

HIZBOLLAH: REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE?

I. OVERVIEW

Few political actors in the Middle East have seen their environment as thoroughly affected by recent events in the region as Hizbollah, the Lebanese political-military organisation that first came on the scene in the mid-1980s. In U.S. political circles, calls for action against Hizbollah, which is accused of global terrorist activity, are heard increasingly. With the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime, the U.S. has upped its pressure on Syria and Iran – Hizbollah's two most powerful patrons. Meanwhile, Israel has made clear it will not tolerate indefinitely the organisation's armed presence on its northern border. Within Lebanon itself, weariness with Hizbollah and questions about its future role are being raised with surprising candour.

One after another, its local and regional cards appear to have been lost: Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon deprived Hizbollah of its principal *raison d'être*; America's swift military success reduced the immediate prospect of it being drawn into a costly confrontation in Iraq; and renewed international efforts to restore calm in the Israeli-Palestinian theatre combined with intense pressure on radical Palestinian Islamist groups have diminished its ability to invoke the Palestinian struggle as a justification for armed action. Today perhaps more than ever since its establishment in 1984, the organisation's purpose and fate hang in the balance.

Hizbollah is engaged in its own soul-searching. Pressured to undertake a strategic shift, it faces the decision whether its future is one among many Lebanese political parties or whether it will maintain the hybrid nature, half political party and half armed militia, part local organisation and part internationalist movement, that has defined it from the outset.

Fully penetrating Hizbollah's decision-making process is almost impossible. The movement enjoys

a highly effective regime of internal discipline and concealment. External influence, whether emanating from Iran or Syria, is extremely difficult to assess. Nevertheless, various sources – including ICG interviews with Hizbollah members and with informed Lebanese political observers as well as Hizbollah's own public statements and commentaries in its weekly *al-Intiqad* (critique) – offer important insights into its dilemma and the directions in which its thinking is leading.

The picture pieced together by ICG on the basis of fieldwork between April and July 2003 is that of a movement perplexed by recent developments and still struggling to find its footing. Outward self-confidence conceals deeper doubt and uncertainty about its role and possible theatres of action. Uncomfortable in its current pose yet unwilling to change in fundamental ways, it has opted for a posture of wait-and-see, maintaining the rhetoric and armed capability of a militant organisation but few of its concrete manifestations.

In so doing, it is postponing an inevitably wrenching internal debate and banking on future developments in Iraq and on the Israeli-Palestinian front that, by radicalising the region, might renew either Hizbollah's purpose or its patrons' strength. The U.S. could fail to establish a political authority viewed as legitimate by the Iraqi people, Iranian or Syrian influence might grow there, and that country might yet turn into a deadly quagmire for the occupying forces; violence between Israelis and Palestinians could rekindle. Under either of these scenarios – even more so under a combination of them – pressure on Hizbollah to disarm and normalise its status, it believes, would fade.

There is little doubt that international and principally U.S. pressure in the Middle East has helped lead Hizbollah to its present stance of relative passivity. But pressure alone – and, to date, it has essentially been pressure alone – can only move it so far. Indeed, Hizbollah believes that the strong U.S. rhetoric and aggressive approach

toward Syria and Iran may already be producing a backlash. A highly tense and polarised atmosphere in which Washington appears to be asking regional players to choose sides is one in which even Lebanese actors inherently hostile to Hizbollah are reluctant to be seen as backing the U.S. Lebanese who in recent months had become more assertive in their denigration of both Hizbollah and Syrian policies toward and presence in their country have felt compelled to mute their criticism since Damascus has become an overt U.S. target.

Being tough-minded need not mean being single-minded. To be effective, a policy that pressures countries and organisations that sponsor or engage in armed attacks ought also to offer the prospect of genuine gain if they cease to do so. The U.S. should be much clearer in presenting these potential gains and in putting forward an overall, positive vision of the region's future. Members who aspire to see Hizbollah play a more restrained role ought to be encouraged. The U.S. ought to refrain from references to forcible regime change in Syria or Iran. It should put before Damascus its conception of a fair and lasting Israeli-Syrian peace, even if its implementation cannot be immediate and its realisation will depend on clear-cut Syrian steps designed to boost Israel's confidence – particularly concerning support for radical, militant groups. And Iran ought to hear some acknowledgment of its security concerns and of the trade-offs that Washington is prepared to undertake.

Putting and maintaining pressure on Hizbollah, Syria and Iran undoubtedly will play an important part in determining the future of the region. But for the United States and its vision for the region, getting things right in Iraq and moving forcefully toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, seriously engaging Syria and Iran and encouraging Hizbollah's conversion into a purely civilian political actor are likely to have the greatest and most sustainable impact.

II. HIZBOLLAH'S DECISION-MAKING

Hizbollah's internal structure reflects its dual nature – military and political – and is of necessity marked by heightened concern with hierarchy, discipline and, above all, secrecy. As a result, much of what is said or reported is extremely difficult to verify. Still, several conclusions appear to emerge that

shed light on Hizbollah's decision-making process and on the weight given in that process to various internal and external actors.

Hizbollah sustains a wide network of institutions embedded in Lebanese society.¹ It would accordingly be wrong to ignore the degree to which the party is receptive and susceptible to the views of its constituents. At the same time, many other factors serve to dilute this influence and give disproportionate weight in the party's decision-making process to members of the leadership who hold harder-line views on both social and political matters.

- Power is heavily concentrated in the hands of the "Decision-making Consultative Council" (*Majlis Shura al-Qarar*), a seven-member body that is presided over by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.² His authority, although considerable, is not absolute. Partly in order to avoid a situation in which the leader's death would cause lasting damage to the party, power is distributed among other Council members. Decisions typically are reached by consensus and, occasionally, through a formal vote. Resulting directives are binding on all of Hizbollah's constituent bodies.
- Beneath the Consultative Council are a myriad of secondary bodies and committees, including both the General Convention (*al-Mu'tamar al-'Am*) that elects Council members and the Politburo. The General Convention is charged with implementing Council directives and formulating policies regarding the party's everyday operations in Lebanon as well as its relations with Shiite constituencies and other Lebanese parties and political forces. It is run by an Executive Council of twelve members, each assigned a specific unit such as civil defence, healthcare, education, regional affairs, or the party's involvement in

¹ See ICG Middle East Report No. 7, *Old Games, New Rules: Conflict on the Israel-Lebanon Border*, 18 November 2002, pp. 4-5.

² Nasrallah was first elected to this post after Hizbollah's former leader, Abbas al-Musawi, was assassinated in 1992. Although the party's internal laws originally barred a Secretary General from running for re-election, the rule was changed in light of Nasrallah's significant popularity. He was re-elected in June 2001 for a fourth consecutive three-year term.

Lebanon's labour unions. Though the Executive Council's composition and functions provide it closer relations with the rank-and-file, the Consultative Council is widely believed to have the final word on all key matters vis-à-vis both the Executive Council and the Politburo.³

- The political weight of Hizbollah's domestic constituents has been further diminished by leadership changes in the wake of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon.⁴ The June 2001 internal elections saw the influence of party laymen and members of parliament diminish vis-à-vis that of conservative and hard-line clerics. Hizbollah's nine-member parliament delegation, generally considered more reformist and moderate, suffered a further blow when its leader, Muhammad Ra'ad, was dismissed as head of the Executive Council. These and other changes resulted in both greater power for the Consultative Council and the virtual elimination within the Council of a significant bloc of party officials with immediate and direct relations with the party's rank and file and Lebanon's domestic political scene.
- Among Hizbollah members, high-ranking resistance fighters enjoy disproportionate influence. There are several reasons for this: their former commander (the current commander's identity is concealed) is typically elected to the Consultative Council, they enjoy privileged voting rights in the General Convention and, perhaps most importantly, they are accorded significant deference in the short-listing of candidates for the party's highest decision-making bodies.
- Further affecting the decision-making process is the role reportedly played by security and intelligence agencies. Some are integral parts of Hizbollah; others have an ambiguous and murky relationship with the party. A shadowy organisation commonly referred to as the

"Party's Security" (*Amn al-Hizb*) reportedly protects Hizbollah's leaders, maintains law and order in various Hizbollah strongholds via so-called liaison committees (*lijan irtibat*), monitors party officials and even watches over the Consultative Council and Nasrallah himself.⁵ According to some observers, it has sweeping authority to restrict party officials' contacts with the outside world and impose disciplinary action, including removing them from office. Its leaders, unknown to the outside world, are said to include hard-line veterans of the party's armed resistance operations.⁶ Observers also report creation in 2000 of another clandestine organisation with the ability to influence decisions, the so-called "Counter-Intelligence" (*Amn al-Muddad*).⁷ Although not an integral part of Hizbollah as such, it is said to include Hizbollah members and Lebanese operatives formerly associated with the party, such as Imad Mughniyeh, suspected by the U.S. of involvement in several deadly terrorist operations.⁸

- Though views differ on their precise weight, Iran and Syria also undoubtedly play important roles through the material and political support they provide. Iran's political and ideological influence is particularly noteworthy. Critical Hizbollah decisions – such as participation in Lebanon's 1992 parliamentary elections – are said to be verified with Iran's Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamenei, considered by the party to be their ultimate source of authority. In the words of one of Hizbollah's most astute observers, "Before taking a final decision on fundamental issues, the Consultative Council's directives

³ The Politburo is chaired by Ibrahim Amin-as-Sayyid, a member of the Consultative Council and of Lebanon's parliament. The eleven-member body appears to enjoy little if any independent power and plays an advisory role only vis-à-vis the Consultative Council.

⁴ ICG interview with Nizar Hamzeh, researcher on Shiite politics at the American University in Beirut, July 2003. See also *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1-2 August 2001.

⁵ ICG interviews with Lebanese observers of Hizbollah and journalists, Beirut, June-July 2003.

⁶ It also is alleged that *Amn al-Hizb* includes a handful of high-ranking officers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard based in Lebanon. ICG interview with Nizar Hamzeh, July 2003.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Others, including the U.S. and the UK, believe that Mughniyeh is in fact a member of the Consultative Council with responsibility over the party's "external security apparatus". ICG interview with UK official, Beirut, July 2003. On Mughniyeh, see ICG Report, *Old Games, New Rules*, op. cit., p. 20. The *Amn al-Muddad* allegedly carries out special operations on Hizbollah's behalf, such as the kidnapping of Elhanan Tannenbaum, a former Israeli Colonel, in October 2000.

are first sent to heaven. Only then do they gain authoritative force”.⁹ Although in theory Khamenei has the final say, his role appears to be more subtle. To date, he reportedly has not overruled a single Council decision, suggesting that his principal responsibility is to bestow on the majority view additional legitimacy vis-à-vis its minority detractors. But Khamenei is said to possess various other, more direct, means of influence, in particular through the security and intelligence agencies, where involvement by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and intelligence services is widely suspected.

III. FACING A NEW REGIONAL MAP

External pressure on Hizbollah has increased steadily since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S. Branded by the Bush administration a terrorist organization “with global reach” and therefore a legitimate target in its “war on terrorism”, Hizbollah soon saw itself labelled the “A-team of terrorists”; the prospect of aggressive U.S. or Israeli action rapidly became the subject of intense speculation.¹⁰ The war against Iraq and the subsequent Anglo-American occupation of that country combined with more determined U.S. efforts to end the violent phase of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation have further tightened the pressure. U.S. complaints may not be new, but with U.S. forces now virtually Hizbollah’s neighbours and with President Bush’s personal prestige on the line in the Middle East, both America’s ability and its motivation to monitor the organisation’s activities and supply lines, pressure it and dismantle its military capabilities have increased several fold. Washington appears to have calculated that its resolve would be immediately tested in the aftermath of its military success in Iraq, and it lost no time in putting Hizbollah and its state-sponsors on notice that crossing U.S. redlines (e.g., supporting armed operations in Iraq or violent

actions against Israel) could trigger as yet undefined responses. The threat of military action clearly was on the table.

Although many of the U.S. demands did not directly relate to Hizbollah, almost all impacted upon it directly or indirectly.

□ Syria was the initial target of U.S. displeasure in the aftermath of the Iraq war, accused, inter alia, of harbouring both officials of the deposed Baathist regime and some of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD), providing military material to Iraq, encouraging the travel of volunteers to combat U.S. troops in Iraq, developing its own WMD program, discouraging the redeployment of the Lebanese army to the Lebanese/Israeli border and assisting militant organisations such as Hizbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.¹¹ Statements by U.S. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld were widely read as hinting at possible military action; subsequent “clarification” by Secretary of State Powell softened the message somewhat,¹² but as noted by a Lebanese journalist, the mere fact that such a public misunderstanding was possible was “indicative of how far U.S. policy has shifted from the carrot to the stick”.¹³ On 21 July 2003, President Bush signalled that concern about Syria (and Iran), far from abating, had intensified, as he accused

⁹ ICG interview with Nizar Hamzeh, Beirut, July 2003.

¹⁰ For discussion of Hizbollah’s history of involvement with international terrorism, especially in the 1980s and first half the 1990s and including the bombing of Israel’s embassy and a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994 respectively for which Argentina and the U.S. have blamed the organisation, see ICG Report, *Old Games, New Rules*, op. cit., pp. 20-23.

¹¹ According to Stephen Seche, the Director of the Office for Syria, Jordan and Lebanon at the U.S. Department of State, “there was very credible evidence of trans-shipments of military-related material moving from Syria into Iraq....There were...reports after the onset of hostilities [in Iraq] of the volunteer combatants being facilitated travel from Damascus to Iraq. . . And then there were reports from the other side of Iraqi regime officials seeking safe haven in Syria”. Remarks made at the Middle East Institute, 19 May 2003.

¹² On 28 March 2003 Secretary Rumsfeld described Syria’s alleged military supplies to Iraq as “hostile acts” for which the Syrian government will be held “accountable”. Associated Press, 28 March 2003. Secretary Powell later described interpretations of the Rumsfeld remarks that Syria would be the next target as a “mischaracterisation”. U.S. Department of State, on-the-record briefing en route to Damascus, Syria, aboard the Secretary of State’s airplane, 2 May 2003.

¹³ ICG interview with Lebanese journalist in Beirut, 22 April 2003.

Damascus of “harbour[ing] and assist[ing] terrorists” and vowed to hold it accountable.¹⁴

In contrast to the approach taken by the Clinton administration during the 1990s, which aimed at getting Syrian cooperation on issues like support for Hizbollah and others by promoting movement on the Israeli-Syrian track, the Bush administration has opted for a more confrontational stance. Under its logic, the U.S. will at best do nothing to help Syria, at worst take hostile action, if Damascus does not comply with its demands on the key issues of terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. As a Lebanese commentator observed about the Secretary of State’s visit to the region in May 2003, “Powell came to Syria and Lebanon to discuss the implementation of his demands. He did not come to negotiate”.¹⁵

Nor can Syria ignore political pressures building within the U.S. There is broad support in the Congress for the “Syria Accountability Act”, which would subject Syria to a series of sanctions should it fail to comply with U.S. demands including those regarding Hizbollah and southern Lebanon.¹⁶ Although the Bush administration has not supported the bill, “this disposition will only last as long as there is an inclination on the part of Syria and others to be forthcoming”.¹⁷

Pressure on Syria did not emanate from Washington alone. Although clearly uncomfortable with the new U.S. tone toward Damascus,¹⁸ France added its voice, insisting on a withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 520.¹⁹

- From Syria, U.S. pressure moved rapidly to Iran, where, in addition to Tehran’s support

for militant organisations, accusations focused on its nuclear program and alleged interference in Iraqi domestic affairs. Again, the tone was strikingly hostile.²⁰ Demands concerning Hizbollah arguably could be among the least difficult to meet, at least partially. During a visit to Beirut on 12-14 May 2003, and despite his praise for Lebanon’s resistance in general, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami is widely believed to have urged Hizbollah to show restraint.²¹

In Israel, despite the clear lull in Hizbollah attacks, including against the Shab’a farms from southern Lebanon, concern about Hizbollah remains high, and Washington’s more bellicose tone may have emboldened those favouring an aggressive approach. In conversations with current and former Israeli national security officials, ICG was told in no uncertain terms – by members of Likud and Labour alike – that “the threat presented by Hizbollah on Israel’s northern border cannot be allowed to continue”, and that a pre-emptive Israeli military action had been considered repeatedly and seriously by the cabinet.²² Since the end of the Iraq war, Israel has given added urgency to its demands that Hizbollah be dismantled and its rockets removed from southern Lebanon.²³

¹⁴ Quoted in *International Herald Tribune*, 22 July 2003.

¹⁵ Nicholas Nassif in *an-Nahar*, 5 May 2003.

¹⁶ First introduced in 2002, the draft bill was renamed the “Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act” and revived in April 2003. See:

http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=108_cong_bills&docid=f:h1828ih.txt.pdf

¹⁷ Stephen Seche, op. cit.

¹⁸ ICG interview with French diplomats, Paris, June 2003.

¹⁹ See press conference of Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, Paris, 4 May 2003.

²⁰ See, e.g., remarks by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice at Town Hall Los Angeles Breakfast, 12 June 2003.

²¹ President Khatami’s public statements indicated as much. Speaking to a crowd in Beirut, he said: “We know that the Israeli forces should not find any excuse to make use of U.S. forces at their own service. We are not interested in an escalation of the crisis in the region. We believe in the wisdom of the Lebanese people and political groups under such sensitive conditions”. Cited by IRNA, 14 May 2003.

²² ICG interview with former national security official, Tel Aviv, May 2003. Making the link between Hizbollah and Iran, Shimon Peres, who was foreign minister in Ariel Sharon’s first government and is now interim head of the Labour Party, wrote: “The Iranians fund, arm and train Hizbollah, a terror organisation par excellence; around 100 officers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are in Lebanon, helping Hizbollah prepare for, and put into effect, acts of terror. They train Hizbollah in the skills of launching the 10,000 rockets that they put at their disposal”. Quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 2003.

²³ Associated Press, 14 April 2003.

□ Heightened hostility toward Hizbollah, and a concomitant weakening of the view that a distinction can be made between its military and political wings, also could be felt in various Western capitals. In Washington, Hizbollah has been characterised as more dangerous even than al-Qaeda by CIA Director George Tenet and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.²⁴ U.S. politicians also have been pressing this theme.²⁵ On 30 May 2003, a U.S. District Court judge ruled that Iran and present Hizbollah leaders were responsible for the 1983 bombing of the barracks in Beirut that killed 241 U.S. Marines. An unidentified witness, who claimed to be a former member of Hizbollah, testified in graphic detail about the involvement in the attacks of current Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, then a senior official in one of the myriad radical Shiite factions that later coalesced under the umbrella of Hizbollah.²⁶ In December 2002, Canada announced a total ban on the organisation, breaking with its previous policy of dialogue.²⁷ On 16 June 2003, the Australian Parliament passed a bill blacklisting Hizbollah's External Security Organization as a terrorist organisation.²⁸ Several members of

the European Union, including the UK and the Netherlands, are pushing to add either Hizbollah's "external security branch" or the party as a whole to its list of terrorist organisations, a call that so far has been resisted.²⁹

□ U.S. pressure on the Palestinian Authority to dismantle Hamas also inevitably is read by Hizbollah as a harbinger of things to come. The goal of ridding the region of militant and armed non-state actors no longer is seen as a by-product of U.S. peacemaking, as it has been at times in the past – but as a priority objective in and of itself that is likely to be pursued relentlessly. Debates within the EU's Council of Ministers on Hamas's status and a possible decision to brand it as a terrorist organisation would, according to a European diplomat, "fire a warning shot across Hizbollah's bow".³⁰

Hizbollah itself has been forced to acknowledge the profound change in circumstances. Months prior to the war on Iraq, its members had told ICG that they were opting for a time-out, "lying low" in anticipation of what they hoped would be a short-lived storm.³¹ After the war, a member said, "Hizbollah knows the new balance of power in the region" and would take it into account as it plans for the immediate future.³² Interviewed on *al-Jazira* television, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stated that he "recognises the profound changes caused by

²⁴ Tenet explained: "I'll tell you that Hizbollah, as an organisation with capability and worldwide presence, is [al-Qaeda's] equal, if not a far more capable organisation". Quoted in the *The Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 2003.

²⁵ Senator Bob Graham, a Democratic Presidential candidate, has made fighting Hizbollah one of the centrepieces of his campaign: "continued operations of headquarters and training camps within Syria and the Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon is unacceptable. For the sake of our children and grandchildren, we simply cannot afford to repeat the mistakes that we made in Afghanistan with al-Qaeda in Syria with Hizbollah". Remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, "Collateral Damage: Iraq and the Future of U.S.-Syrian Relations", Washington D.C., 24 April 2003. On a visit to Damascus, U.S. Representative Tom Lantos sounded an equally strong note, saying he would push for sanctions if Syria did not take action to "close [Hizbollah's] terrorist headquarters and put an end to supplying Hizbollah with military means". Agence France-Presse, 26 April 2003.

²⁶ See United States District Court for Columbia, "Deborah D. Peterson v. The Islamic Republic of Iran", Civil Action No. 01-2094 (RCL)/01-2684 (RCL), 30 May 2003.

²⁷ *The Washington Times*, 12 December 2002.

²⁸ See

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2002-03/03bd170.htm>.

²⁹ ICG telephone interview with EU official, June 2003. A French diplomat told ICG his country had no intention of acceding to the proposal: "Over the past few months, Hizbollah has showed its pragmatic side, as it responded to European, Arab and American pressure to stop its attacks. We only have one shot at putting them on the terrorism list. Why would we do so now?" ICG interview, Paris, July 2003.

³⁰ ICG interview with European diplomat in Beirut, July 2003.

³¹ ICG interview with Hizbollah members in Beirut, May 2003. One member was quick to add, however, that Hizbollah "has not declared it will stop its operations there indefinitely". Another member, also a member of parliament, described Hizbollah's policy as a "temporary, tactical retreat". ICG interview with Muhammad Fnaysh, 7 July 2003.

³² ICG interview with Ali Fayyad, director of Hizbollah's Consultative Centre for Study and Documentation, in Beirut, 3 May 2003.

the U.S. invasion in a key Arab state ... and by the U.S. threats" against Syria and Lebanon".³³ "This may affect some tactics, some speech, language and methods..."³⁴ Although Nasrallah hastened to add that "[these] are secondary issues that will not alter our position on the essence of the conflict [with Israel]", the essence of the message was unmistakable, and reflected the initial shock-wave of what the party elsewhere described as "the region's new phase, the first phase of a new era, that of a new American imperialism".³⁵

IV. WHITHER HIZBOLLAH

From its inception, Hizbollah has been far more than a political party. Indeed, partisan politics often appeared as an afterthought for a movement whose agenda and methods centred on fighting the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Israel's withdrawal in 2000 was perceived in Lebanon and the region as a whole as handing Hizbollah a major victory but it also created its first true strategic dilemma. Since that time, it has sought to define its identity and role by focusing on a series of shifting and so far unsatisfactory priorities.

A. RESISTANCE AFTER LIBERATION

Armed attacks on the Shab'a farms seem no longer to be on the agenda of Hizbollah, which appears eager to move away from an issue that is losing its attraction. The position that the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon did indeed end three years ago, although still officially contested by both Hizbollah's leadership and the Lebanese government (who both maintain that Israel still occupies Lebanese land in the Shab'a farms),³⁶ has been gaining considerable ground. Even in the eight months since the release of ICG's last report on Lebanon, support for the thesis that resistance

against a continuing Israeli occupation is legitimate has dropped significantly.³⁷ Some Hizbollah sympathisers admitted to ICG that the notion of liberating the Shab'a Farms had lost its currency.³⁸ Lebanese and Syrian claims that this tiny uninhabited strip of land belongs to Lebanon are met with increasing scepticism, both in Lebanon and abroad. "Until now I still don't understand the steadfastness regarding Shab'a when no attempt is made to establish the legality of the claims", complained Lebanese Member of Parliament Nassib Lahud.³⁹

Albeit in far more discrete ways, similar weariness is voiced by people living in southern Lebanon, near the area from which Hizbollah has conducted attacks on the Shab'a farms. Municipal officials in the border area told ICG that, given heightened U.S. pressure on Hizbollah, "we cannot afford to take issue with the resistance and the need to confront the Israeli enemy", but privately explained that they had had enough of armed conflict and that the threat of new clashes was thwarting small development projects designed to attract Lebanese and foreign tourists to a region that suffers from chronic unemployment.⁴⁰ These sources indicated that tensions in the South, therefore, are currently confined to negotiations between local residents and Hizbollah on individual issues such as having the organisation move its military positions away from built-up areas. In Kfar Shuba (a village adjacent to the Shab'a), a dispute reportedly broke out between local residents and Hizbollah following attacks launched by the party from

³³ Interview with Hassan Nasrallah, *al-Jazira*, 8 May 2003.

³⁴ Elsewhere, Nasrallah described the U.S. campaign in Iraq and subsequent demands on Hizbollah and its sponsors as "unprecedented" developments constituting "significant change" and "serious pressures". See *al-Intiqad*, 9 May 2003.

³⁵ Mustafa al-Hajj 'Ali in *al-Intiqad*, 9 May 2003.

³⁶ On the nature of this claim, see ICG Report, *Old Games, New Rules*, op. cit., p. 33.

³⁷ A prominent Lebanese diplomat who, in October 2002, told ICG that Hizbollah was justified in fighting Israel's presence in the Shab'a farms, stated some eight months later that "the claim that the Shab'a farms is occupied Lebanese land is finished. The card of resistance in the South is now over." ICG telephone interview, Beirut, June 2003.

³⁸ ICG interviews with supporters of Hizbollah and Sayyid Fadlallah, in Beirut, April 2003.

³⁹ Interview with Nassib Lahud in *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 May 2003. Nassib Lahud, a widely respected MP for the Metn region, is a cousin of Lebanese President Emile Lahud and leader of the opposition Democratic Renewal Movement.

⁴⁰ ICG interviews with municipal officials near the Israeli-Lebanese border, July 2003.

nearly on 21 January 2003 that triggered an Israeli retaliation that killed a village resident.⁴¹

Adjusting to this new domestic and international reality, Hizbollah has sought to redefine its armed resistance as a means of defying the enemy without necessarily firing a shot. Aside from the single limited round of shells aimed at Israeli military positions in Shab'a in January, Hizbollah appears effectively to have backed down.⁴² Seeking to shift focus away from the Shab'a, Hizbollah has been pointing to its repeated actions aimed at Israel's numerous incursions into Lebanon's airspace and territorial waters,⁴³ both by highlighting them in public⁴⁴ and by deploying additional anti-aircraft guns to the South. "Politically [firing at Israeli plans] has the same significance as a full-fledged military operation", argued one Hizbollah official.⁴⁵ The anti-aircraft fire generally causes limited damage due to shells falling in Israel; on 22 July 2003, such Hizbollah anti-aircraft fire injured three Israelis.⁴⁶ But not a single plane has been downed, nor have the Israeli incursions stopped. Implicitly confirming that armed attacks on Shab'a were no longer on Hizbollah's current agenda, Nabil Qa'uk, Hizbollah's commander for the South, explained: "We are not in need of a folklore called holy

Jihad".⁴⁷ To which a Hizbollah official added, seeking to preserve something of the old Shab'a tale: "The essential point is that it is our *right* to resist the occupation of Shab'a, even if we do not *carry out* that resistance".⁴⁸

Instead, resistance has become, in effect, deterrence. Hizbollah's self-proclaimed goal is to make it far more difficult and costly for Israel to attack Lebanon or Syria. "We have upgraded our combat readiness, and we are certain we can repulse any aggression", said Hizbollah spokesperson Hassan Izz ad-Din, commenting on the movement's weapons build-up in southern Lebanon.⁴⁹ Later, he added: "[Israeli Prime minister] Sharon knows that any attack on Lebanon is not an easy decision. As for Hizbollah, we have very developed capabilities. We can't prevent an attack but we can make it very difficult for the Israelis to achieve their goals."⁵⁰ Another official told ICG that "without armed resistance Sharon would have committed a whole load of new massacres in the South".⁵¹

Accordingly, Hizbollah has shifted its public emphasis from "liberating" Shab'a to "protecting Lebanon and Syria and empowering all Arab positions in facing the Israeli challenges" as a result of its military presence in southern Lebanon.⁵² However, it is one of history's ironies that Hizbollah's newfound rationale may ultimately

⁴¹ Ibid; ICG interviews with European diplomat, Beirut, July 2003. The head of Kfar Shuba's municipality firmly denied the report, however. ICG interview, 5 July 2003.

⁴² As mentioned above, Israeli forces responded with artillery and with air-to-ground missiles raiding, killing one civilian and wounding another. *The Daily Star*, 22 and 23 January 2003. While the timing of the attack surprised observers (Hizbollah claimed it was in response to repeated violations by Israel of Lebanon's air space and territorial waters), it was noteworthy that Hizbollah did not retaliate for the death of a Lebanese civilian, a break with its prior practice. Agence France-Presse, 22 January 2003.

⁴³ The Israeli over-flights have been denounced by the UN Secretary General as "provocative" and "at variance with Israel's otherwise full compliance with Security Council resolution 425 (1978)". See "Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon" (for the period 15 January 2003 to 23 July 2003). According to Hizbollah, there have been 7,171 Israeli violations of Lebanon's airspace and territorial waters since May 2000. *Al-Intiqad*, 6 June 2003.

⁴⁴ Nabil Qa'uk, Hizbollah's commander for the South, claimed that during the war in Iraq Hizbollah's targeting of Israeli planes "intensified," and included shooting rockets over Israeli settlements. "This way the Resistance realised a new siege while ensuring that the equilibrium won't change". Quoted in *al-Intiqad*, 2 May 2003.

⁴⁵ ICG interview with Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2003.

⁴⁶ *Ha'aretz*, 22 July 2003.

⁴⁷ Nabil Qa'uk cited in *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 May 2003.

⁴⁸ ICG interview with Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2003.

⁴⁹ Cited in *an-Nahar*, 18 March 2003.

⁵⁰ Cited in *The Daily Star*, 20 March 2003.

⁵¹ ICG interview with Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2003.

⁵² Nabil Qa'uk, Hizbollah's commander for the South, cited in *al-Intiqad*, 2 May 2003; see also remarks by Hizbollah Deputy Secretary Na'im Qasim, BBC, 24 June 2003. Some Lebanese officials echoed Hizbollah's view, arguing that the Lebanese army was unlikely to deter Israel whereas the prospect of attacks by the armed militia could. ICG interviews, Beirut, July 2003. Hizbollah's rationale coincided with, and was strengthened by, Israel's own assessments about the movement's arms build-up at the border. According to Israeli military sources, Hizbollah possesses some 10,000 rockets with a range up to 75 kilometres. One Israeli general was quoted as saying: "Hizbollah has received massive rocket supplies from Syria, and these deliveries have reached massive levels in recent months." Cited by Agence France-Presse, 3 March 2003. For details on the Israeli allegations see *an-Nahar*, 3 March 2003; Gary C. Gambill, "Hezbollah's Strategic Rocket Arsenal", *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, November-December 2002.

suffer from a flaw similar to the one that ultimately condemned Israel's presence in southern Lebanon. In both instances, the armed presence was justified as a means of deterring an attack made far more probable by virtue of the armed presence itself.

Hizbollah itself appears to have come to a similar realisation. Concerned that reports of its armed presence in the South were drawing excessive U.S. attention and contributing to loud calls in Washington for Hizbollah's removal from the border, the movement began to play down the threat it ostensibly had been seeking to assemble. Nasrallah stated that notwithstanding certain costs the party could inflict on its enemy, "we cannot prevent them [the Israeli army] from entering our land, our cities and villages".⁵³ The movement also began stressing that Lebanese regular troops already were deployed at the border and that, therefore, the presence of "Hizbollah's sons" in a number of border villages "cannot be the main issue".⁵⁴ Recent unconfirmed reports that Hizbollah has started to withdraw some of its more lethal weaponry might have been designed to allay Israeli and U.S. concerns.⁵⁵

B. THE ELUSIVE PALESTINIAN ARENA

From the outset, Hizbollah claimed that its principal agenda related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Characterizing Lebanon as only one part of a far broader theatre of operations, it stated its goal as being to "liberate" Palestine. Following the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada, Hizbollah increased its support for armed operations in Israel and the occupied territories, and observers were concerned about the risks to regional stability posed by this "Palestinianisation".⁵⁶ With the war in Iraq, Hizbollah's leadership further underscored the importance of the Palestinian struggle, claiming that the primary U.S. objective was less Baghdad than Jerusalem. Nasrallah described the joint Israeli and American agenda as follows:

Today their main aim is Palestine – both before Iraq and after it. When we talk about the occupation of Iraq their aim is Palestine via the gates of Iraq. When Syria, Iran and the Islamic movement are targeted, their aim is Palestine. [...] Their threats today are foremost directed against Palestine while their secondary goal is to allow the U.S. completing its control over Iraq.⁵⁷

Nasrallah concluded, therefore, that he viewed Hizbollah's task as reminding the Arab and Muslim world of its "holy duty to support the Palestinian people".⁵⁸

In practice, however, this strategy proved to be more rhetoric than action. Direct military intervention by Hizbollah on the Palestinian front would have exposed it, as well as Lebanon and Syria, to swift and severe Israeli retaliation. For the U.S., moreover, the priority after Iraq has become the Israeli-Palestinian front. Pressure has accordingly mounted on Syria to refrain from encouraging or allowing any action that might derail efforts to end the phase of violent confrontation that began in September 2000. Significantly, Syria's President Bashar al-Asad recently stressed that Hizbollah was focused on Israel's occupation of Lebanese territory, noting that "no one suggests" that its aims include eradicating Israel or that it would oppose Syria's potential resumption of negotiations with Israel.⁵⁹ Syria also welcomed (and, according to some sources, quietly encouraged) the ceasefire agreement announced by various Palestinian groups.⁶⁰

The decision by armed Palestinian groups, including Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, to accept a three-month ceasefire has further constricted Hizbollah's ability to invoke the Palestinian situation as justification for its own actions. Although Hizbollah may have been involved in an effort to ship weapons to Palestinian armed groups

⁵³ Cited in *al-Intiqad*, 2 May 2003.

⁵⁴ Hassan Nasrallah in interview with *al-Jazira*, 8 May 2003. ICG recently noted an increase in activity of Lebanese regular forces deployed in the South and even saw vehicles of the Lebanese armed forces in villages adjacent to the Blue Line.

⁵⁵ This report was based on an unnamed source within the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 May 2003.

⁵⁶ See ICG Report, *Old Game, New Rules*, pp. 13-15.

⁵⁷ Cited in *al-Intiqad*, 2 May 2003.

⁵⁸ Hassan Nasrallah cited in *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 June 2003.

⁵⁹ Cited in *an-Nahar*, 25 May 2003.

⁶⁰ Syria's Foreign Minister, Farouk al-Shara, stated: "Syria supports any true peace and blesses any agreement among the Palestinians which bolsters their unity". *The New York Times*, 1 July 2003.

in May 2003,⁶¹ and Nasrallah held a publicised meeting with a key Hamas leader the following month,⁶² neither step appears to herald a significant upgrading of the organisation's investment in the Palestinian struggle. Hizbollah has sought to play down the significance of the ceasefire, both by predicting that "Israeli provocations" would soon put an end to it and by describing it as a mere tactical move by armed Palestinian groups to avoid a confrontation with the Palestinian Authority.⁶³ Still, as a Lebanese official with close ties to Hizbollah told ICG: "Hizbollah has strong ties with various Palestinian groups, and these will be maintained. But for all practical purposes, it has no viable Palestinian theatre of operations".⁶⁴

C. IRAQ: A DISAPPOINTING BUT STILL UNFINISHED STORY

Although hostile to Saddam Hussein's regime, which had violently repressed fellow Shiites in Iraq and invaded Iran, Hizbollah considered a U.S. attack designed to remove him an even greater peril to Iraq and the region as a whole. For Hizbollah, the purported U.S. strategy to reshape the Middle East began in Baghdad, and that is where it should be stopped. The U.S. operation in Iraq, its leader said, constitutes a first step to "tear the region apart [and] fracture it into weak petty states fighting each other in the shadow of [U.S.] military bases spread throughout the region".⁶⁵

Struggling to "solve the dilemma between [Iraqi] dictatorship and [U.S.] colonialism by taking a morally and politically sound position",⁶⁶ Hizbollah proposed in February 2003 that Iraqi opposition

groups meet with Saddam and, through Arab League mediation, agree on far-reaching political reforms while jointly opposing U.S. intervention.⁶⁷ Dismissed by all sides – indeed angrily by some Iraqi exiled groups that considered it an unwelcome intrusion⁶⁸ – the proposal never got off the ground. Hizbollah was forced to explain that its opposition to U.S. intervention did not imply support for Saddam Hussein's regime or justification for its earlier repression of Iraqi Shiites.⁶⁹ Relations with Iraqi Shiite opposition groups, the SCIRI in particular, were strained over their apparent willingness to work with the U.S. According to one observer, Hizbollah leaders began to describe Iraqi Islamists scornfully as "American Mujahidin" (a reference to the U.S.-backed Afghan Mujahidin in the 1980s, also the target of Hizbollah's contempt).⁷⁰ In Hizbollah public speeches, too, Iraqi opposition groups were told they were making a serious mistake.⁷¹

⁶¹ On 21 May 2003, the Israeli Navy reportedly seized a fishing boat destined for Gaza off the Lebanese coast. It allegedly carried a Hizbollah explosives expert and missile ignition switches to help Palestinian militants improve their Qassam rockets. Ha'aretz, 23 May 2003. Hizbollah denied the report.

⁶² In early June 2003, Hassan Nasrallah received Khalid Mish'al, Hamas spokesman in Damascus, who issued a declaration rejecting the Middle East Roadmap and the results of the meetings in Aqaba, Jordan, between President Bush, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. See *al-Intiqad*, 6 June 2003.

⁶³ ICG interview with Muhammad Fnaysh, Beirut, 7 July 2003.

⁶⁴ ICG telephone interview, Beirut, June 2003.

⁶⁵ Hassan Nasrallah cited by Reuters, 7 March 2003.

⁶⁶ ICG interview with 'Ali Faysyad, Beirut, 3 May 2003.

⁶⁷ Details of Hizbollah's proposal – dubbed "the Ta'if plan for Iraq" (after Lebanon's peace conclave in 1989) are found in *al-Intiqad*, 14 February 2003.

⁶⁸ One official of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) said "Hizbollah's proposal was designed more to resolve its own difficulties in taking a position than to help the Iraqis. Given the sheer scale of repression in Iraq, there is no way that we would sit with Saddam around a table". The official lamented in particular Hizbollah's failure to call unambiguously for Saddam's removal. ICG interview with SCIRI official, London, 27 June 2003. Nasrallah, unable to claim any real Iraqi support for his initiative, said instead that Iraqi reactions to the plan "reflected their openness to a deepened discussion". Cited in *as-Safir*, 10 February 2003.

⁶⁹ See Interview with Hassan Nasrallah in *as-Safir*, 10 February 2003; speech by Hassan Nasrallah reprinted in *al-Intiqad*, 14 February 2003; ICG interviews with Hizbollah officials and members in Beirut, April-May 2003.

⁷⁰ ICG interview with Amal Sa'ad Ghorayeb, researcher on Hizbollah at the Lebanese-American University in Beirut, 1 May 2003.

⁷¹ In reference to "some who want to arrive in that government or the other by meeting with the Americans and working day and night with them", Nasrallah noted: "Not under any pretext, in any form or by any means can anyone in the world support the U.S. invading forces, even if he is against Saddam Hussein". Cited in *al-Intiqad*, 14 February 2003. Visibly irritated, a SCIRI official countered: "How soon did it take Hizbollah to start its resistance operations in the early 1980s? Not before trying to negotiate with Israel. And was Hizbollah not part of the April Understandings with Israel and the U.S.?" ICG interview with SCIRI official, London, June 2003. Pursuant to the 1996 April Understandings, Israel and Hizbollah

When the war began, Hizbollah hoped it would be a long and difficult conflict from which the U.S. would emerge weakened and with its plans for the region in ruins. The headline of the party's weekly claimed that "Iraqis prepare for a street war in Baghdad",⁷² while Nasrallah warned: "Do not expect the people of this region to welcome you [Americans] with roses, flowers, rice and perfume. [They] will receive you with guns, blood, weapons and martyrdom operations".⁷³ The swift collapse of the regime and the absence of serious armed resistance came as a disappointment; still, Hizbollah invoked its own experience with Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon – where the initial welcome by many Lebanese quickly turned into armed resistance – to predict an American quagmire.⁷⁴

As a Hizbollah official explained, "After the Palestine Liberation Organisation was kicked out of south Lebanon, there was a sigh of relief. But, as soon as people started to realise that the Israelis weren't there to help them, the resistance began. You will see that soon the same will happen in Iraq. Hizbollah can then serve as a model for emulation [*namudij*]"⁷⁵ Hizbollah's satellite-television station, al-Manar, began broadcasting clips of Iraqis suffering under the invasion and occupation immediately followed by archive footage of Hizbollah fighters attacking Israeli military compounds in southern Lebanon. The analogy (including in U.S. eyes) was reinforced by Iran's reported interference in Iraq, reminiscent of its role in helping to establish Hizbollah.⁷⁶ Although the

largely refrained from attacking civilians. See ICG Report, *Old Game, New Rules*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁷² The paper added: "There may be a great disparity in military force between the Iraqis and the Americans, but that does not mean the war will be over in days". *Al-Intiqad*, 21 March 2003.

⁷³ Hassan Nasrallah's 'Ashura speech reprinted in *al-Intiqad*, 14 March 2003.

⁷⁴ "Now the Americans face the predicament of how to control a people with such consciousness and stamina.... The Iraqis will say yes to the *hawza* [Shiite religious seminary in Najaf] and no to the occupation!" Abdul Hussein Shabib in *al-Intiqad*, 25 April 2003. Hassan Nasrallah predicted that "tomorrow we will read that the 40th day of 'Ashura is the beginning of the end of the American era in Iraq". Ibid.

⁷⁵ ICG Interview with Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2003.

⁷⁶ Paul Bremer, the U.S. civilian administrator in Iraq, accused Iran of using "the same methods in Iraq which Hizbollah uses in Lebanon". Quoted in *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 May 2003. Ole Wohlers Olsen, the Danish head of the

resistance had not reached the desired level by early May 2003, a Hizbollah official told ICG:

True, there isn't real resistance yet in Iraq, only an atmosphere of rejection [*halat ar-rafid*]. We encourage the Iraqis to practice their new freedom in the ways they find appropriate. For every time and place, people will choose the means they find most suitable. But, of course, we and the Islamic world at large would be pleased if the Iraqis would begin resisting the occupation.⁷⁷

The question is not only what Hizbollah aspires to but also whether it is prepared to act on that preference. U.S. officials stated in the early days of the war that they believed Hizbollah had sent armed volunteers to fight their forces.⁷⁸ A Syrian volunteer reportedly claimed that some Hizbollah members were in Iraq, while other sources alleged that coalition forces had captured six Hizbollah members.⁷⁹

These claims are highly difficult to corroborate. Hizbollah strongly denied it had sent members to Iraq.⁸⁰ Perhaps more significantly, all Lebanese observers interviewed by ICG – Hizbollah sympathisers and critics alike – deemed it extremely unlikely that the party would have taken such a perilous step.⁸¹ A Lebanese official with close contacts to Hizbollah explained: "Hizbollah has no direct active role in Iraq, but it enjoys a huge number of assets there, Shiites with whom it has maintained ties over the years. It has no need to send its people. They are there already".⁸² Others have questioned this assessment of Hizbollah's

Basra branch of the U.S. Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, likened the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) to Hizbollah. SCIRI, he explained, also has its armed militia (the Badr Brigades) and both draw political capital from the provision of social services to their respective constituencies. *The Washington Post*, 30 May 2003.

⁷⁷ ICG interview with Hizbollah official in Beirut, May 2003.

⁷⁸ *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 April 2003; *The Washington Post*, 9 April 2003.

⁷⁹ Associated Press, 10 April 2003; *al-Hayat*, 12 April 2003.

⁸⁰ ICG interview with Hizbollah official in Beirut, May 2003. See also *an-Nahar*, 31 March 2003.

⁸¹ ICG interviews with Lebanese politicians, journalists and academics in Beirut, April-May 2003.

⁸² ICG telephone interview, Beirut, June 2003.

influence, stressing that Iraqi Shiites appear to be motivated by a strong sense of nationalism and would be unlikely to take Hizbollah's wishes into account.⁸³

In the course of several weeks of fieldwork in southern Iraq, ICG found a mixed picture. For a number of Iraqi Islamists, Hizbollah's experience in Lebanon and in particular its anti-Israeli resistance remain a source of pride.⁸⁴ It is equally true that in the 1990s several Iraqi Shiites – both Islamist militants and members of the Najaf seminary – found refuge in Lebanon, where they enjoyed close kinship ties and which they also chose as a way to express their Arab, as opposed to Iranian, affiliation. At the same time, ICG saw very little concrete presence of or support for Hizbollah in Iraq.⁸⁵

Iraq's fate may well help determine Hizbollah's own, but for the time being at least, the party appears to be unwilling or unable to do much to affect it. On the eve of the war, Hizbollah hoped that "this American attack on the region...can become a source of struggle, revolution and uprising by all Arab and Muslim people. [I]t may move the Arabs away from the position of [merely] waiting and expressing sympathy for the Palestinians to that of becoming a fighter next to

the Palestinians to help Palestine getting rid of this entity [Israel]".⁸⁶ Less than two months later, in a revealing turnaround, Nasrallah lamented that the occupation of Iraq had plunged the Arabs and Muslims into a defeatist mood of "despair [*ihbat*] and loss of hope",⁸⁷ leading to capitulation to U.S. efforts to end the Palestinian uprising.⁸⁸ As a result, Hizbollah seems to be adopting a wait-and-see approach, weathering the combined storm of the U.S. presence in Iraq, heightened efforts to pacify the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and intensified pressure on Iran, Syria, and radical groups throughout the region, in the hope that events in Iraq over time will redound to Iran's and Syria's benefit or so complicate American plans for the region as to thwart them.

D. THE FADLALLAH FACTOR

Hizbollah's relations with Iraq are further complicated by the role played by Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. Born of Lebanese parents in the Iraqi city of Najaf and educated at its religious seminary (*hawza*), he co-founded the Iraqi Da'wa party in the 1960s.⁸⁹ At the time, he was studying under the prominent Iraqi cleric Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Musawi al-Khoe'i (who died in 1992). With the rise of the Baath regime and the virtual closure of Najaf's *hawza* in the early 1970s, Fadlallah moved to Lebanon where he served as al-Khoe'i's representative. He also authored a series of writings on political Islam that helped inspire Hizbollah in the 1980s and earned him the reputation of being the party's spiritual leader (*al-murshid*), at least until 1992-93.⁹⁰ Over time, however, his relations with Hizbollah became

⁸³ ICG interviews with Shi'ite clerics in Najaf, May 2003.

⁸⁴ ICG interviews in Baghdad and southern Iraq, June 2003.

⁸⁵ The only visible trace of Hizbollah's influence found by ICG was a party poster near the shrine of Imam 'Ali in Najaf – though it could have been placed there in anticipation of a visit by a crew of (Iraqi) journalists from Hizbollah's al-Manar television, who visited the place that same day. One SCIRI official argued that "if Nasrallah would decide tomorrow to visit Iraq, very few Iraqis would show up to welcome him. They will not forgive Hizbollah for letting them down in the run-up to the war". ICG interview with SCIRI official, London, 27 June 2003. That said, there are persistent reports of Hizbollah's presence in southern Iraq. A British diplomat told ICG that "we are almost certain that a dozen or so Hizbollah agents are carrying out reconnaissance and preparatory tasks in conjunction with Iranian intelligence forces in Iraq". ICG interview, Beirut, 3 July 2003. The diplomat explained that some elements in Hizbollah, although for now only a minority, held the view that if the U.S. "will come after us, we'd better stop them" by tying them down through continued attacks in Iraq. "They think of 1983 when Hizbollah's bombing of the U.S. Marines compound in Beirut resulted in their withdrawal from Lebanon. Likewise, they hope that with some nasty operations in Iraq the Americans will turn isolationists again". Ibid.

⁸⁶ Hassan Nasrallah, 'Ashura speech, 13 March 2003, quoted in *al-Intiqad*, 14 March 2003.

⁸⁷ Hassan Nasrallah cited in *al-Intiqad*, 2 May 2003.

⁸⁸ Hizbollah has rejected the Israeli-Palestinian Roadmap while condemning Arab governments (with the exception of Syria and Lebanon) for "creating an Arab cover for the surrender of the Palestinian cause". Statement by Hizbollah's parliamentary bloc as quoted in *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 June 2003.

⁸⁹ On the Da'wa see ICG Middle East Report No. 6, *Iraq Backgrounder: What Lies Beneath*, 1 October 2002.

⁹⁰ Fadlallah's most famous book is *al-Islam wa Mantiq al-Quwa* (Islam and the Logic of Force). For a discussion, see Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam, Musa al Sadr & the Shia of Lebanon*, (London, 1986), pp. 214-215.

strained.⁹¹ Although diverging little on most political issues, Fadlallah objected to its decision to support 'Ali Khamenei to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini as Iran's Supreme Leader. Whereas Hizbollah recognises Khamenei as its source of authority, Fadlallah cultivates from his fortified compound in Haret Hrayk (southern Beirut) his own following in Lebanon and elsewhere⁹² that sees him, not Khamenei, as the model for emulation (*marja' at-taqlid*).⁹³

While a *modus vivendi* of sorts has been struck between Hizbollah and Fadlallah,⁹⁴ the rivalry could resurface as a result of the war in Iraq, with unforeseen consequences for Shiite politics in general and Hizbollah's position in Lebanon in particular. The central factor in this equation is the anticipated rise of Najaf as the principal centre of Shiite learning to the apparent detriment of the Iranian city of Qum.

Fadlallah's initial position regarding the war closely mirrored Hizbollah's. He called on Iraq's Shiites to resist foreign occupation, stressing that "we cannot give any legitimacy to any government set up under U.S. rule or anyone who stems from

it".⁹⁵ When events failed to coincide with his hopes, he, too, shifted his tone somewhat, explaining: "I don't foresee military resistance to the U.S. in the nearby future; the conditions in Iraq rule this out".⁹⁶ He added, "We can't help the Iraqis to resist because we have too many problems ourselves such as being ruled by the military and intelligence services. Also, there are borders between us. We have seen what happened to the volunteers".⁹⁷ But, unlike Hizbollah, he coupled this with a strong verbal attack against Iran, blaming it for arrogantly seeking to monopolise Shiite religious teaching in Qum.

In an interview with ICG, Fadlallah argued that, "Concerning *marja'iyya* [religious authority], Iran has no privileged position. Najaf is a much better place for religious study and interpretation both because of its tradition of more than 1,000 years and because it is the place of the Holy Shrine [of Imam 'Ali]".⁹⁸ Nor did he express much worry concerning the U.S. presence in this regard: "There are no political preconditions for Najaf to regain its position, even under American occupation. Najaf also thrived under British occupation in the past".⁹⁹ Over the past several weeks, Fadlallah has become increasingly outspoken on the situation in Iraq and on Iraqi Shiism in particular, seeking to present himself as a key figure in the Arab Shiite world.

The prospect of Fadlallah returning to Najaf to play a leading role seems remote. The United States considers him responsible for the attack against the Marine barracks in Beirut and for the kidnappings of a number of its citizens in Lebanon in the 1980s. Fadlallah's age (he is 70) and ailing health also would appear to rule out a new political career in Iraq. Nor would Fadlallah be alone in asserting a prominent position among Iraqi Shiites, where some half a dozen clerics are staking claims for highest religious authority.

⁹¹ When ICG went to interview Fadlallah in May 2003, his aides emphasised that he was not Hizbollah's spiritual leader. ICG interview, Beirut, 5 May 2003.

⁹² Fadlallah is said to have a significant following in Lebanon, Syria and various Gulf countries such as Bahrain. He has offices in Syria, Iran, the U.K, Germany and the Ivory Coast. See Maktab samahat al-marja' as-Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, *Al-Mu'assisa al-Marja'iyya, Injazat wa Amaal*, (Beirut, 2003). In Iraq, Ra'd al-Kursan, a representative of an ad-Da'wa faction in Najaf, asserted that the party still regarded Fadlallah as its spiritual leader. "Many Iraqis are looking forward to Fadlallah's participation. The party is seeking to bring him back to Najaf". ICG interview, Najaf, 27 May 2003.

⁹³ The rivalry between Fadlallah and Khamenei frequently is expressed through disputes over their interpretations of religious principles and practice. For example, in early 2003 a videotape circulating in Iran, the Gulf and Lebanon featured Iranian Shiite scholars protesting Fadlallah's teachings. See *an-Nahar*, 8 January 2003. Some Lebanese Shiites, including Hizbollah members, argue that Fadlallah's religious interpretations are frequently too frivolous and eclectic, or "kharij an-Nass" (outside Islam's religious texts). ICG interview with prominent Shiite activist in Beirut, 2 May 2003.

⁹⁴ That Fadlallah and Hizbollah continue to maintain relations was underscored by Nasrallah's recent visit to Fadlallah. See *al-Intiqad*, 9 May 2003.

⁹⁵ See Fadlallah's Friday sermons in the Imam Hassanayn Mosque in Beirut, 21 February, 7 March, 28 March, 4 April, 11 April, 18 April; see also *an-Nahar*, 6 March 2003.

⁹⁶ ICG interview with Fadlallah, Beirut, 5 May 2003.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* Elsewhere Fadlallah stated: "The Iraqi people have great cultural, political and creative potential. They don't need foreign guardianship". Fadlallah's Friday sermon in the Imam Hassanayn Mosque in Beirut, 9 May 2003.

⁹⁸ ICG interview, Beirut, 5 May 2003. See also interviews with Fadlallah in *an-Nahar*, 25 January 2003, *al-Mustaqbal*, 22 April 2003.

⁹⁹ ICG interview, Beirut, 5 May 2003.

Still, developments in Iraq may well have repercussions on intra-Shiite relations in Lebanon and, therefore, on Hizbollah's fortunes. Fadlallah's audience among Lebanese Shiites, already considerable, is likely to have been boosted by his strong connections in Iraq and association with Najaf. Should Najaf re-emerge as a centre of Shiite authority in real or perceived competition with Qum, moreover, the issue of Iran's influence over Lebanese Shiites – of the rivalry between Arab and Iranian *marja'iyya* – also may be raised.¹⁰⁰ As a prominent Lebanese Shiite activist told ICG, "Fadlallah capitalises on widespread scepticism among Lebanese Shiites concerning Khamenei and Iran. He wants to hook up with Najaf to bolster his position in Lebanon. The *marja' al-arabi* [the institution of Arab religious authority] is on the agenda now. When Fadlallah says that Iran is not the only place for learning, then he presents himself as an Arab *marja'*".¹⁰¹ Even among Hizbollah members, some now argue privately that the party should bury its animosity toward Fadlallah and recognise his importance as an Arab Shiite figure.¹⁰² However, the party leadership is likely to view Fadlallah's increased credibility as an Arab *marja'* as coming at their expense, with both political and financial implications.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Some experts on Shiism argue that the opposition between Najaf and Qum has been exaggerated. They point to the fact that Iranian clerics have roots in both places. ICG interview with Nizar Hamzeh, 4 July 2003.

¹⁰¹ ICG interview, Beirut, 2 May 2003.

¹⁰² ICG interview with Hizbollah member, Beirut, April 2003. Another Hizbollah official, Muhammad Fnaysh, acknowledged the presence of a pro-Fadlallah current (*tayyar*) in the party. ICG interview, Beirut, 7 July 2003. Yet this view remains highly controversial within Hizbollah. Members found to be advocating unorthodox ideas have been branded Fadlallah sympathisers. In early May, the director of the party's al-Manar station, Nayyef Krayyem, was fired for having published unconventional views on celebrating the 'Ashura and for implicitly questioning the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. Reacting to his dismissal, Krayyem wrote a bitter and unusual public reply, complaining he had been unfairly accused of "being with Fadlallah". See *as-Safir*, 5 March 2003; *an-Nahar*, 12 May 2003.

¹⁰³ Followers of a *marja'* are expected to pay voluntary donations (*khoms*). Both Hizbollah (acting on Khamenei's behalf) and Fadlallah channel these resources into social activities that help bolster their respective popularity. Fadlallah runs various schools and educational institutions, a radio station (al-Basha'ir), mosques, cultural centres, co-operatives, hospitals and subsidy programs for students and orphans. In 2002 alone, these activities are said to have

V. WHAT LIES AHEAD: INTO THE LABYRINTH OF LEBANESE POLITICS?

A. WEAKENING IRANIAN SUPPORT?

As it considers its future choices, Hizbollah must contemplate the possibility of still further – and, from its vantage point, entirely negative – regional developments. Internal and external pressures on Iran could provoke a strategic shift, leading the country's leadership to rethink its ties with the Lebanese movement. There are signs that support for Hizbollah is one of the bones of contention between various Iranian factions, with some of the more reformist political leaders questioning whether it is in the national interest.¹⁰⁴ Some advocates of improved relations with the U.S. (including some considered hardliners) see Iran's posture in this regard as a major – and unnecessary – impediment. In light of worsening economic conditions, material assistance to Hizbollah also is provoking some opposition among the Iranian public.¹⁰⁵ While few expect a fundamental change in the relationship in the short term, should a genuine strategic dialogue between Tehran and Washington get under way, Hizbollah might well end up paying the price.¹⁰⁶ As an Iranian political analyst put it, "Hizbollah ultimately will be on the bargaining table. But Iran is not going to give it up for free".¹⁰⁷

amounted to U.S.\$12.6 million. See Maktab samahat al-marja' as-Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ ICG interviews with Iranian political leaders, journalists and observers, Tehran, June 2003.

¹⁰⁵ "When the government was slow to provide aid to earthquake victims in the north last year, many villagers complained that had there been an earthquake in southern Lebanon the government would have reacted immediately". ICG interview with an Iranian journalist, Tehran, June 2003.

¹⁰⁶ This possibility was referred to by Talal al-'Attrisi, an intellectual with close ties to Hizbollah and a regular contributor to its weekly al-Intiqad. See his opinion editorial in *an-Nahar*, 23 May 2003.

¹⁰⁷ ICG interview with Iranian political analyst, Tehran, June 2003. That said, curtailing ties with Hizbollah will not be easy. As an Iranian political scientist explained, many who currently are in power are "spiritually and ideologically committed to the cause; it's not so easy for them to let go. Even if they want to stop supporting Hizbollah, how can they do so without losing face? How

B. SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL?

Likewise, Syria's regime appears confounded by the recent turn of events, with as yet undetermined consequences for its own posture in Lebanon in general and toward Hizbollah in particular.¹⁰⁸ While few (even among U.S. officials) take seriously the prospect that pressure will trigger a Syrian decision to disarm Hizbollah forcibly – and certainly not in the absence of dramatic progress on the Israeli-Syrian track¹⁰⁹ – it could lead Damascus to try to satisfy Washington on demands that are least costly to meet. Closing the offices of the radical Palestinian organisations and taking some action to seal the border with Iraq to prevent former Baath officials from finding refuge in Syria are among them. Ensuring that Hizbollah stands down and avoids any provocative action of its own is another. According to U.S. officials, no significant arms shipments to Hizbollah through Syria have been detected in recent weeks (although they did not exclude that the heavy shipments of early 2003 might have been intended to build a stockpile and obviate the need for further delivery).¹¹⁰

Moreover, in a response to U.S. and international pressure, senior Syrian officials have been discussing with increased frequency the possibility of a pullout of Syrian forces from Lebanon. While claiming that this would merely be an implementation of the Ta'if accords,¹¹¹ the timing clearly suggests otherwise. In an essay published in a Lebanese daily in May 2003, Bahjat Sulayman, Syria's influential intelligence chief, analysed

will they be able explain it to their hardline supporters?" ICG interview, Tehran, June 2003.

¹⁰⁸ A U.S. official told ICG that Syria's leadership appeared to be "at a loss" since the Iraq war, still struggling to find its bearings in the new regional landscape. ICG interview, Washington, June 2003.

¹⁰⁹ A Syrian considered close to President Bashar told ICG: "We want the Golan back and we will never give up on this demand. Our best card to guarantee that our interests are met is Hizbollah. Converting Hizbollah into a purely political party would not be difficult since most of its members already are integrated into Lebanon's socio-economic network. But it is a card that must be used to keep the pressure on Israel. Syria lacks both the military and technological means to defeat or resist anyone! But Syria is the only regional power that controls Hizbollah". ICG interview, Damascus, April 2003.

¹¹⁰ ICG interviews, Washington, June-July 2003.

¹¹¹ ICG interview with Syrian official, Washington, June 2003. On the accords, see ICG Report, *Old Games, New Rules*, op. cit.

several scenarios including a withdrawal which, he argued, could deal the U.S. and Israel a "striking blow" by removing any pretexts for refusing negotiations with Syria.¹¹² A few weeks later, President Bashar stated: "If the majority of the Lebanese consider the Syrian army to be an occupation army, we won't stay one day longer".¹¹³ Praising the Lebanese army for its professionalism in taking up the positions from which Syria had withdrawn in earlier troop movements since June 2001, the President acknowledged that Lebanon in principle could handle its own domestic security.¹¹⁴ Nor did he reiterate Syria's traditional demand for a comprehensive Middle East peace as precondition for Syria's withdrawal.

Since that time, the Lebanese press has been replete with suggestions that a Syrian withdrawal might occur in the near future. As one commentator put it, "Syria's withdrawal has now become more plausible than ever before".¹¹⁵ Whether and to what

¹¹² "This is because it would have the potential of placing the U.S. and Israel in an acute situation of confusion and paralysis prompting them to adopt the logic of negotiation and bargaining instead of the language of conditions, demands and dictates". Bahjat Sulayman in *As-Safir*, 1 May 2003.

¹¹³ Interview with Bashar al-Assad in *an-Nahar*, 25 May 2003.

¹¹⁴ Bashar stated that he no longer saw Lebanon's internal divisions as requiring Syria's military presence, which is solely focused on deterring "Israeli aggression" against Lebanon. Ibid.

¹¹⁵ ICG interview with Samir Kassir (columnist with *an-Nahar*) in Beirut, 12 June 2003. Asked about this, a Lebanese official with close ties to the Syrian regime explained that Damascus was willing to withdraw most if not all of its forces, adding: "This will not change one thing to Syria's influence in Lebanon. That influence has long ceased to depend on a military presence. It is now essentially of a political and economic nature, and neither is about to change". ICG telephone interview, Beirut, June 2003. There is little question that Syrian influence is exercised through its intelligence services, penetration of the Lebanese military, and ever tightening economic relations between the two countries and their political elites. See Reinoud Leenders, "Nobody Having Too Much to Answer For: 'Laissez-Faire', Networks and Post-War Reconstruction in Lebanon", in Steven Heydemann (ed), *Networks of Privilege: The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East*, forthcoming 2003; Albert Dagher, *Lubnan wa Suriyya, at-Tahadiyyat al-Iqtisadiyya wa as-Siyasiyya al-Matluba*, (Beirut: 2001). Syria's influence over Lebanon's government increased with the most recent shake-up of the latter, in April 2003. The new team was dubbed by one Lebanese observer "our new Baath government". ICG interview, Beirut, 2 May 2003.

extent this would impact Lebanon's or Hizbollah's fortunes is unclear, but its mere prospect adds an element of uncertainty to the movement's calculations.¹¹⁶

While none of these Iranian or Syrian scenarios appear to be imminent, none is wholly unimaginable either – something that hardly could have been stated even six months ago. For a movement like Hizbollah that has always prided itself on its pragmatism and ability to adjust to changing realities, these possibilities must be taken into account at some level.

C. A PARTY LIKE ANY OTHER?

A significant and – most importantly – sustainable change in the regional balance of power would be bound to have major implications for Hizbollah's role in Lebanon and the Middle East. At that point, the leadership would be forced to confront the decision it has several times sought to postpone, most recently in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal: whether to abdicate its claim to be an armed liberation movement and find its place among Lebanon's traditional political parties as a principal representative of the Shiite community. Some observers believe that Hizbollah's leadership already has been preparing itself for such a day. One Lebanese commentator remarked that “under the right conditions, Hizbollah could easily transform itself into the equivalent of [the Israeli orthodox party] Shas: it would manage its own religious constituency, impose its social codes and draw state funds”.¹¹⁷

As evidence, some argue that Hizbollah has become increasingly embedded in Lebanese society.¹¹⁸ In this regard, Hizbollah's noteworthy adjustment to the post-Ta'if pluralist and multi-confessional political system in Lebanon in the 1990s, and its ability to play the part of a national political force in its own right and to deliver important social services to its constituents should

not be overlooked.¹¹⁹ Others have speculated that Hizbollah may opt to rely exclusively on non-military means of resistance, for example in the event of Syrian and Lebanese peace agreements with Israel.¹²⁰

For now, however, there are no persuasive indications that Hizbollah's leadership is seriously considering such steps. In response to U.S. demands, Nasrallah aggressively defended his “realistic view” that laying down the arms of the resistance would be tantamount to national suicide.¹²¹ “Who else is then going to confront Israeli aggression? The political parties with their speeches?”¹²² Asked in an interview whether Hizbollah would continue defying demands to relinquish its weapons even if it were to run the risk of U.S. military action, Nasrallah shot back: “Is it rational to fire my own gun at myself now because in a week or a month's time someone may come to kill me?”¹²³ On another occasion he said, “The weapons of the Resistance are the symbol of honour and dignity for a people that fought and lost

¹¹⁹ Hizbollah's accommodation to Lebanon's political system stands in sharp contrast to the worldview it adopted at its foundation in the mid-1980s. That earlier approach was summed up as follows: “We do not constitute an organized and closed party in Lebanon nor are we a tight political cadre. We are an umma linked to the Muslims of the whole world by the solid doctrinal and religious connection of Islam....All such opposition operating within the framework of the conservation and safeguarding of the present constitution without demanding changes at the level of the very foundation of the regime is an opposition of pure formality which cannot satisfy the interests of the oppressed masses”. Hizbollah's “Open Letter”, Nass ar-Risala al-Maftuha allati wajahaha Hizbullah ila al-Mustada'fin fi Lubnan wa al-'Alam”, in *As-Safir*, 16 February 1985. For an English translation see: http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/Hiz_letter.htm.

¹²⁰ Such a “new confrontational role” would be directed against normalisation of relations with Israel via a campaign involving “manifold cultural, social and political means such as religious education, the mass media... rallies and demonstrations, and various political institutions to engender the required level of ‘political awareness’”. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah, Politics and Religion* (London, 2002), p. 161.

¹²¹ See speech by Hassan Nasrallah cited by Agence France-Presse, 25 May 2003.

¹²² Interview with Hassan Nasrallah on *al-Jazira*, 8 May 2003. The party's weekly followed up by featuring a portrait of Nasrallah on its cover that showed Hizbollah's leader being cheered by party members under the caption: “Resistance! Weapons for the defence of the whole of Lebanon!” See *al-Intiqad*, 30 May 2003.

¹²³ Quoted by *al-Jazira*, 8 May 2003.

¹¹⁶ In July 2003, up to 1,000 Syrian troops stationed in North Lebanon reportedly were withdrawn. ICG interview with European diplomat, Damascus, 16 July 2003.

¹¹⁷ ICG interview with Elias Khuri, editor of *Mulhaq an-Nahar*, Beirut, 4 July 2003.

¹¹⁸ See for example Augustus Richard Norton, “Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics”, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 1999.

its fine men to liberate their country and for it to have a place in the world. It is a priceless asset.”¹²⁴

A Hizbollah official and members interviewed by ICG confirmed this sentiment:

We have developed non-military means of resistance such as al-Manar, Bina’ al-Jihad [a branch specialising in repairing war-damage], hospitals and our activities in Parliament. But resistance without military action or capability is nonsense. I simply can’t imagine Hizbollah without arms.¹²⁵

At play is not only the appeal of armed operations, but also repugnance for what Hizbollah considers petty Lebanese politics: to become a fully normal political party would be to succumb to Lebanon’s endemic internal squabbling, corruption and confessional, patron-client system, thereby weakening Arab resolve against Israel. To survive and prosper as an ordinary political party, Hizbollah would have to adopt features it has routinely denounced – constant bargaining, sectarian apportionment (*muhassassa*) of public resources and position, and the like. Hizbollah still views itself as an entirely different breed, a broad movement more than a party among other parties that aspires to goals higher than those dictated by local politics.

Accordingly, in order to face the new challenges presented by the U.S. and to avoid further internal divisions, Nasrallah called on the country’s politicians to set their differences aside and postpone indefinitely the municipal, presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2004.¹²⁶ Lebanese commentators and politicians denounced this as indicative of a rejection of the political system;¹²⁷ for Hizbollah, however, the point was

that, far from it having to adapt to this system, it is up to the system itself to adapt to Hizbollah.

When the country faces aggression, we must all be fully ready to resist....The one who has no weapons must obtain some, and he who does not have the will [to resist] must find it....I invite all national parties to reactivate their resistance structures, because we must be ready to face all challenges.¹²⁸

The Lebanese political system is viewed by Hizbollah as inherently oppressive, corrupt, alienating, even banal.¹²⁹ These characteristics, in the words of one Hizbollah official, are “rooted in the region’s history and have become part of the Muslim-Arab mind”.¹³⁰ Pointing to a book regarding U.S. neoconservative political thought, the official argued that he could agree with much of what U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz had to say about the region’s wretched political condition, the prevalence of authoritarian systems and the lack of democracy. But changes cannot be imported from the outside, he added. They need to come from within. Meanwhile, the lack of democracy as such “didn’t prevent us from effectively opposing foreign occupation”.¹³¹

In accordance with these views, Hizbollah had long been reluctant to extend its social relief work and limited parliamentary presence to full-fledged involvement in Lebanon’s political debates.¹³² This

¹²⁴ Hassan Nasrallah cited in *Al-Hayat*, 2 June 2003.

¹²⁵ ICG interview with Hizbollah official in Beirut, May 2003.

¹²⁶ See Nasrallah’s Liberation Day speech in *ad-Diyar*, 27 May 2003.

¹²⁷ See Sati’ Nur ad-Din in *As-Safir*, 27 May 2003; Jibrán Twayni in *An-Nahar*, 29 May 2003. Deputy Speaker of Parliament Elie Ferzli, an ally of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, described Nasrallah’s suggestion as the announcement of “the death of the political system and an assassination of Lebanon”. Cited in *The Daily Star*, 31 May 2003. Hizbollah later insisted that Nasrallah’s words had been misinterpreted.

¹²⁸ Hassan Nasrallah cited by Agence France-Presse, 25 May 2003.

¹²⁹ In reference to various corruption scandals involving Lebanon’s public administration, a Hizbollah observer wrote: “It is not that the system in Lebanon is corrupt but rather that corruption has become the system”. Nasri as-Sayyegh, “Letter to Corruption”, *al-Intiqad*, 11 July 2003.

¹³⁰ ICG interview with Hizbollah official in Beirut, May 2003.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Observers noted in particular the party’s virtual absence from the country’s sharp debate on the social consequences of privatising state assets, including Middle East Airlines, a company that employs thousands of Shiite workers who have been rendered redundant. Likewise, Hizbollah made little effort either to oppose or amend a recent government decision forcing taxi-drivers (who, in Beirut, are principally Shiite) to shift to engines using more expensive fuel. On these and similar issues, “it was as if the party leadership had decided that enough was enough because such confrontations were a distraction from the priority of armed resistance”. ICG interview with European diplomat, Beirut, July 2003.

resulted in at least some disenchantment among those Shiites who wanted it to become an alternative to the other party representing their interests, Nabih Berri's Amal, which they perceived as corrupt and elitist. Instead, Hizbollah was viewed by many Shiites as insufficiently attentive to their needs – for example by failing to mount an aggressive campaign to secure government funding for development projects in the Biqa'a and southern Lebanon. This apparently cost the party some popular support, particularly in the former area.¹³³ More recently, and possibly in reaction both to domestic disenchantment and the fear of foreign pressure, however, Hizbollah has begun to take steps to consolidate its presence on the Lebanese political scene, seeking meetings with a wide array of actors and representatives of various constituency groups.¹³⁴

At least from the time of the Ta'if accords, Hizbollah has made important adjustments to Lebanon's political system but without relinquishing its special status. Keeping some distance from domestic politics has served the interests of a number of disparate actors: Hizbollah, which has been able to insulate itself partially from external pressures on Lebanon to stop armed operations in the South;¹³⁵ its Shiite rivals, principally Amal, which benefited from Hizbollah's decision not to participate in the government; the Syrian leadership, which used Hizbollah's armed potential in its struggle against Israel and its relative absence from Lebanese political games in its efforts to manipulate the internal scene without having to deal with a powerful and popular player; and Lebanon's Christian community, which otherwise would have felt threatened by the party's Islamist program. Paradoxically, a strategic decision now by Hizbollah to normalise its role on the Lebanese political scene would destabilise this admittedly awkward and risky yet hitherto stable marriage of convenience.

¹³³ ICG interview with Lebanese journalist, Beirut, July 2003.

¹³⁴ In particular, and after initial resistance, Hizbollah has manifested a willingness to engage in a dialogue with Prime Minister Hariri on issues of interest to its constituency. ICG interviews with Lebanese officials, Beirut, July 2003.

¹³⁵ A Hizbollah official explained with surprising candour: "If, for example, we take the position of speaker of Parliament [now held by Amal], we would become part of the Lebanese state. As a result, the whole country would be held responsible for our operations against Israel". ICG interview with Muhammad Fnaysh, Beirut, 7 July 2003.

VI. CONCLUSION

A shifting regional scene and strong international pressure appear to have removed key cards one by one from Hizbollah's deck: the war of national liberation in the South, the struggle for Palestine and national resistance against the Anglo-American occupation in Iraq. Hizbollah has always defined itself not as a mere party but as a movement fighting for one if not several causes; it has prided itself on being realistic, but realistic in the service of a higher goal. What happens if the causes no longer are on the agenda, and realism becomes realism for its own sake?

For Hizbollah, the decision whether to become a more conventional Lebanese political party and renounce the option of armed struggle is momentous. ICG interviews with Hizbollah officials and members suggest that the movement is in greater ferment than ever before, in search of both cause and future. But they also indicate that a strategic decision of this magnitude will be taken only if and when absolutely necessary. There are as yet no indications that such a point has been reached.

For now, the most likely scenario is that Hizbollah will play for time and postpone any decisive shift. From its perspective, what it sees as the struggle between Islamism and Arab nationalism on the one hand, and U.S. and Israeli domination on the other, is still under way. It is banking on American missteps and mounting casualties in Iraq, a growth in Iranian influence in that country, a breakdown in the fragile Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire, or all of the above to shift the balance of power away from Washington and recreate an environment in which Hizbollah can survive intact and perhaps even revert to a more activist role.

It believes it can already point to signs that the tough U.S. approach is backfiring. The perception that Washington is echoing Israeli demands – for instance that Hizbollah dismantle its armed militia – has provoked sympathy for the party in some unexpected and unusual Lebanese corners.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ As one critic of Hizbollah put it: "When I hear U.S. Congressmen expressing their demands as if they are talking to a classroom of children while failing to even mention Israel's behaviour, I cannot help but feeling sympathy for both Syria and Hizbollah". ICG interview

Others groups, like the Qurnet Shehwan (a gathering of Lebanese Christian political activists critical of both Syria and Hizbollah), have lowered their voice since the Iraq war when one might have expected them to raise it: they, too, are fearful of being seen as following U.S. injunctions and of enabling a U.S. strategy whose objectives many Lebanese distrust.¹³⁷ Southern Lebanon residents likewise are wary of seeing their calls for quiet interpreted as acquiescence in U.S. goals.

An approach that relies exclusively on isolating Hizbollah and seeking its demise risks strengthening those within the movement who argue that they have no choice but to fight back. In contrast, the policy of European governments to maintain contact with Hizbollah arguably allows them “to conduct a reality check while providing moderates with an argument that the party is still far from being completely isolated”.¹³⁸ The U.S. is likely to achieve the greatest and most sustainable impact on Hizbollah if it encourages its conversion into a purely civilian political actor at the same time as it moves strongly toward resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, maintains pressure on Syria and Iran and works to get things right in Iraq.

Ultimately, the essence of this battle is perseverance, and Hizbollah would like to believe that it has far more patience and staying power than the Americans. In the meantime, it is not about to undertake a major strategic reassessment as opposed to a temporary tactical retreat. Instead, it will seek to preserve its core military and political assets so as to be able to adapt to whatever situation ultimately prevails. As ‘Ali Fayyad, the head of the party’s Consultation Centre for Studies and Documentation explained, “The real tests for the persistence of the American outburst [against

Hizbollah and Syria] will be Iraq and Palestine”.¹³⁹ Even earlier hints of a fundamental revision of the party’s outlook – such as amending its now largely obsolete founding document – have failed to materialise.¹⁴⁰ “The region is not under the American microscope to the extent that is generally assumed. . . . [T]here is no justification for the logic of those who hastily call for giving up our weapons at the first shriek of the Americans”.¹⁴¹

A Lebanese official familiar with Hizbollah’s leadership and thinking put it this way:

Today, when Hizbollah’s assets are depreciated and its stocks way down, they are being told to sell. Why should they? They can wait. For them, the region is like roulette, and though things might not look too bright right now, the wheel is still spinning. The Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire can collapse at any time. Iraq is likely to turn even more sour, and getting the U.S. out of there is, for Hizbollah, the worthiest of goals. The whole region is in turmoil and it is liable to go either way. Go see where they are in a year or so.¹⁴²

Amman/Brussels, 30 July 2003

with Lebanese journalist in Beirut, July 2003. Other Lebanese activists confirmed this view. ICG interview, Beirut, July 2003.

¹³⁷ ICG interview with a member of the Qurnet Shehwan, Beirut, April 2003.

¹³⁸ “By branding Hizbollah entirely as a terrorist organisation, the U.S. shot itself in the foot: This way one excludes a dialogue and one ends up with no direct influence over the party and with less credibility among many Lebanese who see, instead of terrorism, the party’s hospitals and social services”. ICG interview with European diplomat, Beirut, July 2003. The British embassy initiated a dialogue with Hizbollah leaders in September 2001 and has continued to meet with them since, even during the war in Iraq.

¹³⁹ *An-Nahar*, 30 May 2003.

¹⁴⁰ In 2002, Na’im Qassem, Deputy Secretary General of Hizbollah, confirmed that the party was intending to release a modified version of its 1985 manifesto or “open letter”. See *The Daily Star*, 28 October 2002. The open letter called for, inter alia, the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon, identified Hizbollah as an international movement rather than a Lebanese party, and rejected participation in Lebanon’s confessional political system. See Hizbollah’s “Open Letter”, op. cit. For a discussion, see Fadil Abu al-Nasr, *Hizbollah, Haqa’iq wa Ab’ad*, (Beirut, 2003), pp. 215-227. Hizbollah’s flag still carries the words, “The Islamic Revolution in Lebanon”.

¹⁴¹ Mustafa al-Hajj ‘Ali in *al-Intiqad*, 9 May 2003.

¹⁴² ICG telephone interview, Beirut, June 2003.



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