moreover, Hizballah is participating in a government that includes parties toward which it was once hostile. Twenty years ago, in its Open Letter, Hizballah was extremely critical of the Phalange (known as *Al-Kataeb* in Arabic). Now members of the Phalange and Hizballah serve together in the cabinet — Al-Kataeb’s Pierre Gemayel as minister of industry and Hizballah’s Mohammad Fneish as minister of energy and water.

The head of the Al-Kataeb party, former President Amin Gemayel (1982-88), told me during a December 2005 interview in Beirut that this is a genuine coalition government. Gemayel praised Hizballah for its role in ending the Israeli occupation, noted that the party has a sizable constituency and advocated engagement with it.

Now we have to conduct a genuine dialogue with the Hizballah.... We know that Hizballah played a major role in liberating the country from the Israeli occupation. They are Lebanese representing a very large popular support, and we consider that it is in the interest of the country that we conduct a genuine dialogue with Israel, with Syria, with Hizballah, and we implement the principle of sovereignty.

Gemayel advised against any sort of confrontation, saying it is “in the interest of everybody that we get an agreement with Hizballah.” Hizballah should be a participant in the Lebanese state, he said. Gemayel dismissed the possibility that the Shiites could come to dominate the country’s politics, describing Lebanon as a real “mosaic.” He said that continued cooperation between the country’s commu-

nities would guarantee peace, harmony and freedom. Any community's efforts to dominate would undermine the peace.

Another example of this "cooperation" between communities appeared in February 2006, when the leaders of Hizballah and the predominantly Christian Free Patriotic Movement (*Tayyar Al-Watani Al-Horr*) — Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah and General Michel Aoun, respectively — signed a memorandum of understanding. That document referred to "national dialogue" as the solution to national crises and called for "transparency, frankness, and the placing of national interests above all other interests."

HIZBALLAH'S OBJECTIVE — RETAINING ARMS?

The dynamism of Lebanese affairs leads to questions about the objectives of politically active Shiites. Have they stayed the same since Hizballah's Open Letter of 1985? If not, what do the Shiites seek today? The country's Shiites are represented by Hizballah, Professor Amal Saad-Ghorayeb told me in December at her office at the Lebanese American University; and the party has moderated its goals since the 1980s. Saad-Ghorayeb, author of *Hizballah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), said the Shiites feel threatened because of the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. She continued,

The ultimate goal of the Shiite community today is to preserve the arms of its resistance. If there is too much pressure on Hizballah to disarm, this will be a highly destabilizing event in Lebanon. The Shiites will not accept it. Hizballah has come to represent the Shiites' communal guardian. It is more than a resistance now. Hizballah has

taken on more than a regional role. It now has a domestic role, and according to the dictates of Lebanese politics, if you want to play a strong domestic role you play a communal role. This is what Hizballah has effectively done.

Hizballah fears that disarmament threatens its existence, Saad-Ghorayeb said. "I see Hizballah sticking to its guns, literally and figuratively."

As for Hizballah's desire to create an Islamic state, according to Saad-Ghorayeb, this remains a "permanent fixture of Hizballah's intellectual structure and political thought but will not feature in its political program." She believes that Hizballah sees the Islamic state as a Utopian ideal, but democracy is seen as the only viable alternative.

REPLICATING THE IRANIAN MODEL?

One would be hard put to believe that Hizballah has abandoned its desire to recreate the Iranian system of government in Lebanon. Indeed, there are frequent reminders of the Iranian connection with Hizballah in predominantly Shiite parts of the country. Whether one is visiting the Beirut suburb of Haret Hreik, Bekaa Valley towns such as Baalbek, Brital and Ras El-Ein, or southern cities such as Sidon, one sees posters of Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his successor as supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

When I met with Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah in his heavily guarded compound in the southern suburbs of Beirut, he made it clear that he is not a member of Hizballah and does not speak for the party. Scholars are divided on this issue, and the party acknowledges that it

benefited from his opinions in its early days. Hizballah continues to value his input — Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qasim and Fadlallah met in early January 2006 to discuss developments and the resolution of political divisions, the newspaper *Al-Anwar* reported on January 3. In his sermons and public statements, furthermore, Fadlallah espouses views that are very similar to the positions adopted by Hizballah.

I asked why, when there are religious scholars such as Fadlallah in Lebanon, Hizballah looks to Iran. Fadlallah explained that Hizballah looks to the Iranian clerics Khomeini and Khamenei for two reasons. First, it believes in vilayat-i faqih, which Khomeini instituted; second, Iran provides financial and political support for Hizballah.

The continuing strength of relations between Tehran and Hizballah is readily apparent. Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah visited Tehran in August 2005 to meet with the newly inaugurated President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, and the two met again in Damascus on January 20. Nasrallah acknowledged the close relations between his organization and Iran in a February 3 speech in Beirut, *Al-Manar* television reported; and he complained that allegations of Iranian interference in Lebanese affairs only serve the United States and Israel. Nasrallah denied that Iran has asked for anything in return for its support, adding that the Hizballah leadership is independent.

Washington believes the Hizballah-Tehran relationship is more sinister, going well beyond official visits and the provision of charitable assistance. The U.S. State Department classifies Hizballah as a foreign terrorist organization. It believes Iran provides Hizballah with financial, training, weapons, explosives and political,

diplomatic and organizational aid. Hizballah reacted to the most recent State Department report by saying it considers this “a big medal on [the] mujahedins’ chests,” *Al-Manar* television reported on April 29.

Apprehensions about the Hizballah-Tehran relationship are not limited to Washington and are shared by some Lebanese. Lebanese observers, however, are not concerned about efforts to duplicate theocratic models or about support for terrorism. Their concern stems from the implications for their country’s sovereignty and stability. General Michel Aoun was asked if the Hizballah-Free Patriotic Movement memorandum could lead to accusations that he is about to join a Syria-Iran-Hizballah alliance, *Al-Manar* television reported on February 6. He responded that Lebanese Christians are mature and appreciate dialogue and understanding, but there is no “alliance with Syria and Iran,” although “normal and sound relations with Syria” were addressed.

Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who heads the Progressive Socialist party, has been particularly outspoken about his concerns. He said in an early January interview with www.reason.com that the pro-Iranian side of Hizballah is ascendant, and the party will use its arms against Israel at Iran’s behest. Jumblatt’s concern grew with time, and in a January 27 interview with *The Daily Star*, he said Lebanon is a “hostage to deals that start in Lebanon and end in Tehran at the expense of our ambitions for freedom.” Jumblatt described Lebanon as “the weakest link” in an alliance that begins in Iran and crosses Syria. The next month, Jumblatt said Hizballah’s claim that it must retain its arms because Israel continues to occupy

the Shabaa Farms is merely a pretext that benefits Iran and Syria. He also said Iran's President Ahmadinejad is trying to settle accounts with the United States in Lebanon, LBC television reported on February 12 and Amman's *Al-Dustur* reported on February 27.

There was no letup in Jumblatt's concerns. He said on the eve of an early March trip to Washington, "We disagree with Hizballah on the issue of the policy that Tehran perhaps is dictating in the region and to Lebanon in particular," as reported by Al-Jazirah television. "We do not want Lebanon to be an axis of struggle for the sake of Iranian policy." Jumblatt added, "I do not believe that Lebanon should be a victim of the Islamic Republic's ambitions and policies and its expansive strategy from Afghanistan to — I do not know — to Iraq perhaps."

Jumblatt's fear of an Iran-Syria-Hizballah pact appeared to be confirmed by Hizballah's Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qasim in a March 8 interview in *Monday Morning* from Beirut. "The parties which have adhered to [this pact] are committed to support one another in good moments and bad," he explained. "It provides for the signing of agreements of a political, military or other kind, if the need arises."

THE ENDGAME

Muslims make up almost 60 percent of the Lebanese population, and although precise figures are unavailable because Christians have resisted holding a new census, it is believed that Shiites are in the majority. Under these circumstances, it is inconceivable that Hizballah will settle for being a political party that represents the interests of just one of the country's

seventeen religious sects. Events in December through March illustrate several sticking points that policy makers in Washington could address and help overcome.

The first point is that Hizballah is extremely reluctant to disarm, although UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which was passed in September 2004, calls for the disarmament of all the country's militias. Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said in a December 23 interview on Al-Manar television that a UN requirement for semiannual reports on the status of disarmament would lead to a confrontation between the Lebanese military and armed Palestinian groups in the country, whereas the status of their arms is a minor issue. "The UN Security Council wants to impose on us decisions, commitments, initiatives and measures. We, the Lebanese, say that we have no interest in such measures." Defending Hizballah's self-perceived right to bear arms, Nasrallah referred to the disputed Shabaa Farms and said a state of war between Lebanon and Israel still exists.

In a January 7 discussion of the Shiite parties' boycott of cabinet meetings, Hizballah's Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qasim said the status of the party must be resolved first, Al-Manar television reported. "The Council of Ministers must assert that the resistance is not a militia," he said. "This assertion, however, will not alter the nature of the resistance." By declaring that Hizballah is not a militia, the cabinet would shield it from Resolution 1559's disarmament requirement. Nevertheless, as Qasim sees it, it will continue to act as an armed institution. In fact, the Shiite cabinet members resumed work in early February, after Prime Minister Fuad

Siniora declared that Hizballah was not a militia.

Hizballah, in other words, wants to retain its arms at all costs. This could reflect the desire to protect the Shia population from other Lebanese groups, or its continued status as an armed resistance organization could recall the prestige associated with martyrs who gave their lives in kicking out the occupiers. Being armed, furthermore, gives Hizballah an advantage over its political competitors, as that coercive power will give it the ability to impose its wishes. A disarmed Hizballah, on the other hand, would engage with the country's other parties on an equal footing.

The interim UN report on the implementation of Resolution 1559, which was released in mid-April, refers to Hizballah as the "most significant" militia in the country and adds that its "operational status and capabilities" are not noticeably changed. Washington should do everything in its power to persuade Hizballah to disarm, even if this requires security assurance. Furthermore, Washington could hold out political engagement as an incentive.

The second point is that Hizballah will do its utmost to forestall the involvement of other countries, with the exception of Syria and Iran, in Lebanese affairs. This has been a recurrent theme in its statements regarding the UN investigation into the February 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The Hizballah/Amal government boycott followed calls for a similar investigation into the December 2005 assassination of parliamentarian Gibran Tuani and similar incidents preceding it.

Nasrallah explained in his December 23 interview on Al-Manar television that Hizballah and Amal went along with the

continuation of the UN investigation for another six months, but they balked at some cabinet members' call for an international tribunal. Nasrallah went on to say that Israel is behind the assassinations because it wants to undermine Lebanon-Syria relations: "It is very natural for the Israelis to kill anti-Syrian figures if they want to lead Lebanon to bitter enmity with Syria, for Syria would be automatically blamed for the killings. You must have noticed that the operations carried out so far are highly professional."

It will be difficult to persuade Hizballah that other countries do not have ulterior motives when they show an interest in Lebanese affairs. To promote regional peace, however, this is essential. If the prospect of an international tribunal proves too unpalatable, a truth commission that deals with the political killings might provide closure.

All possible efforts should be made to block Iranian interference in Lebanese affairs generally and assistance to Hizballah specifically. During the presidency of Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami, Tehran-Beirut relations gained a great deal of importance relative to Tehran-Hizballah relations. Khatami's interest in improved relations with the international community as a whole contributed to this process. The two countries' economic ties continue to expand. Iran's new president, however, the former Revolutionary Guard, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, has pursued a more confrontational foreign policy since taking office in August 2005 and has made clear his relative indifference to the international community's sentiments.

It can be argued that Ahmadinejad is just one actor in the foreign-policy process,

which includes a complicated system of formal checks and balances that limits the ability of an elected official to affect policy directly. Equally or even more significant in that process are the informal factors — such as personal networks based on kinship, education and military service — that can affect the president’s initiatives. Ahmadinejad remains well-connected as the leading representative of a new generation of Iranian leaders, and he has implemented a robust effort to replace officials at every level of the government, thereby creating a new elite beholden to him. However, he has been weakened on a personal level. The legislature rejected four of his initial cabinet nominees, seasoned politicians of the conservative and reformist wings openly criticize his diplomatic blunders and his personnel moves, and state officials ignore his conservative cultural initiatives.

Setting aside the personal aspect of decision making as it relates to Ahmadinejad’s bellicosity, two articles of the Iranian constitution urge the government to support organizations such as Hizballah. Article 3 says the government is duty-bound to provide “unsparing support to the dispossessed of the world,” and Article 154 says the government “supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe.”

Moreover, there are circumstances under which Tehran would encourage

Hizballah to take aggressive actions: for example, a real or imagined transgression by the West. The supreme leader’s representative at the Guards Corps, Mujtaba Zolnur, made this clear when discussing Iran’s reaction in case of an American attack. He said, “Iran has a lot of supporters in other countries, and once our interests are endangered, the enemy’s in other countries will also be endangered,” *Aftab-i Yazd* daily reported on January 23, 2006. Furthermore, according to Mohammad Hussein Jamshidi’s doctrinal study for the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps — *Basis and History of Military Thought in Iran*, (Tehran: IRGC College of Command, January 2001) — support of revolutionary movements is sometimes necessary to defend Iran itself. In what is termed the Doctrine of Extremities, “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.”

Lebanon is a difficult case, but a successful and peaceful democratic process there will be an excellent example as Washington promotes democracy in the region. Success there, furthermore, will contribute to the defanging of Iran as a threat to the United States and its allies. Yet such success will be elusive without understanding and trying to shape the ultimate objectives of the Lebanese Shiites.