

Assessing the Strength of Hezbollah

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about Hezbollah, a group that has become a powerful player in Lebanese politics, a formidable militia force capable of posing a serious challenge to Israel's vaunted military, and a group that is both a beneficiary of Iranian largesse and an accomplice to Iran's ambition for regional hegemony in the Middle East.

My first on-the-ground exposure to Lebanon was thirty years ago when I served for fourteen months in southern Lebanon as an unarmed United Nations military observer (on secondment from the U.S. Army). Only a bit more than year before, the Shah of Iran had been toppled from power. Hezbollah, the subject of today's hearing, did not exist. Indeed, the PLO was then the dominant military power from Beirut to the Israeli border, and Israeli-PLO clashes were routine occurrences. This was 1980. Within Lebanon a civil war had been underway for five years, and it would be another decade before the internal conflict came to an end. As the leader of a small team of well-qualified observers, I enjoyed regular contacts with members of the Lebanese Shi'i Muslim community, including the leaders of a political movement known as Amal.

The Shi'i Muslims are the largest single community in Lebanon, probably accounting for a third or more of the total population, and they primarily live in and around Beirut, in the Bekaa Valley and in South Lebanon. Historically, this is an underprivileged community. I recall vividly the dreadful conditions that defined many Shi'i villages, legacies of decades of neglect by the central government exacerbated by the ravages of recent fighting.

Many of the Lebanese Shi'i leaders in those early days, while inspired by the revolution in Iran, were little interested in importing Iranian models into Lebanon. They yearned for an end to the violence that often took a heavy toll in Shi'i lives and property. In 1982, Israel invaded with grand plans to destroy the PLO and install a friendly Lebanese government that would become

the second Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel. The Israeli invasion occasioned great hope in Lebanon that the civil war would be finally be ended, especially since the PLO military apparatus was decimated. The dominant Shi'i group at the time, Amal, certainly shared the hope that a violent chapter in Lebanon's history was finished.

In Washington, the Reagan administration seized upon the Israeli invasion as a strategic opportunity, and along with European allies launched the Multinational Force to help stabilize security in an around Beirut. Meantime, while Israel incrementally retrenched its forces, it established an occupation zone in southern Lebanon, the Shi'i heartland. That zone was not surrendered until 2000. Israel's occupation would contribute to the radicalization of the Shi'a and undermine more moderate voices, and was therefore counterproductive.

An even more horrific chapter was, in fact, only beginning in Lebanon. Iran and Syria were important characters in that chapter, and those that followed. When recalling the horrendous decade of the 1980s in Lebanon, images of the ruins of the U.S. Embassy, the decimation of the Marine barracks and its hundreds of sleeping occupants, and the cruel captivity suffered by scores innocent hostages, some held for many years, leap to mind.

With Iranian tutelage, a cadre of Lebanese Shi'is rejected Amal's relatively conciliatory stance and sought to reproduce Iran's revolutionary model in Lebanon. By the mid-1980s, they would coalesce into Hezbollah. A number of them participated in the hallmarks acts of violence and terrorism referred to above.

In 1982, Syria permitted Iran to establish a foothold in Lebanon for a contingent of Revolutionary Guards. It should be noted, however, that Syria for many years was deeply suspicious of Hezbollah and there were several serious clashes between the Syrian army and Hezbollah militants. In fact, Syria lent much support to Amal, for which Hezbollah was the main rival. Particularly while President Hafez al-Asad was alive (died: 2000), Syria often assiduously balanced the political gains of Hezbollah and Amal.

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Mr. Chairman, I begin with these recollections because I believe they are relevant to understanding the topic at hand, namely the strength of Hezbollah in 2010, and its ability to sustain impressive popular support in Lebanon.

How did a relatively small group of revolution-oriented conspirators become arguably the most powerful and popular organization in Lebanon? I offer five key explanations:

- Resistance to Israeli occupation: While Hezbollah was by no means the only group challenging Israel's presence; it was by far the most successful.
- Institution building: Recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of social, cultural and economic organizations serving the Shi'i community, Hezbollah's are among the most

efficiently run and most admired. Lebanese opponents to Hezbollah have acknowledged that it is really the only fully institutionalized political party in the country.

- **Worldview:** Hezbollah promotes an ideology that stresses the importance of resistance, not just to foreign occupiers--and to Israel and the U.S. in particular—but resistance to injustice, corruption and poverty.
- **Piety:** Hezbollah advocates an expansive view of piety that stresses commitment, engagement, community participation and individual responsibility. While this conception of piety is hardly unique to Hezbollah or to Shi'i Islam for that matter, it is an important element in the organization's message to its followers.
- **Pragmatism:** At key junctures in its history, Hezbollah has changed course, notably in 1992 when it put aside its condemnation of Lebanese politics as “corrupt to the core” in order to participate in elections and in the political process.

When Israel unilaterally withdrew from its self-declared “Security Zone” (which accounted for roughly ten percent of Lebanon's territory), in May 2000, Hezbollah was widely credited and celebrated in Lebanon for playing the leading role in forcing Israel to exit. Israel denies that it withdrew under pressure. The fact is that Hezbollah proved an increasingly potent foe. It is widely believed in Lebanon that Israel would still be occupying a large chunk of the country were it not for the anti-occupation resistance.

While Hezbollah's main rival, Amal, continues to enjoy support in segments of the Shi'i community, it has lost many of its supporters to Hezbollah. Much of the growing Shi'i middle class, in particular, grew disappointed with Amal's inefficiency, corruption and its inability to be other than a large patronage network, which is not to say that they have necessarily joined Hezbollah.

When I revisit many of villages and towns in South Lebanon that I first encountered decades ago, I see impressive evidence of a flourishing economy: new homes, good cars, competent public services, and a variety of institutions that did not exist before, such as modern clinics and decent schools. Many of these communities benefit from wealth earned in Africa, where Lebanese Shi'is play active roles as traders and entrepreneurs. In addition, a variety of religious foundations linked to revered Shi'i clerics, such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani, based in Najaf, Iraq, and Lebanon's own Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, offer a range of services. Support for Hezbollah is by no means universal, but it is widespread in these towns and villages. Yet, we should remember that loyalties and affiliations run in many different directions.

Whether they live in the Bekaa valley, the South or in *al-dahiya* the bustling, predominantly Shi'i suburbs of Beirut, families are typically linked to relatives in the other regions by marriage, nativity, or economics. The migration from the Bekaa and the South to *al-dahiya* is a relatively recent phenomenon, in that the surge from the countryside to the city began in the middle of the Twentieth Century. So, not only is Lebanon a small country to begin with, but people living in the various regions typically have extensive networks of ties to the other regions. This is one

reason why violence in one area quickly elicits a reaction in other settings. It is also why the Israeli occupation inspired so much resistance.

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With Syrian support and encouragement, Hezbollah insisted on keeping its arms despite Israel's exit in 2000. So long as Israel remained in Lebanon, Damascus could argue that the key to a secure northern border for Israel was in a peace agreement with Syria. The Israeli exit undermined Syria's leverage. Hezbollah argued that the Israeli withdrawal was incomplete since Israel continued to occupy a segment of Lebanese territory in the Golan Heights. More important, the group argued that unless Israel was deterred from returning to Lebanon, it would exploit Lebanon's weakness. This is not an argument that persuaded all Lebanese, or all Shi'is for that matter.

As the afterglow of the celebrations ebbed, Hezbollah's rationale for keeping its weapons was increasingly challenged, particularly after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, and the exit of Syrian forces a few months hence.

It bears emphasizing that the Israel-Lebanon border area was quiet from 2000 to 2006 by historical standards. In 1999, the last full year of Israeli occupation, there were over 1,500 military operations in southern Lebanon, according to the Israeli researcher Daniel Sobelman. In contrast, for the next six years there only a few dozen in total. Israeli military casualties averaged 1-2 soldiers annually, and there were only two civilian deaths attributable to Israeli or Hezbollahi fire. Notwithstanding commentary to the contrary, rockets were not routinely flying across the border into Israel.

This period of relative quiet ended in July 2006, when Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers in a raid across the border into Israel. They had been trying to do so for months, in order to use the captives as bargaining chips to gain the release of Lebanese prisoners held by Israel, including one Lebanese convicted for his role in a deadly 1979 terrorist attack in northern Israel. As the Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah later acknowledged, he and his cohort failed to anticipate the fierce Israeli response that would follow. The result was a destructive war that lasted 33 days.

Israeli generals overestimated the effectiveness of air strikes, and expected a relatively short campaign with the goal of crippling Hezbollah. Hezbollah proved a far more tenacious adversary than Israel anticipated. The war ended up displacing half a million Israelis and close to a million Lebanese. In addition to painful military losses on each side, 43 Israeli and more than 1,000 Lebanese civilians were killed. The material damage in Lebanon was severe, and included 78 destroyed or badly damaged bridges, as well as 15,000 homes badly damaged or destroyed.

Across the Arab world the war elicited widespread support for Hezbollah, although that support has since faded. More to the point of this hearing, the war prompted two opposing results in

Lebanon: For some Lebanese Christians (who account for no more than one-third of the total population), and particularly for non-Shi'i Muslims, especially the Sunnis, Hezbollah's role in starting the war evinced animosity and anger, and underlined the need to disarm it and check its power. Local Sunni-Shi'i tensions erupted in several deadly clashes, but thankfully cooler heads prevailed, including within Hezbollah.

These concerns intensified in May 2008, when Hezbollah and its allies took up arms against fellow Lebanese to thwart a government decision that would shut down its private fiber-optic communications network.

The Lebanese victims of the 2006 war were overwhelmingly Shi'i Muslims, just as the areas targeted were predominantly Shi'i areas. The Beirut suburbs, Hezbollah's epicenter, were continually bombed and the line between civilian and military targets blurred quickly. At one point the Israeli Chief of Staff was quoted as directing that for every Hezbollah rocket striking Haifa, a ten-story building in *al-dahiya* would be destroyed. The result was that most Shi'a viewed the war as one conceived to target their community. This validated the Hezbollah resistance narrative, and the argument that unless Israel was deterred, it would invade Lebanon at will.

I have sat in on informal debates about Hezbollah security role in Lebanese Shi'i villages. These were not academic debates, the real life concerns. The Lebanese Army is widely revered in Lebanon, probably because it is one of the few truly national institutions. Even so, the Army is not viewed as a credible force that is capable to defend Lebanon against Israel. Therefore, deferring to Hezbollah is seen as a necessary and realistic option, even by Shi'is who are ideologically distant from Hezbollah.

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Meanwhile Sunni-Shi'i tensions linger. These tensions were manifest in last June's elections when Sunni voters were mobilized en masse to support the Future Movement and vote against slates connected with Hezbollah. I saw this myself when I observed the 2009 elections in the Bekaa valley city of Zahle, and in some of the predominantly Sunni villages in the surrounding areas. Participation rates were very high, and the candidates sympathetic with Hezbollah received only ten or fifteen percent of the total votes.

However, Lebanese politics are by definition consensus politics. The idea that one sect or party can control or dominate the political system is far from the mark. Thus, when a new government was finally formed in Beirut, last Fall, Hezbollah and its allies ended up with one third of the ministerial posts and with the ability to block any decision that threatened to undermine the group's military power. The ministerial statement that announced the new government explicitly acknowledged Hezbollah's role in defending Lebanon. The declaration referred to "the right of Lebanon through its people, Army and the Resistance to liberate the Shebaa Farms, the Kfar

Shuba Hills and the Northern part of the village of Ghajar as well as to defend Lebanon and its territorial waters in the face of any enemy by all available and legal means.”

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Since 2006, there has been an uncommon solidarity within the Shi'i community and Hezbollah has been the beneficiary. I argue that the solidarity of the Shi'i community is an aberration, it is an artifact of the recent war, as well as the fear that another war looms. This is a war that Hezbollah claims it does not seek, but that Israel is expected to launch. Preparations for that war are underway on both sides.

During the late 1990s, while the Israeli occupation continued, Hezbollah's full-time military cadre numbered about five hundred and was supplemented through a reserve system (in some ways similar to Israel's). By 2006, that number had doubled. Today, the standing military force is measured in the thousands. There is no way for a civilian researcher to reliably estimate the size of Hezbollah's arsenal, but by the group's own estimates its store of arms is far more robust and more sophisticated than it was in 2006.

Despite the fears of war, the Israeli-Lebanese border has been very quiet since the 2006 war. UNIFIL, bolstered under Security Council Resolution 1701, has provided an effective buffer. While it has stopped Hezbollah from publically displaying weapons in the border region, it has not, however, impeded Hezbollah's ability to rearm.

Unless Hezbollah can be decisively defeated by Israel—defeated in detail, in military parlance—the effect of another war would be to bolster Hezbollah, and to once again validate its narrative. For a variety of reasons, I believe that it is unlikely that Israel is capable of decisively defeating Hezbollah's hardened forces. The level of civilian casualties, probably on both sides, would be dreadful, and would prompt a fierce backlash in the Muslim world. Equally important, Israeli soldiers would have to go toe to toe with Hezbollah fighters who know the difficult terrain of Lebanon intimately and have a strong incentive to protect the homefront. The Israeli Army's comparative advantages, especially technical sophistication, largely disappear in close combat.

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Mr. Chairman, I have tried to explain the solidarity that currently exists within the Lebanese Shi'i community to the benefit of Hezbollah. Yet, there are a variety of divisions within the community as well. These include secular and clerical opponents of Hezbollah, and, of course, the longstanding rivalry with Amal. In addition, there are strong feelings in some quarters that Hezbollah is too closely aligned with Iran, and that the community's interests are better served through Arab as opposed to Persian ties. We see variants of these views in Iraq. These latent divisions will remain submerged as long as so many Shi'a feel that their community faces an existential threat. One key to reducing Hezbollah's mass appeal may be to reduce the threat of

war, rather than heighten it. So long as the threat prevails, Hezbollah will be a prime beneficiary.