

PERSPECTIVES

**HIZBULLAH: WALKING THE LEBANESE
TIGHTROPE**

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Hizbullah: Walking the Lebanese tightrope

Rodger Shanahan

Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shi'a political party and militia group, has earned a reputation as a multifaceted, well-organised and disciplined organisation, whose military wing was able to force the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the country in 2000, and then effectively fought those same forces to a standstill in 2006. This paper will provide an overview of the complex political milieu in which the party operates, the reasons why the party faces challenges to any future national political advancement it may contemplate, and why it is likely to continue to enjoy success in the long term. To understand any element of Lebanese confessional politics, including that of the Shi'a, it is first necessary to understand something of Lebanese history. In many ways, the history of Lebanon is one of the 18 recognised religious communities interacting with, and seeking support from, external supporters who were also normally co-religionists. This trend continues today (with modern variations), with US, Saudi, Syrian, French and Iranian influences active in the contemporary Lebanese political scene.

Amongst the Christian community, the Maronites had been courted by French Jesuits for hundreds of years and had established a Maronite college in Rome as early as 1584, while the first French Jesuit community was established in modern-day Lebanon by 1656. Indeed, the emergence of significant numbers of Greek and Syrian Catholic communities in Lebanon can be put down to the proselytising activities of Jesuits amongst the respective orthodox communities. The state of Greater Lebanon (today's republic) was an artificial creation of the French mandatory power, appending areas such as the largely Sunni ports of Beirut and Tripoli and the Shi'a-dominated agricultural area of the Biq'a' to the Christian heartland of Mount Lebanon to make an economically viable Christian-majority state in the East.

The Sunni community for their part had prospered under the rule of their co-religionists from the time that Ottoman overlordship of Lebanon commenced in 1517. The Shi'a, meanwhile, were largely a product of the rural areas of the south and the Biq'a' valley. Many lived a little more than feudal existence, existing as sharecroppers on estates owned by a landed Shi'a rural class. On occasion they suffered persecution at the hands of the Sunni rulers. There was no external protector to look after the community's needs, but there were links between southern Lebanon and what is now Iran dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century. The new

Safavid rulers, having decided to convert to Shi'ism, sought scholars to teach the legal fundamentals of the new religion. Jabal 'Amil, a region of southern Lebanon, was well known for the quality of its jurists, and many scholars moved to the new Safavid country.

These familial links still exist between the two countries, albeit to a much smaller degree (familial links are immeasurably stronger between Lebanese and Iraqi Shi'a), and a number of Lebanese study Shi'a jurisprudence at Qum in Iran. But it is Hizbullah's adherence to Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of *wilayat al-faqih* (governorship of the jurist) that most closely binds the two communities these days and lays the organisation open to accusations of dancing to another country's tune. Amongst Lebanese Shi'a who follow the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, support for *wilayat al-faqih* may be confined only to issues of political guidance. For others it may extend to issues of jurisprudence across the whole gamut of social and religious issues. Links between the Shi'a and Syria are more pragmatic, although the 'Alawite ruling minority in Syria are considered by many Lebanese Shi'a to be Shi'a themselves.

As a result of the disparate confessional groups residing within Lebanon, consensus between all religious communities has been the mainstay of the political system. Whilst this notion of consensus politics is admirable, it existed (and still exists) in a structural environment that had no inherent flexibility and favoured the Christians. The initial distribution of parliamentary seats was based on the 1932 census, the only census taken in Lebanon's history. At this stage Christians were a majority, whose numbers were further inflated by including emigrant Lebanese in the census, the majority of whom were also Christian. As a consequence, the number of seats in parliament was always a multiple of 11, to be distributed in a ratio of five Christian seats for every Muslim seat. This rigid system discriminated against other confessional groups by neglecting the changing demographic realities of the country. At the same time, the unwritten National Pact of 1943 gave the presidency to a Maronite, the prime ministership to a Sunni and the much weaker position of Speaker to a Shi'a (a role which became dominated by the feudal families).

The rise of the Shi'a

The political quiescence of the Shi'a continued for decades after the emergence of Greater Lebanon and then the republic. This began to change with the emergence of a political consciousness within the community, firstly through the participation of Shi'a in the leftist political parties (particularly the Lebanese Communist party) that sought to change the

current order, the development of a middle class made rich by their commercial activities overseas (largely in West Africa) and then through the activities of the Iranian-born cleric and founder of Amal, Musa Sadr. It is not necessary to dwell on these events, but Fouad Ajami's book *The Vanished Imam: Musa al-Sadr and the Shi'a of Lebanon* provides an excellent account of this period.

The combination of these developments whittled away at the domineering influence of the traditional Shi'a families, but it was the 1975-90 civil war that finally caused the traditional feudal family structure to fall apart. This occurred to a degree in most of the communities, but it was most pronounced amongst the Shi'a. Military prowess amongst the various militias threw up alternative communal leaders who became powerful figures outside the traditional familial power structures. For the Shi'a, external events created other stressors that shaped the political organisation of the community. Firstly, the return from Najaf of Lebanese scholars who had participated in the *ad-Da'wa* movement provided a leadership group who were more attuned to the notion of a politically activist role for Shi'a clerics. The 1979 Iranian revolution then provided an exemplar of how the Shi'a community could be politically organised. And finally, the 1982 Israeli invasion provided an external enemy that could coalesce the Shi'a into combining religiosity with resistance. Hizbullah's formation in 1982 was essentially the product of these events (Augustus Richard Norton's *Hizbullah: A Short History* provides a good background). The interconnection of the aforementioned events is evidenced by the fact that three of the nine founding Hizbullah delegates were members of *ad-Da'wa*, and that Iranian Revolutionary Guards were on hand early to provide professional military training to the early Hizbullah cadres.

Hizbullah's political development

Hizbullah has gradually become an organisation willing to combine pragmatism with militancy depending on the circumstances with which it sees itself confronted. This is a trait which has developed over time, as its initial phase was certainly a radical one. Besides speeches from its senior leadership, the only guide to Hizbullah's broad aims is contained in its 1985 'Open letter to the Oppressed of Lebanon and the World' which effectively acts as a political manifesto, and which among other things calls for the destruction of the state of Israel and the free choice of Islam as the system of government. It also describes as friends all the world's oppressed peoples.

The manifesto itself is dated although the organisation has never resiled from either the substance or intent of the original document. Given that it rejected any type of political reform that in its view perpetuated the current (sectarian) political system, it is no small wonder that Hizbullah became an increasingly, albeit incrementally, active player in Lebanese politics since the signing of the Ta'if Accord in 1989 that eventually ended the civil war. The Accord was initially opposed by Hizbullah because it called for the disarming of militias (which has never been applied to Hizbullah) and also because, while it modified the political system and called for an end to sectarianism, it never gave a timetable for it to occur. It was also a reluctant participant in the first postwar parliamentary elections of 1992; while few Lebanese agreed that the polity was ready for such an election, Syria was keen for political participation and Hizbullah obliged, given that it was Syrian authority and military presence that allowed its armed wing to circumvent the requirement to disarm. Hizbullah did, however, maintain its distance from what it saw as an inherently corrupt institution, preferring instead to remain outside cabinet to perform as a parliamentary opposition.

This political strategy was fine so long as the Syrian occupation guaranteed that no legislation would be passed that ran counter to Hizbullah and its supporters' needs. But the withdrawal of Syrian military forces in April 2005 changed the political dynamic and forced Hizbullah to guarantee its interests by entering cabinet. The lack of a Syrian arbiter on the ground meant that Hizbullah needed another mechanism to forestall any attempts to clip its wings politically – hence its demand for veto power within cabinet so that consensus, rather than majority decisions, would be the standard (allegedly a precondition for the party's entry into government). For a time, it appeared that this stratagem would work for both sides, but in November 2006 Hizbullah and its co-religionists in Amal walked out of cabinet in protest at the Siniora government's seeking a majority vote to allow for the establishment of an international court to try those charged with the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. This move effectively ground the government to a halt, and ushered in a protracted period of political instability.

Present and future constraints

Cracks in the wall ?

Despite Hizbullah's increasingly powerful presence within Lebanon, there are significant constraints on its future potential, and some recent indications that it has miscalculated its place within Lebanon. The zenith of Hizbullah's popularity within the country occurred in 2000 following the withdrawal of the last of the Israeli forces from southern Lebanon after an

18-year occupation. The party's fighters were fêted by all confessional groups as legitimate resistance fighters who inflicted the first defeat by an Arab force on the much-vaunted Israeli military. Lebanese state institutions began to operate freely again in the south, although the military did not deploy to the area, leaving security in the hands of Hizbullah's fighters.

Six years later, Hizbullah's initiation of the 2006 war with Israel showed how much political capital the organisation had lost during the period it had made the south its own. Although lauded in some circles for the tenacious fighting skills it displayed during the war, the political decision taken by the organisation to capture Israeli soldiers was criticised both inside and outside Lebanon. It was an offensive action taken unilaterally without reference to the Lebanese government, took place leading into the peak Lebanese tourist season and was not in response to a specific Israeli action. The decision therefore laid the party open to criticism that it was following its own agenda without giving thought to the impact of its actions on other Lebanese. Besides the large loss of life, the economic and infrastructure damage was enormous. The tourist season was ruined, and for the first time there were rumblings of discontent from émigré Lebanese Shi'a from the south who had seen their investments destroyed by the Israelis in response to the ill-advised action by Hizbullah.

That Hizbullah's actions had alienated many of its countrymen was acknowledged by Hassan Nasrallah in an interview in August after the war, when he claimed that if Hizbullah had ever thought that the Israelis would respond in the way they did, it would never have undertaken the action. Still, his contrition was relatively short-lived: he later qualified this by saying that Israel had plans for an assault on Hizbullah in September of 2006 and that the organisation's actions had forced Israel to bring forward the planned execution date of the operation, thereby blunting its effectiveness.

The next false step on Hizbullah's part followed an outbreak of heavy fighting in May 2007 between elements of the Lebanese army and Palestinian and foreign Sunni extremists from Fatah al-Islam based inside Nahr al-Barid refugee camp near Tripoli. Nasrallah declared both the Nahr al-Barid camp and Palestinian civilians as a 'red line' that should not be crossed. This statement led to accusations that Nasrallah and Hizbullah cared more for external causes than they did for the organs of Lebanese state authority such as the army. And while many Lebanese have sympathy for the Palestinian cause in the Territories, few have sympathy for those in the camps in Lebanon. Of more pertinence was the fact that, at the time of the statement, many Lebanese soldiers had already been killed by the militants. For an avowedly nationalist leader to place restrictions on the use of force by the Lebanese military was

another miscalculation on the part of Nasrallah, because it unnecessarily exposed him to criticism at a time when the Lebanese people were united behind their army.

A resurgent Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)

An unintended consequence for Hizbullah following the 2006 war was undoubtedly the deployment to the south of the Lebanese army. Since 1982 only Israeli and their proxy South Lebanese Army forces had operated there. After the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 Hizbullah operated freely in the presence of the much weakened UNIFIL forces. While a greatly-expanded and better-equipped UNIFIL also deployed after the war, the rapid deployment of Lebanese troops to the south has at a minimum restricted the freedom of movement of Hizbullah and raised the stakes were Hizbullah to conduct a strike against Israel by exposing LAF, as well as UNIFIL soldiers, to retaliatory fire. The deployment to the south also raised the LAF's profile immeasurably amongst the Lebanese by providing them with a national border defence role which they had long sought.

Deploying into static locations is one thing, but the bloody fighting undertaken by the LAF at the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp against the radical Islamist Fatah al-Islam in mid- 2007 inspired admiration for the LAF in the eyes of many Lebanese. The loss of 170 LAF personnel in particularly bloody fighting against an enemy that all Lebanese disliked presented Hizbullah with a military and political dilemma – for the first time it had competition in providing a military force capable of and willing to undertake offensive action against an enemy of the state. What is more, the LAF is a truly national rather than narrowly sectarian institution, drawing its members from across all communal groups. During and after the fighting, the March 14 grouping was quick to emphasise the LAF's new-found standing in the community. Commercials congratulated the LAF on protecting the community, and billboards popped up showing the Lebanese flag with the central cedar tree in LAF camouflage, or the LAF symbol turned into a phoenix rising, or backgrounds in LAF camouflage proclaiming 'Amr Lak' ('it's up to you'). This was all designed not so subtly to advise that there was now a national military institution to do the role that Hizbullah had taken over during the Israeli occupation.

The re-emergence of the LAF has been a welcome development, and its profile has risen within Lebanon as a result. But there is no way that it is capable of, or its leadership is willing to, disarm Hizbullah. The LAF leadership must tread a fine line in ensuring that the unity of the force is maintained by remaining outside sectarian political issues – attempting to disarm a Shi'a militia would, commanders fear, place intolerable strain on the unity of the LAF. At the same time, it is extremely unlikely that the LAF could do so forcibly even if it so wished.

Outside of the relatively small Special Forces Group, the training standards of the LAF are poor compared to those of Hizbullah. Fighting on ground it is familiar with, and having at the least fought the Israelis to a stalemate in 2006, Hizbullah would likely be more than a match for the LAF.

Hizbullah's nationalist dilemma

Lying at the heart of Hizbullah's ideological dilemma is the fundamental contradiction between the party's Lebanese nationalist claims and its sectarian behaviour. How, for instance, can the party claim to be a Lebanese nationalist organisation when at the same time it adheres to Ayatollah Khomeini's notion of *wilayat al-faqih* as a result of which it owes allegiance in political, and also in many instances Islamic juristic issues, to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran? The anomaly in its nationalist claim is further exemplified by the communalist nature of the organisation. Again, while the nature of Lebanese politics dictates that political organisations are created along confessional lines, Hizbullah's narrow sectarian appeal limits how nationalist its fellow countrymen see it. Even its tactical alliance with Michel Aoun's Maronite Free Patriotic Movement was seen for what it was; a limited political move.

Finally, there is the dichotomy between the party's claim to be a nationalist organisation when it has Islamic internationalist aspirations. Hizbullah's manifesto stated that it had an affinity with other 'oppressed' groups, and this has been given practical expression through Hizbullah's support for Palestinian groups and Nasrallah's view of the 'Islamic current', where groups who share similar aspirations to Hizbullah but without the ideological orientation are considered fellow-travellers. In this way the party sees no difficulty in associating closely with Sunni Palestinian groups such as Hamas, which share Hizbullah's views regarding the destruction of the state of Israel and the liberation of Jerusalem while obviously not sharing Hizbullah's views on *wilayat al-faqih*.

The third force

As with all sectarian political groups, there is always the potential for supporters to drift away if viable alternatives present themselves. Some supporters are not committed to the same notion of *wilayat al-faqih* as are the main elements of Hizbullah, but are attracted by the party's success in providing social services and by its reputation for probity. If another communal political party was able to deliver the same success but without the ideological orientation it may become attractive to some of Hizbullah's wider support group. Certainly Hizbullah's sectarian 'rival' Amal has shown no sign of fulfilling this role, given its reputation for corruption and its reliance on Nabih Berri, its leader and speaker of the

parliament. Whether a third force is likely to emerge is unknown. While there have been efforts to create other Shi'a political parties, there appears little likelihood of a successful alternative model appearing any time soon.

A strong future

Despite these ideological inconsistencies and recent miscalculations, there is little indication that support for Hizbullah amongst its Shi'a constituency is weakening. Hizbullah's political organisation, unity of purpose, effective provision of social services and financial backing mean that it produces economic results and a sense of communal pride for the Lebanese Shi'a community. In some ways, with its health care and hospitals, educational institutions and martyr's foundation it provides a cradle-to-grave service to an element of the community without recourse to the government.

The maintenance of a highly-disciplined and well-performing militia is an obvious reason why Hizbullah remains influential. Although the Ta'if Accord called for the disbandment of all militias, Hizbullah considered its armed elements to be a legitimate resistance movement and, with Syrian support, remained armed while the disarmament of other militias was largely successful. While the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon gave the organisation a reason for claiming to act in the national defence, the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 should have negated the reason for its existence. The militia's continued utility to both Syria and Iran allowed it to remain active and further develop, however, using the continued Israeli occupation of the disputed Sheb'a Farms area as a convenient fig leaf for its existence. At the same time, Hizbullah argues that calls for its disarmament in line with the Ta'if Accord are selective. So long as both the constitution and the Ta'if Accord call for the end of sectarianism, Hizbullah says that demands for its disarmament cannot be separated from the other elements addressed in the Accord. Otherwise, it believes that the government is only interested in addressing issues that seek to weaken the organisation.

Perhaps the main reason why the future may well belong to Hizbullah is simple demographics. While the exact proportion of the population that is Shi'a is not known given the absence of any contemporary census data, the community is allocated 21% of parliamentary seats based on the Ta'if Accord that set a 50:50 proportion of Muslim:Christian seats in the post-war parliament. Given the higher Shi'a birthrates and lower rate of immigration amongst the community, most estimates place their proportion of the population at over 40%, and increasing. As a consequence, the Shi'a community in general have felt that

the system discriminates against them. Hizbullah and Amal both somewhat unsurprisingly demand an end to sectarianism which is called for in both the Ta'if Agreement and in Article 95 of the constitution but which has never been implemented. As a political party first and foremost, Hizbullah is keen to achieve electoral reform to turn this demographic strength into a greater share of political power. The other elements of the Lebanese political system are equally keen to deny them this. The future of Hizbullah, and of Lebanon itself, will ultimately be decided by this political battle.

Addendum

The May 2008 crisis

Opinions are divided over the long-term ramifications of Hizbullah's decision to move some of its and its supporters' forces onto the streets of West Beirut in May 2008 to stop government attempts to expose its internal communications network to scrutiny. On the one hand, Hizbullah's actions represented a repudiation of its long-held claim that it was a Lebanese national resistance movement that maintained its weapons to augment the capability of the Lebanese Armed Forces to repel external aggressors. In the space of one week, however, it revealed the reality from which it cannot escape – its military wing ultimately exists to protect the interests of one communal group.

Hizbullah's leadership, however, would have factored in such considerations to their decision. Ultimately the party believed that an examination of its communications system was tantamount to a move towards disarming it and that the issue was of such importance that it needed armed intervention. At the same time, its narrow sectarian support base meant that its actions were unlikely to alienate anyone not already alienated from the party. The fact that the fighting was not allowed to spread into the Christian quarter of Beirut showed that Hizbullah sought to prevent its actions from initiating a new civil war. And the party would feel that it achieved its aims. The Siniora government was forced to back down on its proposed communications probe, the sacked airport security chief was reinstated, and the subsequent Doha Accord delivered what Hizbullah had sought all along – veto power in the cabinet.

While Hizbullah came out of the events of May with its martial reputation enhanced, the same events could be quite damaging in the long term. The LAF deployed in defensive positions to protect government buildings and to prevent the fighting from spreading but made no effort to stop the fighting, let alone disarm the combatants. Having seen how easily Saad Hariri's armed supporters in the Future Movement were beaten, confessional groups could well decide

that security for their interests will best be served by constructing well-armed and well-trained sectarian militias to avoid a repeat of what happened to the Future Movement. By looking after their sectarian interests with military force, Hizbullah may well have pushed others to contemplate doing the same.

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