

## **Rising Power: Domestic and Strategic Factors of the Iran-Hizbullah Connection and their Regional Implications**

Hadi Semati

The cross border operation by Hizbullah and the massive response of Israel has exacerbated the already impaired (in)security complex in the region. The war brought the region much closer to a wider conflict and shattered the operating framework of the Bush administration and its supporters that the intractable conflicts of the Middle East could be delinked and dealt with separately. From the beginning of the crisis, many pointed fingers at Iran as the major accomplice in Hizbullah's adventure, for Tehran was desperately trying to divert attention from the looming confrontation with the West over its nuclear program. We will probably never know the extent and nature of the Iranian involvement. Hizbullah, however, has become much more independent in recent years both operationally and financially, and would not necessarily consult with Tehran on every operation that it undertakes. But it has become clear that the Iranian sway in the region is inexorably growing and almost impossible to stop or reverse. Hizbullah occupies a central part of this dynamic.

The Shi'a community in Lebanon has had centuries of cultural, intellectual, and political ties with Iran. These enduring relations assumed a greater salience in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution when Iran was seeking hospitable environments for its message. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 provided the ultimate opportunity for Iran to interconnect the revolutionary zeal against Israel and its Shi'a coreligionists' desire for empowerment for a community that has traditionally been the disadvantaged group in Lebanon. More than two decades of persistent help has transformed the once small guerilla organization into a popular and powerful political force inside Lebanon. For Iran, Hizbullah is a great success story in the Arab world, one that is rooted in a strong sense of common identity and religious affinity. These ideational reasons underlie the strong commitment that Iran has and will have to Lebanese Shiites, in particular Hizbullah, and one should not in any way underestimate them. It is inconceivable therefore that Iran would reduce its strong commitment to Hizbullah anytime soon, if ever. To understand the relation between Hizbullah and Iran one needs to take into account the domestic and strategic dimensions.

### **Domestic Dynamics**

From the beginning of the crisis two broad narratives were articulated by the elite in Iran. First was the position taken by some reformists who argued that Hizbullah's action was a strategic blunder and would have costly repercussions for Lebanon and Iran. Proponents of this view suggested that the Israeli response would undermine Hizbullah's power, hinder its transformation into a broad political party, and would probably reduce its deterrence capability, an asset that Iran badly needs. Moreover, they argued, the tension would complicate Iran's nuclear diplomacy as the U.S. and Israel would find it convenient to blame Iran for all the ills of the Middle East, thus doubling their efforts to pressure Iran in the Security Council. Hizbullah's action, others in this camp suggested,

might reinforce the anxiety of the Arab governments of the region about the perceived rising power of the Shiites, leading to a possible strain in Iran's regional diplomacy.

The second narrative advocated by the broad conservative coalition couched the massive retaliation of Israel as part of the U.S. agenda to shape a new Middle East in which Iran and its allies are weakened. The ultimate objective of United States and Israel, as they understood it, was to destroy Hizbullah and divide the Sunni and Shi'a world in a politically reconfigured Middle East. The prescription thus was to stand by Hizbullah to the end. The relentless attack on Lebanon, the high number of civilian casualties, and the military successes of Hizbullah made it very difficult for the advocates of the former narrative to have any inroads in the debate about Lebanon. Constantly watching the images of the war in television, the public too tilted toward more expressive support of Hizbullah. The broadcasts of the state-run media, by highlighting the humanitarian aspects of the war in Lebanon, were somewhat effective in constraining critical public and elite debate of the war.

It is in this context that the support for Hizbullah became imperative within domestic political dynamics of Iran. Different political forces had to demonstrate their solidarity with Lebanon and Hizbullah. A rare case of unity developed among competing forces during the crisis enabling the government to have a total freedom of action. It was an issue containing deep-seated emotions which easily transcended political rivalries. Moreover, the war in Lebanon and the way it ended enabled the government to sell its narrative about U.S. plans in the region to the Iranian public and a substantial part of the elite. In other words, U.S. unequivocal support for Israel in its retaliation against Hizbullah and the perceived defeat of Israel further consolidated the conservative forces and discredited the moderate voices.

### **Strategic Context**

Iran's sense of loneliness and strategic vulnerability in a hostile neighborhood has left her no choice but to cultivate allies wherever she can. Lebanon, with its indispensable Shi'a community, has been the natural place where shared values and tangible strategic objectives have compelled Iran to be present at all cost. By the end of 1990s, ideological interests notwithstanding, Iran's calculation vis-à-vis Hizbullah and Lebanon started becoming more complex to include strategic considerations. The changing strategic balance of power in the region since the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan led to the rearrangement of regional politics in favor of Iran. The indisputable influence in post-Saddam Iraq, a strategic partnership with Syria, and central presence in Lebanon through Hizbullah have all made Iran the most powerful actor in the region for the foreseeable future. The Israeli blunder in the recent war with Hizbullah, and the perception by the Muslim world that for the first time the Israeli army did not perform well has reinforced the self-confidence of Iran to project itself in the region.

The growing strength of Iran, however, does not necessarily mean inflexible positions on key issues. Iran would probably pursue a careful pragmatic and/or idealistic policy that best serves its long-term objectives. It is highly unlikely, though, that Iran

would support any form of disarmament of Hizbullah or any political framework that would reduce Hizbullah's leverage within Lebanese politics. Moreover, there is every indication that the financial and logistical support for Hizbullah would be even more crucial in the coming years and Iran will not hesitate in extending such support.

Although the leading Arab states of the region have grown nervous of Iran's increasing power, the Arab streets have been more receptive to Iran's position and uncompromising support for Hizbullah. This has gained a more salient role in Iran's calculations considering the heightened anti-American sentiments in the region and the composition of the new government in Iran. The increasing anger in the Arab streets and the rising popularity of Hizbullah as the result of the fierce fight it put up against Israel seem to have strengthened Iran's clout even further. In pursuing its policies, Iran usually takes into account three separate audiences: the Iranian public, the wider Muslim world, and the international community. It is a delicate balance that Iran has to carefully manage, and it seems that Israel's devastating attack on Lebanon has extended Iran's reach and influence into the opinions of the Arab masses more than ever than in the last twenty seven years. This has had a strong impact on Iran's self-confidence and the ability to project power.

Hizbullah is a key in Iran's vision of the Middle East. It is no longer a simple ideological issue, but increasingly defined in terms of Iranian national interests. Lebanon and the vast power of Hizbullah give Iran a strategic depth and a significant gateway to the Arab world where Iran had already made significant inroads by positioning itself as the ultimate player in Iraq. Iran will continue supporting Hizbullah for the foreseeable future without hesitation. Any attempt to deal with the emboldened Iran should be cognizant of the recent events in Lebanon and how they ended by producing the opposite results and unintended consequences.

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