



Hizbollah and Its Changing Identities

By AMAL SAAD-GHORAYEB AND MARINA OTTAWAY

JANUARY 2007

During the last week, the confrontation between the Lebanese government and Hizbollah has reached a critical point. A Hizbollah call for a general strike on January 23, enforced by barriers of burning tires on all major roads—giving people no choice but to stay home—brought the country to the brink of violence. Two days later, fighting erupted among students at the Beirut Arab University, quickly spilling over onto the streets. After the war of last summer, Lebanon had settled back into a pretense of normality, shattered periodically by massive demonstrations in the streets of the capital, as Hizbollah mustered its supporters in an attempt to force the government to call for early elections. The government refused to give in. Hizbollah is now trying to break the impasse.

From Washington, the crisis in Lebanon looks like a confrontation between a moderate, pro-western government and a radical movement doing the bidding of Iran—the western tip of the Shiite crescent through which Teheran hopes to impose itself as the dominant power in the Middle East. From Lebanon, Hizbollah looks like a movement trying to reconcile three identities and agendas increasingly at odds with each other, and blundering in the process. One Hizbollah is the movement that looks to Iran for support and is a player in the new geopolitical game of the Middle East. A second Hizbollah is the resistance movement that gained heroic stature last summer in the eyes of all Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites alike, for standing up to Israel and depriving it of a military victory. And there is a third Hizbollah, a player in the Lebanese domestic political scene, seeking to increase its power and change the byzantine rules by which politics is played in the country.

In their public speeches and in a recent series of interviews carried out by Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (posted on this website), Hizbollah officials deny vehemently that the movement is simply a pawn in a game played by Iran.

The demonstrations and strikes that have become the hallmark of its modus operandi since December are not part of a creeping coup engineered by Iran and Syria to gain control of Lebanon and advance their confrontation with the United States and Israel, as Hizbollah's enemies claim. But "we do not deny this alliance, we shout it from the rooftops," declares Nawaf al Mousawi, head of the party's Foreign Relations Unit. "We are part of a resistance axis to American hegemony in the region, from the resistance in Afghanistan to the resistance in Palestine." Hizbollah readily acknowledges the financial support it receives from Iran, is thankful for the weapons provided, and openly recognizes Ayatollah Al Khamanei as the movement's spiritual leader. But it denies being controlled by Iran or Syria. Above all, it rejects the widely held view that its primary goal in paralyzing the government is to stop the formation of the international tribunal that would investigate the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and try the culprits. The relationship is a strategic alliance Hizbollah uses for the benefit of Lebanon. The movement's agenda only partly coincides with those of its foreign allies.

But the Iranian agenda and that of Hizbollah appear to be getting closer. After the invasion of Iraq, Hizbollah started condemning the entire U.S. policy in the Middle East, not just its support of Israel. This focus on the entire region is a shift for a movement that developed in 1982 to resist the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon. The war last summer, which the United States deliberately and openly refused to stop as part of a strategy to create a new Middle East, has further convinced Hizbollah that Washington is as much of a threat to the region as Tel Aviv. It is not Israel that calls the shots, with the United States lending blind support; rather, it is the United States that calls the shots and Israel that complies. It is not clear what this means in practice, since Hizbollah is a movement rooted in Lebanon and focused on the defense of its territory. Symbolically, however, the growing focus on the United States represents a remarkable change from local to geostrategic concerns.

And yet, Hizbollah remains solidly rooted in domestic Lebanese politics. If Nasrallah's rhetoric ranges wide, the movement's actions are dictated by the logic of the Lebanese political system. Despite what it calls its "divine victory" in the summer war, Hizbollah is feeling insecure. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 has led to the deployment of a larger UNIFIL force in Lebanon. Potentially, UNIFIL could be sent anywhere in the country the Lebanese government wants it to be and pressed to enforce previous UN resolutions calling for the disarmament of Hizbollah. The European countries that are providing the core of troops for UNIFIL have made it quite clear that they have no intention of disarming Hizbollah by force, deploying far from the Israeli border, or risking getting caught in a civil war. Still, Hizbollah does not trust the government and wants to gain enough control over its decisions to make sure UNIFIL's mission will remain strictly that of protecting Lebanon from Israel. This means that Hizbollah needs to control one third plus one ministerial posts and thus be able to block important decisions, which require

a two-thirds majority. Since the government refuses to accept the demand, Hizbollah has withdrawn its ministers from the cabinet and is trying to paralyze the government so that it has no choice but to call for new elections. Hizbollah feels confident that, in alliance with the Christian Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun and other smaller allies, it will win the new contest. And here the arcane rules of Lebanese politics come into play: even if an alliance of Shiite and Christian parties should win the elections, the prime minister must remain a Sunni. Hizbollah is ready to accept that rule, deeply rooted in the power-sharing agreement that underpins the country's enormously complicated political system. In practice, this means that if Hizbollah and its allies won the new elections, the country would find itself with a cabinet headed by a Sunni prime minister trying to preside over a cabinet dominated by Hizbollah and Free Patriotic Movement ministers. So the present government has dug in and is determined not to surrender, while Hizbollah is determined to bring it down. The fact that Shiites in Lebanon have not been accorded a share of political power commensurate with their growing share of the population makes a change in the present balance particularly threatening.

With only 45 percent of seats in the parliament, Hizbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement, and other members of the opposition cannot bring down the government through a vote of no confidence. Hizbollah cannot convince it to resign and call for new elections by using the sophistry of its political arguments: that the government has lost public support, as some opinion polls indicate, implying that it must resign as governments supposedly do in similar circumstances in democratic countries; and that it has lost its legitimacy by renegeing on an agreement to protect the resistance (read Hizbollah) in exchange for election support, thus betraying its popular mandate. The government is simply not buying. As a result, Hizbollah has turned to the streets, to demonstrations large and small. Until last week, it was a war of attrition that made it impossible for the country to function normally, paralyzing economic activity in hopes that the government would eventually be forced to give in. Now, the confrontation threatens to turn to real violence. The result is a nervous country, with a dying economy and no solution in sight despite the initiatives taken from Arab governments and the Arab League.

Lebanon as a whole is paying a high price for this confrontation, which is slowing down the reconstruction badly needed after the summer war and causing businesses to suspend their activities—"Waiting for Godot," reads the sign on a shuttered store in the center of town.

But Hizbollah is paying a high price as well. For a while last summer, Hizbollah was seen as a heroic movement, the best symbol of an Arab resistance against Israel that had been battered in previous confrontations but emerged triumphant in this one—depriving Israel of a victory is triumph enough in Arab eyes. Nasrallah's picture was everywhere for a while. During

the Yemeni elections held in September, all parties displayed Nasrallah's picture at their rallies. The Lebanese, divided among themselves and bearing the brunt of the Israeli bombing, were always more skeptical that the events constituted a victory, yet many hesitated to condemn Hizbollah. Today, in the region and above all in Lebanon, most Sunnis interpret Hizbollah's vitriolic criticism of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora as an attack against all Sunnis and conclude that Hizbollah is a sectarian movement, playing Iran's game and pitting Shiites against Sunnis.

But Hizbollah still sees itself as the embodiment of the resistance. Emboldened by last summer's victory and by Israel's resulting political problems, it is flexing its political muscles at home. It claims that all of its actions are dictated by the necessity to protect the resistance, not by its greed for power. It is in order to protect the resistance that Hizbollah and its allies must gain enough seats in the cabinet to block government decisions that would cripple the movement. It is in order to protect the resistance that it must retain its arms, because if it lost them government forces alone would not be able, and possibly would not even try, to stop Israel from invading Lebanon. The present political struggle is simply a continuation of the war. Once again the United States is trying to defeat Hizbollah, this time by insisting that it disarm, rather than by letting Israel bomb Lebanon at will. But Hizbollah will retain its arms until there is a strong Lebanese state to defend the country against Israel.

Such arguments have lost credibility except among Hizbollah's supporters and those of Michel Aoun, the maverick Christian leader who returned from exile in France and relaunched his political career by joining forces with Hizbollah. For supporters of the March 14 coalition and a growing number of Sunnis in other countries, the image of Hizbollah as the embodiment of the resistance, always weak, has been completely replaced by that of Hizbollah as the embodiment of sectarianism.

Hizbollah today is a strong, well-organized movement, with admirable discipline and a coherent, if not convincing, official doctrine—all officials interviewed for this article expressed the same ideas in virtually identical language. But Hizbollah also has different agendas depending on the circumstances. While always claiming to act in the name of the resistance, sometimes it is primarily a party seeking to modify the political rules by which politics in Lebanon is played; sometimes it is primarily a strategic player determined to fight alongside Iran against the U.S. presence and influence in the Middle East. Hizbollah does not admit that these agendas may be incompatible and uses sophisticated arguments—or sophistry—to reconcile them all.

The situation is proving increasingly difficult. The resistance agenda—the movement's *raison d'être*—is being undercut by Hizbollah's increasingly

confrontational involvement in Lebanese politics and the resulting loss of Sunni support, both at home and abroad. Hizbollah's strategic alliance with Iran has raised fears of an Iraq-inspired, Iranian-backed Shiite power grab in Lebanon. At the same time, Hizbollah's insistence that it must keep its weapons, although only to defend Lebanon, has undermined its legitimacy as a political party in the eyes of many Lebanese. Hizbollah is discovering that it is difficult to maintain a heroic image while plunging deep into the murky waters of Lebanese political competition and the changing geopolitics of the region.

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