

## Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship

Terms such as “proxy” and “client” are often used to characterize the power dynamic between Hizballah and its allies Iran and Syria. These states’ vital resources and indispensable political sponsorship elevated Hizballah to the position it enjoys today. They each played a central role in past decisions of momentous importance for Hizballah. Today, however, this image of Hizballah as a client of Iran and Syria has become obsolete due to the power base the Shi’ite group has nurtured and expanded in Lebanon and the growing political capital it has acquired in the Middle East thanks to at least the perception of its military victories, be they real or not, particularly in the summer 2006 war against Israel.

By holding its ground against Israel, the region’s strongest military, Hizballah demonstrated its capacity to shake the Lebanese and regional political landscape. Hizballah resisted Israel’s onslaught without substantive Syrian support. By partnering with Hizballah, Syria hoped to defy isolation and reclaim its role as a pivotal power in the region, as well as give the Asad regime a new lease on life. The shifting dynamics of this relationship, however, with Hizballah asserting itself as a more-autonomous actor, have considerable implications for policies aimed at engaging or isolating Syria, as well as for dealing with the Hizballah challenge.

Hizballah has acquired a degree of autonomy and flexibility in recent years vis-à-vis Syria. Long gone are the days when Damascus’s rules and influence determined Hizballah’s activities, guaranteeing the predictability and restraint that prevented full-blown war. Hizballah has emerged as a more-independent player able to operate in Lebanon and the wider Middle East on its own terms.

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Syria and Hizballah maintain complex relations that have evolved considerably over the past 25 years, shifting to fit their strategic interests and ideological agendas. Yet, two crucial changes, one in the early 1990s when Syria established itself as the unquestioned dominant player in Lebanon and the other ongoing since 2000 as Hizballah gradually grows stronger, have redefined how they interact and led them to reassess their relative positions. Hizballah has acquired enough confidence and prestige to become more than just a pawn for Syria to manipulate. Today, for strategic and ideological motives, Syria is more pro-Hizballah than Hizballah is pro-Syria.

### **Hizballah's Initial Volatile Relationship with Syria in the 1980s**

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Lebanon's Hizballah was born from a long process of Shi'ite awakening made possible by the political activism of charismatic clerics and by urbanization and rose from the chaos of the Lebanese civil war. It has emerged as the foremost and most famed Shi'ite organization in the Sunni-dominated Arab world.<sup>1</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran's commitment to exporting its revolution and Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon to dismantle the Palestinian guerrilla infrastructure in Lebanon and install a friendly regime gave Hizballah its central and crucial *raison d'être*—*muqawama*, or resistance against a formidable occupier, Israel—that would transcend political and sectarian rifts and shape its political outlook.

Syria had a direct but not determining role in Hizballah's birth, allowing Iranian units to enter Lebanon to provide organizational, logistical, and operational support for guerrilla operations. An in-depth examination of the Hizballah-Iran connection falls outside the scope of this paper,<sup>2</sup> but unlike Tehran, Damascus did not anticipate Hizballah's evolution into Lebanon's foremost guerrilla organization, nor was it comfortable with the prospect of managing an Islamist organization with clear transformational goals. Given its own experience with Islamists, Damascus was concerned about a potential loss of control over this new movement.<sup>3</sup> Hizballah's ideology, Iranian political sponsorship, independent resources, and tight discipline made it problematic for Syria to exert the kind of control it had over its other Lebanese clients, including Amal, the Shi'ite community's initial champion and Syria's favorite proxy.

Yet, after the weakening of Syria's position in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion and the deployment of the multinational force composed of U.S. and European troops, Hizballah was instrumental in facilitating Syria's reentry into the Lebanese arena. Lacking a strategy and resources, Damascus was in no position to confront the multinational force and Israeli occupation forces in Lebanon head-on to protect its Western flank and interests in Lebanon. It therefore relied on local allies to reestablish influence, and many willingly co-

operated. Hizballah complied mostly on tactical grounds because its interests intersected with those of Syria. It did not initially accept the Syrian logic of co-opting or coercing Lebanese leaders from all political and religious persuasions into accepting its domination without questioning Lebanon's sectarian-based political system. Nonetheless, Syria appreciated the potency of Hizballah's asymmetric warfare and willingness to spearhead both the anti-Israeli resistance and efforts to expel the multinational force. At the same time, Syria went to great lengths to avoid irrevocably alienating Western powers by posing as a moderating force and cultivating deniability, especially during the hostage crisis.<sup>4</sup> What Syria would not do, Hizballah and others did.

This image of Hizballah as a client of Iran and Syria has become obsolete.

Syria's uneasiness with Hizballah showed in its efforts to sideline the group's political outreach. Hizballah was notably absent from several unsuccessful efforts to negotiate a comprehensive settlement of the Lebanese war, including the Syria-engineered Tripartite Agreement of December 1985. Hizballah was also involved in deadly clashes with Syria and Syrian allies over control of West Beirut in the 1980s. By the end of the decade, Hizballah's future was still far from guaranteed. Much would hinge on the nature and quality of its relations with Syria, by then the dominant player in Lebanon, whose strategic environment and preferences were quickly changing with the rise of the United States as the uncontested external power in the Middle East.

### **Hizballah Adapts to Syrian Domination in the 1990s**

Major regional realignments and international acceptance of Syrian domination of Lebanon in the early 1990s paved the way for the first turning point in Syrian-Hizballah relations. Persuaded by U.S. diplomacy, Syria joined both the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq and the Arab-Israeli peace process in 1991. Almost simultaneously, the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989 and Iranian fatigue of revolutionary radicalism resulted in a pragmatic reorientation of Iranian foreign policy that gave Syria a freer hand to maneuver regionally. Syria became the uncontested power in Lebanon.

#### **SYRIA'S STRATEGIC LEVERAGE**

The official framework for Syria's presence in Lebanon was based on the 1989 Taif Agreement, which reaffirmed the centrality of Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing structure while calling for its deconfessionalization. The agreement

crushed Hizballah's idealistic goal of an Islamic state and should have spelled its end as an armed organization, as it also required the disarmament of all militias. Hizballah's conundrum was that Syria had become the Taif Agreement's godfather, and rejecting it would inevitably lead to confrontation. This new political reality compelled Hizballah, after intense internal debates, to accept Lebanon's confessional system and to work out an arrangement with

**Syria's departure from Lebanon presented Hizballah with challenges and opportunities.**

Syria to preserve its weaponry.<sup>5</sup> Conveniently, Syria had a use for this arrangement. Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad sought to recover the Golan Heights lost to Israel in 1967 and to obtain a peace agreement that acknowledged Syria's pivotal role in the region. Hafiz had few avenues for exerting pressure, and he quickly grasped the value of relying on Hizballah as an armed group to improve Damascus's negotiating position vis-à-vis Israel.

The writings of prominent U.S. and Israeli peace negotiators as well as interviews with Syrian officials confirm that Hafiz sincerely desired a negotiated settlement with Israel, contingent on the full recovery of the Golan Heights in exchange for a flexible mechanism for its return, including mutual security guarantees, water arrangements, and diplomatic relations.<sup>6</sup> Although Hafiz hoped to orchestrate an Arab front to strengthen his own negotiating position, the collapse of the elusive Arab front after the 1993 Oslo accords and the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement forced Syria to look elsewhere for leverage.

Lebanon, firmly anchored in the Syrian orbit, served as Damascus's strategic depth. It guaranteed good-faith negotiations over the Golan Heights from a position of relative strength. The Western and Israeli assumption underlying Syrian-Israeli talks was that Damascus would constrain and eventually disarm Hizballah once peace was reached. As former Western and Arab diplomats put it, there was an informal understanding that once peace between Syria and Israel was signed, a treaty between Israel and Lebanon would follow, providing a framework for Hizballah's disarmament and the integration of its fighters into Lebanon's regular armed forces.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Hizballah's future was never explicitly put on the table, and there is no clear indication that Syria was asked to offer written guarantees to that end. Hizballah's own statements were contradictory enough to wonder whether its leadership even knew the endgame. Hizballah's ambiguous rhetoric might have been aimed at augmenting pressure on Israel and increasing its own value as a Syrian asset.<sup>8</sup>

Syria's official position on Hizballah's activities in Lebanon relied on the disingenuous argument that Hizballah was a legitimate actor operating with

the full consent of the Lebanese nation without Syrian intervention. Syria thus could not determine the post-peace future of Hizballah for Lebanon or publicly acknowledge any need for continued Hizballah attacks against Israel if Israel withdrew unconditionally from southern Lebanon under UN Security Council Resolution 425. In reality, to preserve the linkage with the Golan Heights, Syrian leverage on Israel through Hizballah depended on the continued Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. This explains why the Lebanese government and Hizballah, with heavy Syrian prompting, raised the contentious issue of the Shebaa Farms, a strip of land whose real ownership remains unclear but which Lebanon claims. This delicate and confusing game on Lebanon contrasted with the clarity of the Syrian position regarding bilateral Israeli-Syrian issues, especially the necessity for Israel to return the Golan Heights.

The informal understanding on Hizballah's future after a peace settlement fell short of a guarantee that Hizballah would disarm. Given the absence of a simultaneous Israeli-Lebanese negotiation track, which was deemed unnecessary because Syria called the shots, Lebanon could not assure Israel and the United States that Hizballah would relinquish its weapons. Moreover, even if Syria were prepared to enforce Hizballah's disarmament in principle, former Syrian officials are at loss to describe what steps, if any, Syria would take to promote and facilitate this implementation or whether Syria felt confident that it could deliver on such a commitment.<sup>9</sup> Would Syria's presence, under the pretext of negotiating its end, be even more entrenched by linking it to an effective and permanent disarmament of Hizballah? Would renouncing Hizballah's weapons require a new negotiation over power-sharing in Lebanon to give the Shi'ite community a greater share of power? Could the Lebanese polity cope with such dramatic changes without being closely associated with their formulation? Hafiz probably hoped that Syria's role in Lebanon could continue beyond a peace settlement to prevent the Shi'ite militia from becoming a spoiler.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Hizballah would have served as a pretext for perpetuating Syrian control over Lebanon, which remained the ultimate prize for Damascus.

Hizballah embraced the label of national resistance to circumvent the Taif Agreement and to differentiate itself from other militias. This meant that Syria had to manage two conflicting projects in Lebanon.<sup>11</sup> Hassan Nasrallah, the young and charismatic secretary-general of Hizballah, articulated an agenda of steadfast resistance against Israel aimed at transcending Lebanon's political and sectarian divisions. On the other hand, Rafik Hariri, a wealthy businessman and prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and 2000 to 2004, envisioned Lebanon as a hub for regional trade and finance and a prime real estate market, as well as a magnet for tourism, and relied on the expectation of imminent regional peace.

Syria resolved this quandary by facilitating an informal bargain.<sup>12</sup> Hizballah obtained autonomy and absolute exclusivity in carrying out its resistance against Israel from Lebanese territory with official cover but agreed to minimize its participation in Lebanese economic and political affairs. Hariri was given considerable authority over reconstruction and domestic and economic policies but little or no say over resistance strategy and policy.

This deal had obvious limitations for these Lebanese actors. Whenever Israel and Hizballah clashed, the fighting jeopardized Hariri's economic plans by reminding international investors and donors of the continuous instability plaguing Lebanon.<sup>13</sup> Tensions between Hizballah and Hariri were frequent, sometimes erupting in public arguments that were quickly contained by Damascus.<sup>14</sup> Yet, despite the difficulty of managing this arrangement and the need to preserve a clear but delicate division of roles, it served Syrian interests well. Damascus relied on Hariri to project a reassuring image to the West, other Arab states, and much of the Lebanese public and to generate revenue and growth in Lebanon, which would sustain Syria's own economy. Hizballah's growing power also checked Hariri's ambitions, most notably by limiting government reach into Hizballah-controlled areas and serving as a reminder of Syria's overriding authority. By retaining a decisive say in all security and foreign policy matters, Syria acted as the ultimate arbiter of disputes.

At the same time, support for Hizballah and other Damascus-based Palestinian groups allowed Syria to play up its pan-Arab, anti-Israeli credentials and avoid harsh criticism for its involvement in the peace process. Importantly, Hafiz demonstrated calculated caution, being careful not to meet personally or in public with Nasrallah and relying heavily on his intelligence apparatus to run Hizballah. This approach was primarily shaped by Hafiz's prudence, distrust of Hizballah's ideology, and genuine investment in peace negotiations with Israel.

## **HIZBALLAH STRUGGLES FOR A FUTURE**

Hizballah was expected to channel and moderate the frustrations of its Shi'ite constituency. It did so by developing an extensive network of social services that reflected its social vocation (*da'wa*) and compensated for the lack of government resources and presence, instead of promoting Shi'ite rights within the framework of the state. Doing so would have created friction with other Lebanese sects and jeopardized the Syrian-engineered consensus on the *muqawama*. This arrangement ironically boosted Hizballah's domestic profile over time, shielding it from the Lebanese population's wide rejection of the corrupt Lebanese political elites, highlighting its principled agenda compared to their parochial interests, and allowing for gradual political integration without sharing the blame for the country's many ills. Therefore, instead of contributing to

the country's reform, Hizballah subordinated significant Lebanese concerns to its resistance agenda, arguably a priority given the continued Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

Hizballah remained closely aligned with Syrian diplomatic posturing, alternating lulls and uptakes in armed conflict as needed. It drew comfort from the fact that Syria differentiated between the concepts of peace and normalization. Whereas peace meant the end of the state of war and the establishment of normal diplomatic relations, normalization went further, calling for broader cooperation on a variety of economic, cultural, and social issues. The hope was that a peace with Israel would allow Hizballah to endure as a national guard. If Hizballah could no longer resist Israel militarily, its carefully nurtured society and culture of resistance would prevent the rapprochement of Israeli, Syrian, and Lebanese societies, keeping Israel regionally ostracized despite a formal end to war.<sup>15</sup>

**Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon has eroded its capacity to constrain or disarm Hizballah.**

Midlevel Hizballah officials were naturally concerned about the future of their movement when the much-publicized land-for-peace formula assumed the dismantlement of its armed branch. Yet, they also held a belief, born from Hizballah's political successes, that Hizballah could genuinely transform itself into a political party if need be.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, while Hizballah's military successes in 1993 and 1996 raised its value as a Syrian asset in negotiations, they also gradually transformed it into a more autonomous player with enhanced Lebanese and regional prestige, creating some confidence that it would survive any Syrian-Israeli peace.

Ultimately, of course, there was no grand bargain between Syria and Israel. In its place, after repeated Israeli failures to degrade Hizballah and to break Syria's linkage of southern Lebanon to the Golan Heights, a set of rules were formulated in 1993 and formalized in 1996 to manage the escalation of violence and enforce redlines in Lebanon. Hizballah agreed to limit its attacks on Israeli forces and their surrogates in southern Lebanon, while Israel pledged not to strike Lebanese civilians. These rules augmented Syria's leverage by formalizing its role as a guarantor of stability in the area.

### **Bashar's Search for Legitimacy since 2000**

The second major turning point in Syrian-Hizballah relations came at the turn of the century with a change in Syrian leadership. Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak had hoped to break the Syria-created linkage between the Golan

Heights and southern Lebanon when he ordered an unconditional withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, only to see Hafiz al-Asad's death in June and the unexpected issue of the Shebaa Farms thwart this calculus. Syria's ability to reach peace heavily depended on Hafiz's power and commitment. Bashar al-Asad, Hafiz's younger son not cultivated for statecraft, came to power with no serious leadership or management experience and no anti-Israeli or

**Hizballah's power is not just a result of the high-technology weaponry supplied by Iran and Syria.**

military credentials. He lacked legitimacy and credibility at home as well as in the region. To be sure, his youth and softer image quickly endeared him to the Syrian public, but this hardly granted him the authority or strength to guarantee his hold on power and to pursue peace. To compensate, he sought to acquire these traits by associating himself with allies whose regional prestige was built on a record of anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli opposition.

Enter Hizballah, the Lebanese guerrilla movement and political party that had scored its biggest victory to date, Israel's withdrawal, just weeks before Hafiz died and months before Bashar succeeded him. The group could easily provide Bashar with the credentials that he needed to gain credibility, initiating a process of legitimization by association. By associating himself with Hizballah's strength and resolve, Bashar hoped to counter perceptions that he was either a weak leader manipulated by hidden interests or an aggressive one prone to strategic miscalculations.<sup>17</sup> Bashar reasoned that if the victorious Nasrallah was thanking him for Syria's support of efforts that led to Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the Syrian and Arab publics would view him as the legitimate heir to his father's legacy. To justify his own attitude on major regional developments, including his opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Bashar relied heavily on Hizballah's own principled hostility to U.S. designs.

Breaking with his father's cautious handling of Hizballah, Bashar cultivated a close personal relationship with Nasrallah and made certain that the praise they lavished on each other was well publicized. Perhaps the most trivial but revealing illustration of this shift has been the sudden flurry of posters featuring Hafiz, Bashar, and Nasrallah plastered across Syria and Lebanon since 2000. A former regime insider, now a low-key critic of Bashar, remarked half-jokingly that the senior Asad, were he able to rise from the dead, would use these posters as fuel to burn his own son.<sup>18</sup>

To be fair, Bashar's decision may have been vital to his regime's ability to overcome the many domestic and regional crises he has faced since his ascent to power. What some have branded a necessary learning curve or a typical con-

solidation of power, however, has in fact been a slow but willing conscription of Bashar as Hizballah's ideological partner. Pressed by deteriorating regional conditions, from the second Palestinian intifada to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Bashar grew from a follower of Hizballah by necessity into a faithful admirer and willing captive of Hizballah's confrontational outlook when U.S. pressure on Syria intensified in 2003. By overtly partnering with the region's steadfast resistance group par excellence, Bashar lost the plausible deniability that his father had cherished so much. With that, he jeopardized Syria's ability to maneuver diplomatically without dangerously alienating his Western partners and Israel.

Nasrallah's influence on Bashar is apparent in the latter's public remarks. Bashar borrows from Nasrallah's repertoire, rhetorically espousing Hizballah's worldview, appealing to audiences beyond Syria, and framing his resolute opposition to U.S. policy as part of a larger struggle against imperialistic oppression. Bashar has also revived a waning pan-Arab, nationalist, and strongly anti-Western rhetoric in an attempt not only to recast himself as his father's legitimate successor but also to defy U.S.-allied Arab leaders and pander to their anti-U.S. publics.

Syria's mostly symbolic gains from its partnership with Hizballah became tangible and political ones in 2004. After the September 2004 passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which demanded Hizballah's disarmament and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, and the February 2005 assassination of Hariri, Syria relied heavily on Hizballah's outrage to counter rising U.S. and French pressure and to portray the resolution as an international diktat with no Lebanese or Arab legitimacy.

During this tense period, Hizballah emerged as Syria's honorable and reliable ally. Under heavy scrutiny from Western and Arab countries as well as intense criticism inside Lebanon, Syria could not resort to its usual unsavory proxies to mount a credible defense of its record in Lebanon. A Syrian official remarked in May 2005, "Many of our allies in Lebanon have thrived since 1990 thanks to Syria, but they have lost their credibility with their people. Not Hizballah."<sup>19</sup> Nasrallah stood out as Syria's champion, organizing a massive "good-bye but thank you" demonstration on March 8, 2005, and presenting the departing head of Syrian intelligence with a peculiar if telling gift of gratitude for Syria's support for the resistance: an Israeli rifle seized by Hizballah.<sup>20</sup> The photo op served to mitigate the humiliation of Syria's forced withdrawal and to shore up Bashar's profile at home. The positive relationship with Hizballah, a Shi'ite party with a seemingly nonsectarian attitude and a glorious anti-Israeli record, became the key achievement that Bashar wanted to highlight domestically and regionally. His eagerness to do so demonstrated that the tables had turned. Rather than Hizballah deriving great benefits from Syria's support, Syria now reaped more benefits from its association with Hizballah.

## **Hizballah Today**

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Syria's departure from Lebanon considerably changed the strategic environment in which Hizballah operates and presented it with challenges and opportunities. The key challenge was to preserve a consensus on its weapons and retain a special status in Lebanese politics. The key opportunity was to finally overcome its image as a Syrian pawn and capitalize on its achievements and credibility. This process was fraught with considerable difficulties, and domestic and regional developments conspired against it.

Hizballah's actions since the 2005 Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon are often presented as an extension of Syrian and Iranian policy.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, its interests often coincide and reinforce those of Syria and Iran, but many overestimate the influence that they have over Hizballah's decisionmaking and preferences. Syria today is more pro-Hizballah than Hizballah is pro-Syria. Hizballah is no longer a card or a proxy; it has become a partner with considerable clout and autonomy.

Paradoxically, there is little love today for Syria among Hizballah's supporters.<sup>22</sup> They see Syria as having constrained Hizballah's political potential. The Lebanese Shi'ite community also suffered from Syrian workers competing for the same jobs. Furthermore, Hizballah owes no particular heritage to Syria, contrary to Iran, which remains a supreme religious and ideological reference. An anecdote making the rounds in Beirut has Hizballah militants comparing Syria to a ring and Iran as a finger on Hizballah's hand. The ring can fall off or be taken off willingly, whereas the finger can only be severed.<sup>23</sup> This contrasts with the attitude of the Syrian public, which identifies with Hizballah. Syrians view the Lebanese as fractious, greedy, and ungrateful for Syrian sacrifices in Lebanon, but they see Hizballah as righteous and animated by a just, pan-Arab cause.

Hizballah's objectives are often misunderstood. Hizballah's *raison d'être* has become the very idea of perpetual but not necessarily active *muqawama* against Israel. A former Hizballah activist put it this way: "Resistance is like a one-wheel[ed] bike that Hizballah is riding. If it stops pedaling, it falls."<sup>24</sup> Yet, the *muqawama* refers not only to guerrilla operations, but also to a culture of resistance based on social mobilization and an associated political and social discourse that transcends religion, territoriality, and nationalism, although it is rooted in all three. Therefore, Hizballah has no tangible ultimate objective such as advancing Shi'ite demands, reforming Lebanon's governance system, or liberating Israeli-occupied Arab territories. It will undoubtedly accept those as valuable by-products of its resistance efforts, but they do not constitute Hizballah's core purpose.

Contrary to its initial goals and to the fears of many, Hizballah no longer actively seeks to impose an Islamic agenda on Lebanon and even prefers not

to govern the country if it can rely on amenable allies from various sects in parliament and government.<sup>25</sup> Hizballah has genuinely adjusted to the sectarian fabric of Lebanon's society, gradually emphasizing muqawama instead of Islamism in its rhetoric and ideology. Hizballah has not abandoned its Islamist ideal, but to the extent that this goal complicates its ability to pursue muqawama or erodes its image, Hizballah is willing to do away with it.

What Hizballah today wants most is to ensure that nothing, especially Lebanese domestic considerations, can constrain its ability to conduct its resistance agenda in the time frame and form of its choosing. It developed a two-tiered political strategy to anchor Lebanon firmly in a rejectionist axis formed by Iran, Syria, and radical Palestinian groups. It has placed itself within Lebanese society through its political activities and much-praised social services. It has simultaneously positioned itself above society by defining muqawama, preferably but not necessarily endorsed by a national consensus, as a fundamentally supranational vocation.<sup>26</sup> In practical terms, this focus on resistance shapes how Hizballah operates as a political actor, determining its degree and nature of political involvement, its choice of alliances, and even the decision and timing of its operations against Israel.

Hizballah, which thrived as a guerrilla force mostly equipped with small and light weaponry to resist Israeli occupation, became a more-sophisticated force as its main mission shifted to deterrence based on rocket and missile capabilities. Syria's departure from Lebanon meant that Hizballah could no longer count on an external enforcer to protect its weapons. This left Hizballah with three options: build alliances with other forces and deepen its political engagement to eventually govern the country, manipulate sectarian politics to create a Shi'ite shield, or a combination of the two. All of these options are highly dissatisfying. They turn Hizballah into a political party like the others and conflict with the nonsectarian image it cultivates for national and regional purposes.

This fear of the end of a national consensus over its armament prompted Hizballah to enter the Lebanese government for the first time in 2005 and to obtain a formal Cabinet statement endorsing the resistance as "a sincere and natural expression of the Lebanese people's right to defend its land and dignity in the face of Israeli aggression, threats, and ambitions as well as of its right to continue its actions to free Lebanese territory." Hizballah's concern was quickly validated as its rationale for remaining armed came under heavy domestic criticism. The necessity of reaffirming the value of its arsenal led Hizballah to

**Syria is in no position to respond constructively to potential U.S. overtures.**

launch the fateful July 12 operation that started the summer 2006 war with Israel with the stated objective of obtaining the liberation of the remaining Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails. For its supporters, the war validated the need to preserve Hizballah as a militia to defend Lebanon. For its critics, it illustrated the dangers of Hizballah's continued resistance.

In the aftermath of the summer war, constrained by new strategic realities, namely the deployment of Lebanese and UN-mandated troops in southern Lebanon, and undoubtedly exhausted by the fight, Hizballah redirected its efforts toward Beirut, hoping to capitalize on its "divine victory." Faced with the reluctance of the anti-Syrian Lebanese parliamentary majority to offer the expected substantive political gains, angry at the government's alleged connivance with Israel, and concerned that Hizballah's victory would bring no tangible results and leave it weakened in southern Lebanon and in Beirut, a victorious yet apprehensive and frustrated Hizballah stepped up the pressure on the central government to obtain a government reshuffle and a veto right.<sup>27</sup> A senior Hizballah official confirmed this in December 2006: "Now we are demanding [a greater government share] because our experience during the war and the performance of the government has made us unsure. On several occasions they pressured us to lay down our weapons while we were fighting a war."<sup>28</sup>

The U.S. government and others, including Lebanese politicians, misrepresent Hizballah's push to obtain more governmental power as a Syrian- and Iranian-engineered attempt to overthrow the Lebanese government. True, Syria in particular benefits from paralyzing Lebanese government activity as it seeks to obstruct the international tribunal that will try the suspects in the Hariri and other assassination cases and to avoid the institutionalization and expansion of its isolation under a UN umbrella. Yet, Hizballah pursues this objective for a different motive: guaranteeing an institutional cover for the resistance by seizing a veto over government decisions in order to prevent a further erosion of its domestic position. The confluence of the two crises means that the vital interests of Damascus are intrinsically linked to those of Hizballah, even though it abhors being identified with a Syrian goal.

## **Engaging Syria?**

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The deteriorating U.S. situation in Iraq and the summer war in Lebanon have given new life to the idea of enlisting Syria to help stabilize Iraq and restrain Hizballah. Powerful voices have called for a more-inclusive diplomatic strategy in the Middle East. Those advocating engaging Syria stress the value of luring Damascus away from Tehran, thereby countering Iran's spreading influence in the region.<sup>29</sup> Former U.S. secretary of state James Baker, the architect of the

peace process in the 1990s, confidently argues, “If you can flip the Syrians, you will cure Israel’s Hizballah problem.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time, a piecemeal approach runs the risk of being turned down. The International Crisis Group argues that “[i]f the idea [of engagement] amounts to politely asking what up to now has been curtly demanded, [it is] better not even to try.”<sup>31</sup> In any case, the Bush administration remains loath to pursue such a course due to the fear of projecting weakness by engaging foes and due to the high price Syria would be expected to extract. Nevertheless, engaging Syria might be worth trying on its own merits, but only if assumptions about peace talks are revised, the relative power of the parties is well understood, and expectations are kept low.

**Syria will not sacrifice its ties to Iran and Hizballah.**

The summer 2006 war reinforced Syria’s position on several levels. Syria derived much pride and prestige from the perceived achievements of Hizballah. It hoped that the war illustrated the pacifying role that Syria had played in Lebanon since 1990 and persuaded many of the mistake of pushing it out of Lebanon. The war also reminded Israel of Syria’s enduring power of nuisance when ignored or mistreated. Nevertheless, the reasoning behind engaging Syria should not be uniquely driven by the hope that it can somehow stabilize Lebanon in a durable manner.

If talks were to begin, Bashar would be expected to demonstrate his willingness and ability to constrain Hizballah and then to disarm it once an agreement is reached. Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon has eroded its capacity to deliver on both counts. Syria could theoretically cut off the supply of Iranian weapons to Hizballah as required by UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the summer 2006 war with Israel. Further, Hizballah could still be negatively affected by changes in Damascus, particularly if Bashar awakes to the precariousness of his position. To be sure, Damascus retains leverage over Hizballah because it receives logistical support from Syria. Yet, although Hizballah and Iran give Bashar short-term legitimacy and strategic confidence, they cannot offer him regional and international acceptance or much-needed economic assistance.

The Syrian regime, despite some bombastic statements during the summer war, cannot embrace Hizballah-style resistance because it has a lot more to lose to an Israeli attack than Hizballah does. Syria is also nervous about growing Iranian power in the Levant, a powerful constraint on its diplomatic options. Such a course of action, however, ignores the reality that Hizballah thrives as a guerrilla force; its power is not just a result of the high-technology weaponry supplied by Iran and Syria. It would also be politically dangerous for

Bashar to try to outsmart his Iranian ally. Moreover, Hizballah could turn the tables on Syria if it felt outmaneuvered, most likely by provoking Israel without Syrian knowledge but at Syrian expense. Testing Syrian intentions without a clear process and end goal could therefore backfire.

In reality, despite encouraging signs from Damascus, including high-profile interviews of Bashar in Western media and meetings with U.S. senators,

**Reaching a political accommodation with Hizballah, as unpleasant as it may be, is essential.**

Syria is in no position to respond constructively to potential U.S. overtures anyway. A Syrian list of demands and apparent readiness to talk do not amount to a coherent and encouraging negotiating posture. Bashar welcomes the process of dialogue mainly because it replaces the narrative of 2005 as Bashar having systematically miscalculated with a new one of Bashar having correctly positioned Syria to take advantage of the rapidly changing landscape in the Middle East. Moreover, calling for dialogue

while knowing that the other side will not respond makes Damascus seem open to compromise and makes Washington look intransigent and arrogant. Bashar may well calculate that, were he to survive the next two years and wait for the next U.S. administration to adjust to the many U.S. failures in the Middle East, he would emerge on top, stronger and vindicated.

Although Syria could negotiate peace in good faith during the 1990s because of its strong strategic position, the loss of Lebanon as its economic and political depth and the apparent international consensus on preventing its return to Lebanon suggest that Syria will not sacrifice its ties to its few remaining strategic partners, Iran and Hizballah. Bashar is prisoner to the radical outlook he has espoused in order to gain domestic and regional legitimacy. He can hardly jump ship in the current regional environment. Syria is in a position of relative weakness vis-à-vis its partners. Bashar does not enjoy the same degree of popular legitimacy as Nasrallah, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal, or Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniyeh, all of whom are either elected leaders or leaders of successful political parties legitimized by elections. Regime survival against domestic challengers, though weak and divided, continues to top Bashar's priorities. His narrow sectarian base, though loyal, is hardly expandable; and Syria's crippling economy, sectarian fabric, and domestic discontent are a recipe for internal instability.

The new relationship between Syria and Hizballah profoundly impacts how peace should be pursued in the region. Seeing Hizballah only through a regional prism and assuming that Syria will systematically determine Hizballah's behavior is flawed. Lebanon's fabric and conditions must inform Hizballah-spe-

cific policies. As counterintuitive and cliché as it seems, the priority should be political reform. As long as Hizballah subordinates everything to its resistance agenda, it will not play a positive role in reforming Lebanon. This paradoxically provides an opportunity to expose Hizballah's dilemma. Although many Shi'ites see Hizballah as their champion, the latter, to preserve its *raison d'être*, does not prioritize Shi'ite demands, a dilemma one Shi'ite intellectual calls Hizballah's "schizophrenia." Even within Hizballah, there is a rift between a powerful core committed to permanent resistance and the midlevel political cadre willing to focus exclusively on political participation.

The underlying assumption that Israeli peace with Syria will lead to Hizballah's disarmament must also be reassessed. There is no more symmetry in what to expect from Syria with regard to Hizballah. Today, Syria probably retains the power to ignite Hizballah and hopefully to restrain it, but it has lost the power to disarm it. This prospect alarms Israeli strategic thinkers and explains their measured enthusiasm for the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. The summer 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah even suggested to some that the predictability of a deterrable Syria controlling Lebanon is better than the alternative of an unbound Hizballah.

### **What Next for Hizballah?**

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Despite its summer 2006 victory, Hizballah's position in Lebanon remains precarious, with a risk that it might overplay its hand. Its domestic alliances might not outlast the current cycle of political unrest for tactical and ideological reasons. Its Christian allies do not adhere to Hizballah's strong anti-Western outlook and would not settle for an indefinite postponement of a discussion over Hizballah's weapons.<sup>32</sup> Sectarian dynamics have forced Hizballah to resort to its Shi'ite shield, eroding its cross-sectarian appeal in Lebanon and hurting its image in the Arab world.

More recently, however, Hizballah has tried to regain a wider support base by publicly articulating political and economic demands instead of focusing exclusively on the *muqawama*. Further, in the midst of deadly clashes in Lebanon in early 2007, Nasrallah offered to widen the ranks of the *muqawama* to include non-Shi'ite factions in an attempt to polish its Lebanese credentials and counter sectarian criticism. Hizballah seems willing to part with its cherished monopoly over anti-Israeli resistance in order to regain national, multi-sectarian cover and legitimacy.

The need to avoid domestic strife, which would durably taint Hizballah, could lead it to respond positively to Iranian or Arab pressure to accept an unsatisfactory political compromise, although Syria could emerge as an obstacle to such a settlement. If a compromise is not reached, a politically weakened Hiz-

ballah could redirect its efforts to the south and pressure the UN peacekeeping forces there. Hizballah is also in the process of reframing muqawama to include the United States, now seen as an existential threat to be countered. Given this emerging reality, an overly aggressive U.S. posture will only reinforce Hizballah's rationale for pursuing the muqawama instead of undermining it. This is why reaching a political accommodation with Hizballah, as unpleasant as it may be, is so essential.

The fates of Syria and Hizballah are intertwined, but addressing the challenges they pose requires differentiated approaches. Hoping that Syria is the key to Hizballah ignores the reality that although Syria retains some influence, Hizballah has gained leverage and independence over its former patron. Although Syrian and Iranian nods, as unlikely as they may be, would go a long way in containing Hizballah, confrontation by proxy is no longer enough. Rather, only the Lebanese political process, as messy and imperfect as it is, can constrain Hizballah. Political reform and progress on some of Hizballah's demands, including those related to the Lebanese-Israeli track, will undermine its main levers of power and influence. This is of course fraught with considerable risks and is premised on the capacity of the Lebanese polity to demonstrate adaptability and farsightedness. Nonetheless, this is the approach that the international community should promote to prevent another dramatic explosion of violence.

## Notes

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