

assassinated 12 months earlier. The letter was issued in a moment of real exaltation and it is pervaded by a tone of moral rectitude. The emergence of Hizballah changed the whole tenor of the conflict within Lebanon. Hizballah had played a major role in inflicting a chain of humiliations upon the United States: the departure of the American marines from Lebanon, the scuttling of the US-brokered May 17, 1983, agreement between Lebanon and Israel, not to mention holding the world in thrall over the fate of western hostages. Equally impressive was the success of the Islamic Resistance (*al-muqawamah al-islamiyya*) in forcing an Israeli withdrawal from most of Lebanese territory. In January 1985, only a month before the letter was issued, Israel announced its decision to 'redeploy' its forces, and retreated to the border region where its self-declared 'security zone', covering approximately 10 percent of all Lebanon territory has continued to be a magnet for attacks by resistance forces, which in the 1990s have been chiefly organized by Hizballah. (Norton 1993)

The open letter emphasizes that the 1978-79 revolution in Iran serves as an inspiration to action, a proof of all that may be accomplished when the faithful gather under the banner of Islam. 'We address all the Arab and Islamic peoples to declare to them that the Muslim's experience in Islamic Iran left no one any excuse since it proved beyond all doubt that bare chests motivated by faith are capable, with God's help, of breaking the iron and oppression of tyrannical regimes.' (183-4)<sup>2</sup> 'It is time to realize that all the western ideas concerning man's origin and nature cannot respond to man's aspirations or rescue him from the darkness of misguidedness and ignorance.' Islam is the answer. 'Only Islam can bring about man's renaissance, progress, and creativity because "He lights with the oil of an olive tree that is neither eastern nor western, a tree whose oil burns, even if not touched by fire, to light the path. God leads to His light whomever He wishes".' (184)

The open letter describes a world in which 'the countries of the arrogant world' and especially the United States and the Soviet Union (still Cold war adversaries in 1985) struggle for influence at the expense of the Third World. 'Consequently, the oppressed countries have become the struggle's bone of contention and the oppressed peoples have become its fuel.' (178) In Iran, the ethos of the revolution was summed up by the slogan 'neither East nor West', which is also reflected in Hizballah's commentary. One commentator writing in *al-Ahd*, the Hizballah newspaper, notes: 'The Soviets are not one iota different from the Americans in terms of political danger, indeed are more dangerous than them in terms of ideological considerations as well, and this requires that light be shed on this fact and that the Soviets be assigned their proper place in the forces ~~striving to strike at the interests~~ of the Moslem people and arrogate their political present and future.' (May 9, 1987: 12)

The starring role for the enemy of Islam, however, goes to the United States which directly, or indirectly through its 'spearhead,' Israel, has inflicted suffering upon the Muslims of Lebanon. (179) 'Imam Khomeini, the leader, has repeatedly stressed that America is the reason for all our catastrophes and the source of all malice. By fighting it, we are only exercising our legitimate right to defend our Islam and the dignity of our nation.' (170)

The French were also singled out for attack, largely because of their long-standing sympathy for the Maronite community in Lebanon, and for their arms sales to Iraq. For example, in August 1989 the Hizballah radio station noted that the French should be 'taught a lesson because of their scorn for other people and lack of respect for Lebanese Muslims.' (Cited in the *International Herald Tribune*, August 24, 1989)

Compromise and mediation are no answer. Where fractiousness exists among Muslims it is the product of imperialism. Disunity is a product of imperialism, and its agents including compromisers, evil *ulama* and the leaders who have been imposed by colonialism. (184) And, as for Lebanon, the government is corrupt to its core. No renovation can make it palatable, and those that pursue such solutions are traitors to Islam. Self-help is the only answer. The superpowers are corrupt. They have no answers for Lebanon. When the Muslims were under brutal attack in 1982, no one came to their rescue. 'We appealed to the world's conscience but heard nothing from and found no trace of it.' (170) The United Nations, despite its pretensions, merely serves the interests of the arrogant superpowers, or is, at least, prevented from acting by the tacit conspiracy of the superpowers (through their use of the veto). The only answer is to fight under the banner of Islam. 'Thus, we have seen that aggression can be repelled only with the sacrifice of blood, and that freedom is not given but regained with the sacrifice of both heart and soul.' (171)

<sup>2</sup>The page references are to Norton 1987, where the open letter is translated.



Hizballah thus positions itself as a force resisting the designs and games of Israel and the superpowers, whose jockeying for power has led to subjugation and oppression throughout the Third World. The objective is to free Lebanon from the manipulation and chicanery of the malevolent outside powers in order to achieve 'the final departure of America, France, and their allies from Lebanon and the termination of the influence of any imperialist power in the country.' (173) 'The Christian Phalange, who have unjustly enjoyed privilege at the expense of the Muslims, must be pummeled into submission. Only when Lebanon is free from the insidious influence of the superpowers, and when the Phalange have been conquered, will the Lebanese be able to control their fate. Of course, the Phalange is not Hizballah's only Lebanese opponent. Virtually unnoticed outside of Lebanon, Hizballah proved to be especially intolerant of competitors for Shi'i recruits. In this regard the Communist party, an especially appealing target given its alien and atheistic ideology, was singled out for attacks. Dozens, if not hundreds of party members party were killed in a brutal, bloody campaign of suppression and assassination in 1984 and 1985. (Norton 1987b, 1988, 1989)

One of the burdens of the letter is to explain and justify the use of violence by Hizballah, which, it is argued, has been trivialized in the west as 'a handful of fanatics and terrorists who are only concerned with blowing up drinking, gambling, and entertainment spots....' (170) 'Each of us is a combat soldier when the call of jihad demands it and each of us undertakes his task in the battle in accordance with his lawful assignment within the framework of action under the guardianship of the leader jurisprudent.' (169)

Negotiating with Israel is only a form of compromise which validates Israel's occupation of Palestine. 'We condemn strongly all the plans for mediation between us and Israel and we consider the mediators a hostile party because their mediation will only serve to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Zionist occupation of Palestine,' (179) The ultimate objective is to destroy Israel and to liberate Palestine. Thus, 'Israel's final departure from Lebanon is a prelude to its final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation.' (173) It is this absolutism which serves to explain the operational links between Hizballah and the rejectionist Palestinian groups that have opposed the mainstream PLO's peacemaking with Israel.

Once Lebanon is freed from external and internal domination the people will be given the opportunity to determine their fate, but, if they choose freely, they will only choose Islam. Whether the goal is clerical rule under the concept of the *wilayat al-faqih* is not made altogether clear in the open letter. Some scholars claim that the Lebanese Shi'a do not call for 'guardianship' but the 'rule of the *shari'a*.' However, arguably the application of *shari'a* in the context of Khomeini's neo-Shi'ism entails guardianship. In any event, given the central role of the *mujtahid* in Shi'i Islam, a state founded on the *shari'a* could scarcely function without regular recourse to the 'ulama.

The role of the 'ulama are addressed in the open letter: 'Therefore, one of your most important responsibilities, O Muslim 'ulama, is to educate the Muslims to abide by the dictates of Islam, to point out to them the political line they should follow, to lead them toward glory and honor, and to devote attention to the religious institutes so that they may graduate leaders faithful to God and eager to uphold religion and the nation.' (186) '...we do not hide our commitment to the rule of Islam and that we urge an Islamic system that alone guarantees justice and dignity for all and prevents any new imperialist attempt to infiltrate our country.' (173) Hizballah urges 'adoption of the Islamic system on the basis of free and direct selection by the people, not the basis of forceful imposition, as some people imagine.' (175) Unfortunately, given the organization's pattern of violence against its political and ideological adversaries, Hizballah's commitment to voluntarism has to be doubted. Anecdotal data from non-affiliated Shi'is living in the Hizballah-dominated regions add weight to this note of doubt.

### Implementing the Design

True to the often intransigent and consistently militant tone of the open letter, Hizballah moved aggressively in the mid to late 1980s to strike aggressively at western influence and westerners in Lebanon. Groups linked to Hizballah, if not directly controlled by the party, kidnapped dozens of foreigners and held them hostage for as long as seven years (in the case of the American journalist Terry Anderson). Although the myriad of groups that abducted foreigners often pursued their own local agendas, particularly the freeing of Lebanese held in Kuwaiti and Israeli prisons, the captors were also sensitive to Iran's interests and influence with the result that freeing the captives required a complex series of negotiations involving the freeing of Iranian assets by the United States, the freeing of Lebanese prisoners by Israel, and, most important, a government in Tehran intent on bringing the hostage crisis to an end. The negotiations were



conducted under the personal auspices of United Nations Secretary General Perez de Cuellar, and off-record accounts by UN officials at the center of the negotiations emphasize both the importance of Iran's capacity for suasion as well as the limits of Iran's influence. (Private meeting, January 1992)

Perhaps the signal act of the period was the June 1985 skyjacking of TWA flight 847 to Beirut. Hizballah was deeply implicated in the hijacking, which was intended to highlight the fate of 766 Lebanese prisoners held in Israel (primarily in the Atlit prison), many of whom were held under extremely difficult conditions and with no recourse to the protections of international law. Some of the captives had participated in resistance operations, but others were merely suspects held hostage by Israel. Not only did the hijacking expose the deep tensions between Amal and Hizballah when Amal leader Nabih Berri attempted to mediate the crisis, but it also revealed the deep-seated radicalization of the Shi'i political scene. In point of fact, Hizballah was intent to demonstrate that Berri lacked the ability to speak on its behalf. The end of the crisis only came through the quiet agreement of Israel to release its Lebanese prisoners being held in the Atlit prison, and the intervention of Syria, and especially Iranian Speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was enlisted to pressure the perpetrators to bring the crisis to an end.

Iran's support for Hizballah had never been unconditional, although the organization had certainly served as a stalking horse for Iranian interests. However, by the end of the decade Iran's support for Hizballah wavered, especially in terms of its use of violence. In the Gulf, Iran's efforts to foster domestic bases of support failed for the most part. In contrast, only in Lebanon were the conditions propitious for the establishment of a revolutionary foothold. Nonetheless, by the late 1980s, Iran's policies were changing, often in ways that were unsettling to the devotees of the Islamic revolution. In 1988, the first Gulf war that Ayatollah Khomeini had vowed to pursue until Saddam Hussein was toppled, came to an ignominious end. With the death of Khomeini in 1989, the charismatic symbol of the revolution was replaced by men of more modest proportions who would now have to address the daunting, if mundane challenges of post-revolutionary Iran. Even before Khomeini's death, the rationale for Iran's power position in Lebanon was changing, and the underlying logic for Iran's ties to Lebanon would be dramatically rethought.

While Iran's alliance with Syria remained compelling, given the shared Iraqi adversary, Turkey's geopolitical advantages vis-à-vis both countries, and the ever-present threat of a U.S. backed Israel, Hizballah's value was no longer unequivocal. During the first Gulf war, Iran had exploited its influence with Hizballah to squeeze the foreign hostages for spare parts and missiles. With the Gulf war concluded, the hostages were an impediment to Iran recovering funds sequestered by the United States. Internecine fighting between Amal and Hizballah provoked a significant change of attitude in Tehran, where the bloodletting in Lebanon was viewed with disgust. The fighting between the two groups was vicious and cost many civilians their lives. As a result, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani reacted sharply to the conflagration, and condemned both sides for their actions. Rafsanjani's stance seemed to signal a new departure for Iran, cultivating relations broadly among the Shi'a rather than concentrating on only one group. (Norton 1990: 132)

The coterie of young clerics who comprise the cadre of Hizballah's chafed under the non-clerical leadership of Amal, and the movement's accommodation with Lebanese clientelism. Unlike the Amal politicians, who were intent to comprise the new Shi'i bourgeois, the leaders of Hizballah had been trained in Najaf, Karbala and Qum, where they were ideologically inculcated by the likes of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Muhsin al-Hakim, Ruhollah al-Musavi Khomeini.

From its first moments, Hizballah defined itself in contrast to Amal, and a key turning point came in 1988-89, when the two militias fought to contest the Shi'i heartland in the south, and the teeming southern suburbs of Beirut, where fully half of the Shi'i population now resides. The fighting was sparked by the kidnapping of U.S. marine Lt. Colonel William R. Higgins, who was serving with United Nations forces in the south. The kidnapping was carried out by a splinter group of Amal--the 'Believer's Resistance', led by a former Lebanese army intelligence sergeant Mustafa Dirani--that was sympathetic to Hizballah.<sup>3</sup> The kidnapping undermined Amal's strategy of maintaining a cooperative working relationship with the UNIFIL (the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) and it provoked a sharp offensive reaction from Amal. Nonetheless, the kidnappers succeeded in evading the Amal searchers and Higgins was later killed, but not before the incident sparked serious clashes between Amal and Hizballah, clashes which permitted Amal to consolidate its grip on southern Lebanon. Shortly thereafter, in the fall of 1988, fighting erupted in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and Amal was badly defeated virtually losing its military foothold in the capital.

<sup>3</sup> Dirani was kidnapped by Israeli forces from his Biqa' valley village in 1994.



Hizballah's efforts to roll back Amal influence in the south in 1989 eroded Amal's position there, though it remains popular in the south.

### **Walking between Raindrops**

Despite the fierce ideological tenor in the open letter of 1985, Hizballah has had to pragmatically confront the shifting political landscape of regional politics, as well as the changing terrain of Lebanese politics. As a result, Hizballah has evolved to become a Janus-faced phenomenon. It has retained its fierce enmity for Israel and its commitment to ending Israel's occupation in southern Lebanon, but it has also entered the game of confessional politics in Lebanon, despite its earlier expression of contempt for the political system in Lebanon. Although the evolution of the Iranian regime, especially since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 has obviously affected Hizballah, as has the hegemonic position of Syria vis-à-vis Lebanon, there is little doubt that Hizballah has proved itself responsive to the attitudes and aspirations of its domestic constituency. This constituency includes a large chunk of the expanding Shi'i middle class that has grown skeptical of the Amal movement and its notorious corruption, and has come to admire the comparative integrity of Hizballah. Its broadened constituency brings with it new requisites for sustaining support.

The decision to participate in parliamentary elections in 1992, the first held Lebanon in twenty years, was symptomatic of Hizballah's coming to terms with its socio-political setting. Its success in 1992 signaled the party's acknowledgment that Lebanon is *sui generis*, and that imported Iranian models, however inspiring for certain perspectives, may not be applied in Lebanon. This conclusion was resisted by the Hizballah leadership throughout the 1980s, as it was by many of their Tehran allies, but it was a conclusion that Shaykh Muhammad Husain Fadlallah, arguably the most influential Shi'i cleric in Lebanon made publicly for years. Some scholars argue that the Islamic state model has been put aside tactically 'so that they could appear less threatening to a multiconfessional society and thereby penetrate the regime apparatus more effectively...' (MECS 199\_, 479) Such doubts may be understandable, but many leading Lebanese politicians who have dealt with Hizballah in parliament argue that the movement is, in fact, being co-opted into the system. (Author interviews, July 1995, July 1996, and July-August 1997)

The potential ascendancy of the Shi'i community in Lebanon enlivens a variety of foes, both domestic and foreign. Concerted efforts, including a ban on land sales, have been taken within the redoubtable Druze community to prevent the swelling population of Shi'a from Beirut's southern suburbs from settling in the Shouf mountains. Given Hizballah's acknowledged links to Iran, it often accrues heightened animosity and suspicion both inside and outside of Lebanon. In the 1996 parliamentary elections, a popular Hizballahi deputy lost his bid for re-election in the Baabda district as Druze and Maronite politicians mobilized support for a Shi'i candidate with little support in his own community. Although no single confessional group in Lebanon accounts for a majority of the population, the successes of Hizballah, and earlier of Amal, has often sparked a working majority of Lebanese willing to oppose Shi'i interests. The anti-Shi'i coalitions find ready encouragement from outside of the country, sometimes from Syria, and more or less consistently from Shi'i phobic Saudi Arabia, which has made little secret of its desire to buttress the position of the Sunni Muslims in Lebanon. In the late 1980s, Saddam Hussein, intent to reinforce the anti-Syrian uprising of General Michel 'Aun, poured heavy arms into Lebanon, a gamble that was aimed at thwarting Syrian power in Lebanon but shifting the interconfessional balance in favor of the Maronites.

Hizballah often must walk between raindrops to preserve its place in Lebanon. Indeed, the price of survival is a pragmatic accommodation with political reality that exposes it to internal fissuring (*inshiqaq*) such as the 1997 initiative of Shaikh Subhi Tufayli to launch a revolt of the hungry. Tufayli had been deeply critical of the 1992 decision to participate in parliamentary elections, precisely on the prescient grounds that Hizballah would be transformed (*tahawwal*) from revolutionary force to tame political participant. Hizballah's entry into parliamentary politics marginalized Tufayli, a former secretary-general of Hizballah, but he has built a constituency in the Bika' valley, where the economy remains heavily dependent upon agriculture, including drug cultivation.

Although imported cocoa paste and poppies are reputedly still being processed in Ba'albak in labs that may earn hundreds of millions of dollars annually, the cash crop farming of drugs has been suppressed. Farmers have been forced to switch to the cultivation of potatoes and other vegetables. Unfortunately, the market for produce has been depressed, not least because Syria is exporting significant quantities of cheap produce to Lebanon, exploiting its free access to the Lebanese economy. This has spawned an environment of



angry discontent that Tufayli has helped to fan. Though he announced his intentions months before, on July 4, 1997, he launched the thawrat al-jiyaa or the revolution of the hungry with a rally that was banned by the government, but still attended by several thousand denizens. Tufayli's populist charter includes demands for job creation, crop subsidies, free education, electricity and water, and the equation of service with the resistance with army service for the purpose of state benefits and pensions. Implicitly, of course, Tufayli was criticizing Hizballah for failing its needy constituents, and well-connected members of Hizballah emphasized the deep resonance of the revolution of the hungry in the dense Shi'i suburbs of Beirut. Amidst speculation that Syria had encouraged Tufayli as a means of diluting Hizballah's influence, party Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah confronted the new group with studied coolness and ill-hidden concern. Nasrallah's concern proved justified. In January 1998, after months of challenging state authority, Tufayli attempted to supplant Hizballah's commemoration of Jerusalem Day in Ba'albak. Within 24 hours he was expelled from Hizballah. As a riposte, Tufayli and 200 of his followers occupied the Hizballah hawza in the Ba'albak, prompting a bloody clash with the army, which Hizballah called for assistance.

In many ways, Hizballah's most problematic relationship has been with Syria. While party officials are intent to emphasize their close collaboration with Damascus, there are no illusions. Through its leading role in the resistance in the South, Hizballah serves as a useful mechanism for pressuring Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights. Syria has assiduously pressured Lebanon to insure that no deal on the South will even be contemplated unless it is linked to a deal on the Golan. Should Israel and Syria reach an agreement settling the fate of the Golan and ending the occupation of southern Lebanon, the sine qua non will no doubt be the disarming of Hizballah.

There have been several bloody clashes between Syrian troops and Hizballah, such as in February 1987 when Syrian forces killed 20 militiamen provoking a storm of protest from Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri and then Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi. (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997: 133) Rafsanjani papered over the differences, characteristically revealing his own predilection for Realpolitik by noting that the strategic interests of the Islamic Revolution demand restraint. A later incident, in 1993, when Lebanese troops shot demonstrators in the southern suburbs raised little response in Iran, and was widely taken within Hizballah as a marker of Syria's hegemonial position.

### The Question of the South

Hizballah has done more to combat Israel than any other force in the Arab world. Some involved observers have argued that Hizballah is simply a terrorist or extremist group; that it has little real support in the general population of Lebanon or even among the thirty-five percent or so of the Lebanese who are Shi'i Muslims; that it is a creature of external support; that it has a vested interest in Israel's continued occupation of southern Lebanon, since it would forfeit its distinctive cachet of militancy with no 'security zone' to attack; and, without that cachet it would become an marginal player in Lebanese politics. (Baili 1995) Variations on these views are frequently heard and read, especially by those whose conclusions are based on conjecture rather than field work. The reality is very different, especially in respect to the level of popular support that Hizballah enjoys. It is certainly true that Hizballah has exploited its resistance role in order to build political support. Thus, in the August-September 1996 parliamentary elections, one widely distributed Hizballah campaign poster, which was displayed in many districts of Beirut, as well as the dahiyah (the heavily Shi'i southern suburbs) recalled the sacrifices of the Hizballahis who combat Israel's occupation of South Lebanon: 'They resist with their blood. Resist with your vote.'

There is no question that Hizballah's operations in the south are coordinated with Syria (Hizballah officials freely admit as much), but there is also no question that the resistance is extremely popular among the Shi'a. In fact, the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon is viewed with suspicion and enmity by many Lebanese who worry that Israel covets Lebanese land as well as Lebanese water. Hizballah officials frequently observe that if Israel's presence in the south was not resisted, Israel would have little incentive to even consider withdrawing its forces from the South. (Nasrallah 1996) This assertion is widely shared in Lebanon and the converse proposition that a cessation of resistance activities would induce Israel to withdraw is often dismissed as laughably improbable, and it is not likely to soon be put to an empirical test, since the resistance enjoys wide support, especially among the Shi'a who have been the prime victims of Israel's occupation. Since the late 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have been repeatedly displaced from their homes in the South, more often than not as a result of Israeli military action. In April 1996 alone, some



200,000 fled their homes during the battles between Hizballah and the IDF, often in response to Israeli warnings of as few as two hours.

In the ideology of Hizballah Israel is anathema. In contrast, while the U.S. is considered an adversary and is disliked for its support of Israel, Hizballah's Secretary General has claimed that the United States is not a target for Hizballah attacks. Other leading officials, including the head of the Political Bureau have privately explored the possibility of a dialogue with the United States. The 'Grapes of Wrath' campaign in early 1996 tended to corroborate the characterization of Israel as evil in the eyes of many Lebanese, and especially the Shi'a. (see Hollis 1996)

Israel's massacre by shelling of more than 100 civilians in the United Nations base in Qana has especially inspired hatred for the Jewish state. Close to the U.N. base, a memorial cemetery has been created in which all of the victims are buried. The cemetery has become a point of pilgrimage for many Lebanese. Amongst middle class professionals in the *dahiyah*, trips to Qana, usually with their children in tow, are becoming ritualized. The site is festooned with banners (most in Arabic) accusing Israel of terrorism and genocide, and invoking sayings by some of the central figures in Shi'ism (such as Imam Hussain). Many of the banners emphasize the loss of innocent blood and demand vengeance. One sign reads: 'Qana is the Karbala (the site of Hussain's martyrdom in the year 680 of the common era) of the Twentieth century; it is a land made holy by the Lord Jesus and contaminated by the Zionist Satan (enemy of God).'

The Shi'a are well aware that authoritative reports by the United Nations and by Middle East Watch question Israeli claims that the shelling of the U.N. base was unintentional. The result of the 'Grapes of Wrath' operation, and especially the Qana massacre, is that even if the IDF were to pull up stakes in southern Lebanon the underlying hatred would continue to fester.

Whether in writing or in private interviews, leading members of Hizballah as well as Hojjat Islam Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah, the 'spiritual guide' or *al-murshid al-ruhi* of Hizballah, express their distrust of Israel and emphasize that peace with Israel may never be countenanced. Muhammad Ra'ad, an articulate Hizballahi member from Nabatiya, pointing to the recent election of Benyamin Netanyahu and Netanyahu's attitudes to the Oslo accords, also argues that on a practical basis Israel cannot be trusted. However defensible its rationale may be in Israel's eyes, there is little doubt that Israel's presence in the South has fed radicalism. In that sense, the occupation has been consistently counterproductive for Israel.

Notwithstanding the ideological posture of Hizballah, the organization has shown practical flexibility. In fact, in a July 1996 interview, Fadlallah emphasized the need for dialogue, especially dialogue with one's enemies. Characteristically, he corroborated his argument with an *ayat* (Quranic verse). Asked if that includes dialogue with Israel, he emphatically replies: 'yes, especially with one's enemies.' Strictly speaking, Fadlallah does not speak for Hizballah, but he has a wide following in the Shi'i community and his views are extremely influential. Equally important, Hizballah has shown a willingness to negotiate indirectly with Israel, as it did in the summer of 1996, when with German mediation, it agreed to exchange the corpses of Israeli and SLA soldiers for the bodies of Hizballahis.

The Israeli army has become increasingly frustrated by its inability to pre-empt Hizballah operations, which have become efficiently deadly in recent years. In marked contrast to the late 1980s when Hizballah attacks often involved large Hizballah losses, the ratio of Hizballah casualties to IDF casualties is no longer heavily skewed in favor of the IDF. Since 1995, the ratio of Hizballah to IDF/SLA casualties has been less than 2:1, whereas in the past it was more than 5:1. The IDF is also stymied by the 'rules of the game,' which limit its ability to engage in operations that collectively punish Lebanese civilians. Of course, both sides have targeted civilians intentionally, but given the disparity in hardware and destructive power, many more Lebanese civilians have been killed and wounded than Israeli civilians. Since 1992, twelve Israeli civilians have died as a result of Hizballah attacks, while over 500 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians have died. (See the important report, Hilterman 1996) In short, Hizballah has proven more adept at moving within the box that has come to be defined by the unwritten agreement of 1993 and the written agreement of 1996. Of course, this could change. War is a game of move and countermove, and Israel might regain the upper hand that it enjoyed earlier in the 1980s but this does not seem very likely in the foreseeable future. It is noteworthy that in the course of negotiations Israel has never challenged the right of Hizballah to attack its soldiers in Lebanon. Thus, they have tacitly conceded that the IDF is an occupation force in Lebanon.

The question that is crucial is what would Hizballah's reaction be to an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. This question is made all the more relevant by the fact that the option of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the south has now been vetted by the Israeli government, probably at the prompting of the IDF. The Hizballah answer to this question has been consistently ambiguous. Muhammad Ra'ad, the



Hizballahi parliamentary deputy from Nabatiyya who was elected in 1992 and reelected in 1996, argues that a withdrawal would be followed by a period of 'recuperation'. In other words, there would be a period of rebuilding in the south. Ra'ad adds that were Israel to withdraw unilaterally, as proposed by Israel in July 1996, this would create an imbalance for Lebanon and Syria, but they would recover. Most important, he believes that Hizballah would be the beneficiary of an Israeli withdrawal. He bases this conclusion on two facts: the popular base that Hizballah has built, and the leading role that the party has played in the resistance. When pressed on the question of whether Hizballah would attack Israel per se, Ra'ad argues that the goal of the opposition is to liberate Lebanese soil. As for what will happen in the future these are practical questions that are decided in time.

In response to the observation that the Hizballah position is ambiguous and provides ammunition to those in Israel who argue against withdrawal, Ra'ad responds that the Hizballah position is ambiguity, clear ambiguity (*waadih*). For Ra'ad, political decisions are a reflection of costs and benefits and relative power, which implies that so long as Israel retains the capacity to respond disproportionately to attacks, there is little incentive to continue the attacks southward. Ra'ad also emphasizes that Hizballah is not the only player in the game, and that the Lebanese government or Lebanese outside of Hizballah may raise the question of the 27 Lebanese villages which were captured by Israel in the 1948 and 1949 fighting and incorporated into Israel. These villages fell within the boundaries of Le Gran Liban (Greater Lebanon), as defined by France during the mandate period. Seven of these villages were populated predominantly by Shi'i Muslims.

Of course, other Lebanese forces have attacked Israel's 'security zone' as well, including Amal and a variety of secular militants belonging to Ba'thist, Communist and Nasirist organizations, but Hizballah has conducted the lion's share of attacks, and none of the other Lebanese groups espouse goals other than liberating the South. The 325,000 Palestinians refugees in Lebanon are another matter. Many of them their roots to Haifa and the villages of the Galilee, area which are now very much part of the state of Israel. Although the camps were disarmed in 1991, significant arms caches remain, and camps like Ain al-Hilwah, near Saida, have a number of armed factions that reportedly receive maintain cooperative relations with Hizballah. These groups could certainly choose to mount independent attacks against Israel, but they lack the broad social base of Hizballah, and they would risk a further exacerbation of their already quite difficult relations with the Lebanese.

Like Ra'ad, Fadlallah argues that ambiguity is the calculated position of Hizballah and that this ambiguity increases the anxiety and the fear of Israel. What would happen in the case of an Israeli withdrawal? He replies that we would welcome this withdrawal, while adding that Hizballah would not sign any agreement with Israel or otherwise legitimate Israel. Notwithstanding this reticence, Hizballah has been willing to negotiate with Israel through intermediaries. Not only has Hizballah done so in order to redefine the rules of warfare in southern Lebanon, most recently in April 1996, but, with German mediation, it entered into extensive negotiations for the purpose of exchanging the bodies of fallen fighters. The latter negotiations culminated in the summer of 1996 and they may present a model for future indirect negotiations.

Fadlallah admits, possibly with some delight, that the withdrawal would cause some confusion in the governments of Lebanon and Syria, and in the Arab world. There would be a necessary period of adjustment. Fadlallah adds the formula that is now familiar, namely that Muslims cannot ignore the Israeli occupation of Palestine, which it is the responsibility of all Muslims to liberate. He adds that this is not a responsibility that the Lebanese Muslims must shoulder on their own and the purpose of the attacks against the Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon are for purpose of ending the occupation of Lebanese soil. He tacks on the politically correct position that 'we would also insist on the liberation of the Golan Heights.'

Despite the intentional ambiguity, one walks away from such discussions with a clear sense that Hizballah has no appetite to launch a military campaign across the Israeli border, should Israel withdraw from the South. This is also the firm impression that one gains from the supporters of Hizballah who neither hide their hatred of Israel nor their view that attacks across the border would only inflict further suffering on the people of the South. Hizballah, of course, must be mindful that the mood of general support that it now enjoys is hardly guaranteed and it would sacrifice much of its support base if it provoked violent Israeli retaliation against southern Lebanon. For that matter, it is apt to reiterate that Hizballah calculates that it will be the beneficiary of an Israeli withdrawal, given its celebrated role in the resistance. Certainly, the modality of an Israeli withdrawal would include provisions for disarming Hizballah in the South, as well as the creation of a security regime for the area. It is precisely this eventuality for which Hizballah has been visibly preparing since its party congress in July 1995. At that time, the Arab-Israeli peace process enjoyed considerable momentum, and although Hizballah denounced the Oslo accord, as did Iran, the party was



making a Realpolitik accommodation to the fact that the train was moving whether Hizballah liked it or not. Characteristically, the congress also confirmed the strategic centrality of relations with Syria, a price of doing business in Lebanon these days rather than a principle of preference.

### **Whither Hizballah**

The evolution of Hizballah will continue to be shaped by the shifting landscape of regional politics, and the changing terrain of Lebanese politics. In a passing moment of revolutionary fervor, Hizballah could count on heavy financial and fiscal support from Tehran, but that moment has passed. Now Hizballah faces the reality of an Iranian patron that may be indifferent to its fate, and a Syrian strategic partner for whom its value is transient. Under these circumstances, Hizballah has little choice but to plant its feet firmly in Lebanon.

Although the immediate significance of the May 1997 Iranian presidential election may be modest, there is little question about which way the winds from Tehran are blowing. Prior to the election, in November 1996, Muhammad Khatami, then head of the National Library, visited Lebanon. Khatami is not only a ideological descendant of the reformist 'alim al-Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, but he is married to the daughter of Musa's sister Rabab, who lives in Tyre in southern Lebanon. He paid extensive visits to Speaker Nabih Berri, who also remains the president of Amal, and Shaykh Shams al-Din the president of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council, but not to Shaykh Mohammed Husain Fadlallah, the man whose spiritual imprint upon Hizballah has long been indelible. Fadlallah has made a point of recognizing Ayatollah Sistani rather than Ayatollah Khamene'i as the marji', so Khatami's snub may be related to this fact.

During the visit, when asked whether he deemed more legitimate government based on Shar'ia or based on popular elections, he was quick to prefer the latter. One Islamist objected at the meeting, but Hizballah MP Muhammad Ra'ad defended Khatami. Khatami is said to have urged Hizballah to demilitarize its identity and build a broader base in society. While Ra'ad praised Khatami, he noted that Hizballah had no organizational links to any governmental institution in Iran and is connected directly with the 'leader' and marji' Khamene'i. After his election, Khatami invited a diverse group of Lebanese to Iran. He used the opportunity to underline his commitment to popular sovereignty and again emphasized his view that Hizballah must build a broader base in society and leave behind its para-military focus. (*Ettela'at*, June 3, 1997, p. 9)<sup>4</sup>

Should diplomatic progress be made in ending of the Israeli occupation in the South, it will be possible to learn whether Hizballah has heeded Khatami's advice. Until now, the calculated ambiguity of Hizballah has left observers with a Janus faced party that has insinuated changed positions with such subtlety that its adversaries may argue that there has been no change at all. The tenability of such calculated ambiguity is going to be increasingly hard to preserve.

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<sup>4</sup> The author thanks Houchang Chehabi for sharing this information.