

Hizballah of Lebanon:
Extremist Ideals vs.
Mundane Politics

Augustus Richard Norton

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Foreword

Understanding and dealing with “Islamic fundamentalism” has been one of the more difficult foreign policy challenges for the United States in the last decade. Few policymakers seem to comprehend the ideology behind so-called fundamentalist groups or the rationales behind their actions. While some analysts call it the successor to the Red Scare and have dubbed it the Green Menace, others contend that these groups are essentially social movements with a religious emphasis. Whichever view is correct, there is broad agreement that the topic of “Islamic fundamentalism” requires further attention, and the papers from the Muslim Politics Project hope to address this issue.

The goal of the Muslim Politics Project, which began in 1994, was to counter the misperceptions that prevail in influential circles and to present Islamic intellectual and political agendas in all their complexity and diversity. One of its several undertakings was to commission papers on Islamist foreign policy in order to better understand the international political attitudes and policies of various Islamist groups. This resulted in papers on the following movements: Jama’at-i Islami, Hamas, Hizballah, the Taliban, the Central Asian Islamic Renaissance Party, as well as an analysis of U.S. policy toward Islamism. Each of these papers goes into detail not only about the movements themselves, but also about how they affect U.S. foreign policy. We believe that they provide insights on a topic that challenges policymakers and will help prevent future misunderstandings.

Lawrence J. Korb

Maurice R. Greenberg Chair, Director of Studies
Council on Foreign Relations

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At first glance, Hizballah's position on the State Department's list of groups that sponsor terrorism would seem to be secure.¹ This is not hard to understand, because since the early 1980s the Iran-backed Hizballah (Party of God) positioned itself as an opponent of U.S. policy in the Middle East and especially in Lebanon. Hizballah has been connected with a number of notorious incidents, including the 1983 attack on the Marine barracks in which more than 240 marines died, the kidnapping of U.S. citizens, including Terry Anderson and CIA station chief William Buckley, as well as at least one bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut. The policy humiliations of the Iran-Contra affair stemmed directly from the attempts of senior U.S. officials to gain the release of U.S. hostages held in Lebanon by Shi'i groups that were linked to Hizballah, if not a part of it. The hostage seizures were fully consistent with Hizballah's declared goal of expunging both the American diplomatic presence and Americans from Lebanon, and the hostages' fate was often manipulated in order to serve the interests of Hizballah's sponsor, Iran.

Equally important, Hizballah has proven to be a deadly and effective foe of Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, and it has persistently called for the liberation of Jerusalem and the destruction of Israel. In recent years, Hizballah has been a vocal critic of the peace process, and it has refused to countenance any direct negotiations with Israel. As though all of this were not enough to justify the opprobrium of Americans, Hizballah's close links to Iran, from which it has received generous financial and materiel

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support since 1982, seem to suggest that it is less a phenomenon of Lebanese politics than a geopolitical foothold for Tehran. Hizballah also maintains a close working relationship with Syria, with which it has willingly cooperated, at least in recent years. Hizballah's relentless attacks on the Israeli occupation zone in southern Lebanon have served Syria's purposes by violently underlining the insistence of Damascus that Israel withdraw completely from both the Golan Heights and southern Lebanon.

Hizballah's rhetoric has consistently matched its actions. Taking inspiration from the virulent anti-American statements of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Hizballah has condemned and threatened the United States for its pro-Israeli and anti-Islam policies. One of its most persistent slogans—appearing on posters, banners and billboards—has been “Death to America and Israel” as frequently reiterated by its secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah.² If Hizballah's verbal attacks on the United States have declined recently, no vitriol has been spared for Israel, which remains the ultimate focus of Hizballah's enmity as it does for Iran.

There is no denying that Hizballah has earned its reputation for radicalism. Nonetheless, U.S. policymakers have begun, especially in private off-the-record discussions, to come to terms with the fact that Hizballah may not simply be dismissed as an extremist or terrorist group. The party has managed to build an extremely impressive social base in Lebanon. Hizballah is arguably the most effective and efficient political party in the country. Hizballah provides an array of services throughout the areas where it enjoys a significant presence, especially in the *dahiya* (suburbs) of Beirut; the northern Biqaa valley, and Ba'albak in particular, and in parts of southern Lebanon, including Nabatiyya, the important historic center of Shi'i scholarship.

Its medical facilities are far better than those available in government hospitals, on which the poor would otherwise have to rely. Its hospital in the *dahiya* is extremely impressive, and a new hospital in the southern city of Nabatiyya is in operation. Doctors working in the hospitals report that both Muslims and Christians may and do use the medical facilities, although they

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are found in areas where many Shi'i Muslims live. In addition to medical care, a network of schools, firms, community centers, and public assistance facilities (e.g., food distribution centers for the needy) fall under Hizballah's wing. Hizballah maintains its own engineering and construction company, and it has been quick to lend materiel support and expertise to those whose homes have been damaged or destroyed, whether by Israeli attacks or as a result of internecine clashes within Lebanon. The families of martyred Hizballahis receive regular pensions and other assistance from the party.³

As these examples illustrate, the party reveals two complementary aspects. It has committed itself to the militant pursuit of its goals, especially ending Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon (where it controls about ten percent of all Lebanese territory), while working strenuously to build and sustain a political constituency. Hizballah's commitment to expelling Israel from Lebanese soil is not in doubt, and this goal attracts wide if not unanimous support in Lebanon. Since the signing of the Ta'if accord in 1989, which provided the political formula for ending the 16-year civil war, Hizballah has been transforming itself into a political party. In short, it has been preparing for life after resistance, while simultaneously exploiting its commitment to liberate the south in order to sustain its impressive political constituency whose loyalty is by no means irrevocable.

The story of the political awakening of the Shi'a is a long one, and Hizballah is only its most recent significant manifestation. The following overview is intended to allow the reader to place Hizballah in the broader context of social, economic, and political trends among the Shi'i Muslims of Lebanon.

THE SOCIO ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF SHI'I POLITICS

The modern state of Lebanon won its independence in 1943. The defining compromise of Lebanese politics was the *mithaq al-watani* (national pact). The pact was an unwritten understanding between the dominant political communities of the day—the Sunni Muslims and the Maronite Christians—and it

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provided the terms of reference for independence. In the 1920s, the French carved generous chunks of Syria to create a viable Lebanon. For the Sunnis, the acceptance of an independent state meant putting aside dreams of reuniting Lebanon with Syria. On their part, the Maronites, long the favored ally of French power and influence in the Levant, now acknowledged that the genesis of the independent state required them to concede that Lebanon was an Arab state, not an appendage of Europe. Neither community spoke with a single voice, obviously, and a variety of dissenting voices flourished.

The political system that emerged from the national pact formalized a confessional political system. Each of the country's 17 recognized sectarian communities was accorded political privilege, including senior appointments in the bureaucracy, members of parliament, and high political office, in rough proportion to their size.⁴ This was always a rather inexact process, except for the highest political positions that were awarded to the Maronites, Sunnis, and the Shi'is. Thus, the Maronites, ostensibly the plurality, were accorded the presidency, a position with Gaullist prerogatives and powers, and the Sunnis won the premiership, a decided second fiddle to the presidency. The provenance for this allocation of power was a 1932 census of dubious reliability, which also has the distinction of being the last official census ever conducted in Lebanon.

The Shi'i community, the third largest according to the 1932 data, was awarded the speakership of the parliament, a weak office in terms of relative power and weaker still by virtue of the fragmentation and underdevelopment of the Shi'i community, which could bring little concerted weight on the political system. While a small community of Shi'is lived in and around Beirut, the overwhelming mass of the community lived in southern Lebanon and in the northern Biqaa valley. The long-standing impoverishment of the Shi'a is well known and has been carefully documented and will not detain us here.⁵

The historical context for the impoverishment of all of the Arab Shi'a communities (found, notably, in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia) begins with the fact that

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the dominant Arab Sunnis harbored suspicions of the heterodox minority's adherence to Islam. They also suspected the Arab Shi'a of being a stalking horse for Persia, notwithstanding the venerable origins of Arab Shi'ism, which long predates the introduction of Shi'ism in Persia in the sixteenth century. The Prophet Muhammad's much-esteemed daughter, Fatimah, was the wife of his cousin 'Ali. The validity of 'Ali's claim to succeed Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim community is the central point of contention between Shi'is and Sunnis to this day.

A conjuncture of social facts, regional conflicts, and domestic policies shaped the politicization of the Lebanese Shi'is during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The rate of natural increase of this community outpaced all others in Lebanon. The average Shi'i family had about nine members in the early 1970s, while the average Christian household had only six. Although fertility among the Sunni women was higher than among the Christians, Shi'i women bore an average of one more child than their fellow Muslims.⁶ Families of a dozen or more children are not uncommon among the Shi'is.

As mobility improved in the first decades of Lebanese independence, tens of thousands migrated from the hinterlands to Beirut and abroad. The hardscrabble Shi'i farmers cultivated the hills and valleys of the south and the Bqaa plateau, but most could not subsist on what they earned selling tobacco to the state monopoly or growing vegetables and fruits. Even those who owned land rather than sharecropped it often struggled to eke out a living from farming. The state was of little help, providing piddling sums for rural development. In the northern Bqaa, where the influence of the state was weak, poppies and hashish became valuable cash crops and were harvested well into the 1990s, when Beirut and Damascus succumbed to U.S. pressure and financial incentives to stop the drug trade. Sharp cuts in drug money (and the fact that little, if any, of U.S. incentive payments trickled down) later affected Hizballah's ability to sustain its influence in the area.

In many Shi'i villages, several generations of young men left Lebanon to find their fortunes in the Ivory Coast, Nigeria,

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Senegal, and throughout Africa, as well as in Latin America and the Arab oil-producing states of the Gulf. Later, these migrant workers would return to Lebanon, sometimes with impressive sums of money and usually with little affection for the traditionally powerful families that had dominated Shi'i society from Ottoman times.

In the South, the Shi'i heartland, the influx of 100,000 Palestinians beginning with the 1948-49 Palestine war introduced a pool of cheap laborers, willing to work for less than Shi'i farm laborers, thus giving further cause for migration. Later, of course, following the civil war in Jordan in 1970-71, tens of thousands of armed Palestinian guerrillas would move to Lebanon, where the PLO challenged the authority of the Beirut government and established a virtual state-within-a-state encompassing west Beirut and much of southern Lebanon.

This is the background against which the Lebanese Shi'i Muslims mobilized into politics. For more than a quarter of a century, the transformation of this community from quiescence to activism has brought into question the durability of Lebanon's founding compromise and substantially contributed to the violent turmoil that has enveloped the country.

FUNGIBLE POLITICAL LOYALTIES

Political bosses (*zu'ama'*) from a mere handful of powerful families dominated Shi'i politics into the 1960s, and they maintained their power through extensive patronage networks. The power of the *zu'ama'* depended on the support of their clients, but by the 1960s many young Shi'i men and women, alienated by old-style politics, were attracted by new political forces. As the politicization of the Shi'a accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, they were courted and recruited by a variety of secular political movements, ranging from the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) on the left to the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) on the right. Amal and especially Hizballah were relative late-comers on the political scene.

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Four major (and sometimes intertwined) political trends distinguish the political mobilization of the Shi'a since the 1960s: secularism, liberation (especially in conjunction with Palestine), reformism, and Islamism. Notably, Arab nationalism has enjoyed a very limited following among the Shi'a. In 1997, a fifth, incipient trend appeared from within Hizballah when Shaykh Subhi Tufayli, a former secretary-general of Hizballah, launched a dissident movement in the Biqaa valley among alienated farmers and tribesmen. Although the fortunes of secular movements and parties have declined, the loyalties and sympathies of the Shi'a remain widely distributed and no single organization may claim a majority following among the Shi'a. By the 1990s, Hizballah was certainly the best-organized political phenomenon, and it enjoyed the largest base of popular support.

Of the three distinctive trends that preceded the emergence of Hizballah in 1982, several of the secular parties, as well as the nominally reformist Amal movement, retain a significant following. Support for the Palestinian cause has withered but not disappeared. The integration and naturalization (*tawtir*) of the refugee population evoke wide opposition in Lebanon, not least among the Shi'a.

Within families, political loyalties are often shared between two or more organizations, or are not "lent" to any political group at all. It is common to meet individuals whose personal biographies include membership in three or four different political organizations, usually in sequence. I emphasize that support is lent and that political loyalty is fungible. Ideological fashions have changed dramatically in the last few decades, but instrumental calculations continue to be a powerful explanation for supporting one political organization versus another.

The promise of radical change could have been irresistible only to a community whose ethos emphasized its exploitation and dispossession by the ruling elites. In Lebanon, as in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, Shi'a in large numbers were attracted in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to secular opposition parties. In Lebanon, these took the form of the SSNP, the LCP, the Organization for Communist Labor Action, and, in smaller

numbers, the several branches of the Ba‘th party. Particularly in the case of the Communist organizations and the SSNP, there was an inherent ideological attraction to parties that condemned the tribal, religious, or ethnic bases of discrimination. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the leadership of these secular parties was predominantly Christian. Although support for secular parties has dwindled, significant numbers of politicized Shi‘a continue to express a preference for them. Notably, the SSNP retains an impressive number of supporters, as much as 16 percent in a recent sample.⁷

There have always been few government safety nets to assist the poor or the disadvantaged. As the civil war approached and the armed Palestinian presence grew in strength, many young Shi‘a found their place in one or another of the *fida’i* organizations. Not only did the Palestine resistance movement directly challenge the power of Lebanon’s entrenched elites, but they paid comparatively well and it is well known that many young men and some women took up arms out of a combination of ideological commitment and the simple need to feed one’s family in a “may the richest man win” capitalist system.

Even before the Israeli invasion of 1982, the fortunes of the armed Palestinian presence had soured, especially in southern Lebanon, where the Amal movement gained many adherents at the expense of leftist parties. Amal, of course, had been founded by al-Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, the Iran-born cleric, in the early 1970s as a militia adjunct to the *Harakat al-Mabrumin* (the Movement of the Deprived), the populist reform movement.⁸ Amal faded into obscurity after the eruption of the civil war in 1975, but it enjoyed an impressive resurgence following Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1978, the enigmatic disappearance of al-Sadr during a trip to Libya in the same year, and the historic Iranian revolution of 1978–79, which provided an exemplar for action, if not a precise model for emulation.

Amal drew substantial support from the growing Shi‘i middle class, for whom the movement represented an assertive voice against the power of the political *zu‘ama*. Equally important, Amal challenged the stifling and often brutal domination of the

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Palestinian guerrillas, whose public support plummeted in the late 1970s and early 1980s for bringing southern Lebanon into the crossfire with Israel.⁹ Amal clashed with the guerrillas throughout the early 1980s. From 1985 to 1988, the militia and sympathetic units of the Lebanese army conducted their “war of the camps” to prevent the Palestinians from regaining the position of dominance they had enjoyed prior to the Israeli invasion. The campaign enlivened Hizballah to assist the Palestinians in order to thwart Amal.

Although Amal resistance fighters actively opposed the continuing Israeli occupation of Lebanon, especially after 1983, Amal had tacitly welcomed the Israeli invasion of June 1982, especially since it vanquished many Palestinian fighters from Lebanon. Amal leaders, especially Nabih Berri and Daoud Sulaiman Daoud, sought a modus vivendi with Israel and the United States. Berri’s participation in the National Salvation Committee created by President Elias Sarkis to foster dialogue among Lebanon’s most powerful militia leaders during the Israeli siege of Beirut was derided by Hizballah detractors, who described the committee as no more than an “American-Israeli bridge” by which to enter and control Lebanon.¹⁰ There is no doubt that Berri’s willingness to contemplate a deal that would privilege Syria’s enemies provoked Damascus to lend support to Hizballah as a counterweight to Amal.

Subsequently, as the civil war in Lebanon drew to a close, the transmutation of Amal was underway. What had been a dynamic, populist movement with extensive communal support became a full-blown patronage system with all of the corruption, inefficiency, and inequity that Amal had long ascribed to the traditional *zu’ama*. As for Nabih Berri, with the end of the internal war in 1990, he became speaker of the parliament. He is now privately derided for his pocket-stuffing and publicly feared for his control of a patronage system that few Shi’is can afford to slight. The irony of Berri’s transformation from populist nemesis of the confessional system to powerful denizen of confessional politics is lost on few Lebanese.

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Musa al-Sadr had been an organizer on many fronts, and not only did he create the populist reform movement that came to be Amal, but he also was responsible for the establishment of a representative body that would put the Shi'is on an equal footing with the Sunnis. This body, the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council (*al-majlis al-Islami al-Shi'i al-a'la*), now led by the impressive Shi'i thinker and 'alim, Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, was formed in 1969. Significantly, the council has been especially active in sponsoring and launching a series of ecumenical dialogues, intended to foster intercommunal dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The council was to be a political locus for the growing Shi'i professional class. While the council does not have extensive grassroots support, it does enjoy guaranteed access to the state and is widely regarded as an institutional rival to Berri's Amal, as well as to Hizballah. In contrast to either Hizballah or Amal, Shams al-Din emphasizes the spiritual renewal of the Muslim, rather than the goal of seeking power, which he argues often runs at cross purposes with the Islamic renewal. In fact, he is critical of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front for seeking power and thereby alienating a significant segment of the society.¹¹

HIZBALLAH JOINS THE CAST

Hizballah emerged in 1982, in the midst of the Israeli invasion, although its existence was not formally declared until 1983. Iran and Syria share credit for sponsoring the creation of Hizballah. Iran provided the impetus, while Syria was a willing accomplice. For Iran, the creation of Hizballah represented the realization of the revolutionary state's zealous campaign to spread the message of the self-styled "Islamic revolution," whereas for Syria the Shi'i party was a fortuitous instrument for preserving Syrian interests in Lebanon.

Iran's Syrian ally suffered a military defeat at the hands of the Israeli military. As Syria's power waned, albeit temporarily, many Lebanese politicians courted the United States in the hope-filled summer and fall of 1982, when many thought that Wash-

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ington would set the terms of the peace. Syria faced the disastrous prospect of having its extensive western border controlled by a Lebanese government aligned with the United States and Israel. Amal flirted seriously with pax Americana, on the assumption that the United States was now enjoying hegemony in Lebanon. If Amal was willing to jettison its long-standing links to the al-Asad regime, Syria had other ideas.

Syria's alliance with Iran presented it with the means to strike indirectly at both Israel and the United States, as well their Lebanese allies, including the Amal movement. Thus, Syria acceded to the introduction of a Pasdaran (revolutionary guard) contingent of 1,500 men to Ba`albak in eastern Lebanon during the summer of 1982. The contingent quickly became the nodal point for the Iranian training, supply, and support of Hizballah under the watchful eye of Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, then Iran's ambassador to Damascus. Later, in the 1990s, the reduction of the Pasdaran presence by about two-thirds would confirm a shift in Iran's stance vis-à-vis Lebanon.¹² By 1998, the remainder of the Iranian contingent withdrew, signifying for many Iranians the definitive end to any serious effort to export the "Islamic Revolution."

Israeli and American designs for Lebanon collapsed in 1983 and 1984, in significant measure due to the campaign of bombings and guerrillas attacks mounted by Hizballah or elements aligned to it.¹³ Amal's approach to Washington yielded little and Amal patched its alliance with Syria to become its closest ally in Lebanon. For its part, Syria has no interest in seeing Amal or Hizballah (or any other political force) triumph in Lebanon. Syria's game in Lebanon has consistently followed the pragmatic principles of realpolitik. To adapt the dictum of Lord Palmertson, Syria has no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies in Lebanon. Thus, Hizballah is a wary ally of Damascus, ever aware that alliances of convenience may eventually become inconvenient.

THE WORLDVIEW OF HIZBALLAH

Throughout the 1980s, Hizballah hewed closely to the Iranian line. In fact, its remarkable programmatic document of 1985, an

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open letter addressed to “the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World,” bears a strong made-in-Tehran coloration.¹⁴ In effect, the Islamic revolution gave substance to a new ideological framework that serves to explain the deprivation and the suffering of the Shi’a. The letter emphasizes that the world is bifurcated between those who are oppressed and those who are the oppressors, and chief among the oppressors is the United States and its regional ally, Israel. This perspective not only enjoyed resonance among the Shi’a, many of whom had first-hand experience with Israeli oppression, but it also legitimized and commended the use of violence against the enemies of Islam, particularly the West.

Hizballah released this revealing document in February 1985 to mark the anniversary of the assassination of Shaikh Raghīb Harb, the bright young cleric of Jibshit in southern Lebanon, who was assassinated 12 months earlier, probably by an Israeli. 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 U.S.-brokered May 17, 1983, agreement between Lebanon and Israel, not to mention holding the world in thrall over the fate of western hostages, the last of whom was released only in 1991. 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” became a magnet for attacks by resistance forces, which in the 1990s have been chiefly organized by Hizballah.¹⁵

The open letter emphasizes that the 1978–79 revolution in Iran served 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 ex-

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cuse 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."¹⁶ "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.'"¹⁷

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."¹⁸ 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-'Abd*, the Hizballah newspaper, puts the superpower on the same plane: "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."¹⁹

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.²⁰ "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."²¹ 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

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French should be “taught a lesson because of their scorn for other people and lack of respect for Lebanese Muslims.”²²

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.²³ 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.”²⁴ 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.”²⁵

Hizballah thus positioned 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.”²⁶ 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

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atheist ideology, was singled out for attacks. Dozens, if not hundreds, of party members were killed in a brutal, bloody campaign of suppression and assassination in 1984 and 1985.²⁷

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. . . .”²⁸ “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 jurispudent.”²⁹

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.”³⁰ 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.”³¹ It is this absolutism that 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 *vilayat al-faqih* (which would entail creating an Islamic republic modelled after Iran) 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.” The application of *Shari’a* in the context of Khomeini’s neo-Shi’ism requires clerical guardianship. In any event, given the doctrinal role of the *mujtahid* and the requirement of *taqlid* in Shi’i Islam, a state founded on the *Shari’a* could scarcely function without regular recourse to the *mujtahids*.³² The unanswered question in the open letter is precisely Hizballah’s political design for Lebanon,

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a significant question given the expressed disdain for the existing political system.

The role of the *'ulama* (implicitly, the bulk of the Sunni *'ulama* as well as those Shi'is clerics who do not actively support Hizballah) is 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."³³ "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."³⁴ Hizballah urges the "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."³⁵ 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 nonaffiliated 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 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 American journalist Terry Anderson). Although the myriad 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 complex, multi layered negotiations involving demands for the release of Iranian assets by the United States and the freeing of Lebanese prisoners by Israel.

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The negotiations were conducted under the personal auspices of U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. Although it has been widely speculated that sequestered Iranian assets were freed as a sine qua non for the hostages' release, this is not the case. Indeed, major Iranian claims on the United States remain unresolved, and the Hague negotiations over contending financial claims often resulted in payments by, not to, Iran. Certainly, by the early 1990s Iranian officials (not least President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) were intent on bringing the hostage crisis to an end. President George Bush's January 1989 inaugural promise that "good will begets good will" created a mood of expectancy in Tehran.

Even so, long, tedious negotiations were required between Pérez de Cuéllar's representative, Giandominico Picco, and the captors themselves. At that point in Lebanon's history, the civil war had drawn to a close, most Lebanese did not support the taking of hostages (few ever did), and the conclusion of the Cold War was pregnant with potential to redefine the dimensions of politics in the region. Picco's valuable book presents an authentic account of negotiations that were often as much between the captors as with their Italian interlocutor. Picco does not hide his disappointment that the United States did not, in the end, return good will for good will in terms of reciprocating Iranian efforts to free the hostages.³⁶

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. (Israel continues this practice, amid suggestions by Justice Minister Yossi Beilin in 1999 that the hostages should be released and the practice be brought to a halt.) Not only did the hijacking expose the deep tensions between Amal and Hizballah when Amal leader Nabih Berri attempted to mediate the cri-

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sis, but it also revealed the deep radicalization of the Shi'i political scene. In 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 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 certainly served as a stalking horse for Iranian interests, especially in the 1980s. 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 in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for the most part. In contrast, only in Lebanon did the conditions seem 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 for Iran. The submission of Iran inspired sarcastic graffiti in Lebanon, "Why 598 and not 425?" a reference to the U.N. Security Council resolution that ended the war and the resolution that deals with the restoration of security in the south. 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 postrevolutionary 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 was 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 United States to supply spare parts and missiles in

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exchange for hostages. 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, 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.³⁷

The coterie of young clerics who comprise the cadre of Hizballah's resented the nonclerical 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. There could be no accommodation with a corrupt political system.

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.³⁸ The kidnapping undermined Amal's strategy of maintaining a cooperative working relationship with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and it provoked a sharp offensive reaction from Amal. Nonetheless, the kidnapers 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

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momentarily consolidate its grip on southern Lebanon. Shortly thereafter, in the fall of 1988, fighting erupted in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Amal was badly defeated, virtually losing its military foothold in the capital. Hizballah's efforts in 1989 to roll back Amal influence in the south eroded its position there, though Amal continues to be influential in the south.

WALKING BETWEEN RAINDROPS

In contrast to the fierce ideological tenor in the open letter of 1985, Hizballah pragmatically confronts 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 corruption and has come to admire the comparative integrity of Hizballah. Its broadened constituency brings with it new requisites for sustaining support.

The new Shi'i bourgeoisie does not yearn to live in the Islamic Republic of anything, not least the Islamic Republic of Lebanon. Their frequently cited goal is an open political system and a place at the table, rather than having to stand at the back door of politics as a supplicant.

The decision to participate in parliamentary elections in 1992, the first held in Lebanon in 20 years, was symptomatic of Hizballah's coming to terms with its sociopolitical setting. Its success in 1992 signaled the party's acknowledgment that

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Lebanon is *sui generis*, and that imported Iranian models may not be applied in Lebanon. This conclusion was resisted by some of the Hizballah leadership throughout the 1980s, as it was by many of its 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. Cynics may argue that the Islamic state model has been put aside tactically in a multiconfessional Lebanon, but the strategic objectives remain both unchanged and closer to achievement with Hizballah's penetration of the state. 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.³⁹

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, have 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 by shifting the interconfessional balance in favor of the Maronites.

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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.

THE 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 (*taharwuwul*) from revolutionary force to tame political participant. As a result of his criticism, he was removed from the leadership of the paper. Hizballah's entry into Biqaa parliamentary politics marginalized Tufayli, a former secretary-general of Hizballah, but he has built a constituency in the Biqaa valley, where the economy remains heavily dependent on 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 previously, on July 4, 1997, he launched the *thawrat al-jiyaa'*, (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 jobs, 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

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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. Amid 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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 Lebanese 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, that without the armed resistance cachet it would become an marginal player in Lebanese politics.⁴²

The reality is very different, especially in respect to the level of popular support that Hizballah enjoys. It is certainly true that Hizballah may not claim a wide swath of support among non-Shi'i Lebanese, although it has enjoyed a period of widespread acclaim in the face of disproportionate Israeli punitive attacks on the infrastructure of Lebanon. Among the Shi'is, the foremost victims of Israel's occupation, support is far more durable. 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, displayed in many districts of Beirut, as well as the *dahiya* (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." Should the Israelis end their occupation in the south, it is likely that Hizballah will bask in the afterglow for years to come.

There is no question that Hizballah's operations in the south are coordinated with Syria (Hizballah officials freely admit as much), but the fact is that 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, Israeli denials notwithstanding. Hizballah officials frequently observe that if Israel's presence in the south were not resisted, Israel would have little incentive to even consider withdrawing its forces.⁴³ This assertion is widely shared in Lebanon,

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and the converse proposition that a cessation of resistance activities would induce Israel to withdraw is often dismissed as laughably improbable. 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 little as two hours.

In the ideology of Hizballah, Israel is an anathema. In contrast, while the United States is considered an adversary and is condemned for its support of Israel, Hizballah's Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah—reelected in July 1998 for an unprecedented third term⁴⁴—has claimed that the United States is not a target for Hizballah.⁴⁵ Other leading officials, including Shura Council and Political Bureau members, have privately explored the possibility of a dialogue with the United States.

There is little doubt that Israel's actions in the south have fed radicalism. In that sense, the occupation has been consistently counterproductive for Israel. 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.⁴⁶ The 1996 massacre by shelling more than 100 civilians in the U.N. base in Qana, an ancient village cited in the Bible as the place where Christ turned water to wine, 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. Among middle class professionals in the *dahiya*, trips to Qana, usually with their children in tow, are becoming ritualized. The site is festooned with banners (mostly in Arabic) accusing Israel of terrorism and genocide, and invoking sayings by some of the central figures in Shi'ism (such as Imam Husain). Many of the banners emphasize the loss of innocent blood and demand vengeance. One sign reads: "Qana is the Karbala [the site of Husain'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)."

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Authoritative reports by the United Nations and by Middle East Watch repudiate Israeli claims that the shelling of the U.N. base was unintentional, and these findings are well known in Lebanon. The bitter fruit of the “Grapes of Wrath” operation, and especially the Qana massacre, will be harvested for some time to come. Even if the IDF pulls up stakes in southern Lebanon, there is a significant residue of hatred for Israel, but will this enmity be translated into action?

Whether in writing or in private interviews, leading members of Hizballah as well as Shaykh Muhammad Husain Fadlallah—somewhat inaccurately who is if widely depicted as the “spiritual guide,” or *al-murshid al-rubi* of Hizballah—express their distrust of Israel and emphasize that peace with Israel may never be countenanced. Strictly speaking, Fadlallah does not speak for Hizballah, and he has sometimes been at odds with the party’s leadership, which covets his moral authority. Fadlallah’s ambitions transcend a mere political party. He has a wide following in the Shi’i community and his views are extremely influential.

Fadlallah allows that “we would welcome an Israeli withdrawal,” while adding that Hizballah would not sign any agreement with Israel or otherwise legitimate Israel. Yet, he notes that governments, not individuals, movements, or parties, sign diplomatic agreements. For his part, Muhammad Ra’ad, the impressive Hizballah leader (and school teacher) from Nabatiyya, pointed to the 1996 election of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and, specifically, his distinctively hostile attitudes to the Oslo accords, in order to argue that Israel cannot be trusted. Ra’ad was elected to parliament in 1992 and reelected in 1996, and his political savvy is widely acknowledged.

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. Notwithstanding the ideological posture of Hizballah, the organization has shown practical flexibility. In fact, in a July 1996 interview, Fadlallah, who is routinely titled “ayatollah” by his followers, emphasized the need for dialogue, especially dialogue with one’s enemies. Characteristically, he corroborated his argument with an *ayat* (Quranic verse).

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Asked if that includes dialogue with Israel, he emphatically replied, "Yes. Especially with one's enemies."

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 martyred Hizballahis. Among the corpses exchanged by Israel was that of the son of Hasan Nasrallah, the current secretary-general of Hizballah. These exchanges continued into 1999.

The Israeli army has become increasingly frustrated by its inability to preempt Hizballah operations, which have become efficiently deadly in recent years. In marked contrast to the late 1980s when Hizballah attacks often resulted in disproportionate 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 to 1, whereas in the past it was more than 5 to 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, 14 Israeli civilians have died as a direct or indirect result of Hizballah attacks, while over 500 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians have died.⁴⁷

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 moves and countermoves, 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, Israel tacitly concedes that the IDF is an occupation force in Lebanon.

What would happen in the case of an Israeli withdrawal? This question is made all the more relevant by the fact that the Lebanon file has been hotly debated in Israel, especially since

1997, culminating in Prime Minister Ehud Barak's 1999 announcement: "By July 2000, the army will withdraw to the international border and it is from the international border that we will defend the north of the country. I don't advise anyone to test us when we draw back and are sitting on the border."⁴⁸

The Hizballah answer to this question has been consistently ambiguous. For instance, Muhammad Read 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, 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, he adds that these are practical questions that will be decided in time.

Deputy Secretary-General Na'im Qassem, like Ra'ad, one of seven members of the Shura (Consultancy) Council that governs Hizballah, takes the same line. Qassem tacitly concedes that Hizballah may lose support following an end to the occupation but asserts that it is a viable political party with a cultural, social, and political base.⁴⁹

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 and his colleagues in Hizballah, political decisions are a reflection of costs and benefits and relative power. This implies that so long as Israel retains the capacity to respond disproportionately to attacks, there is little incentive to continue the attacks southward. He 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 seven Lebanese villages which were captured by Israel in the 1948 and 1949 fight-

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ing and incorporated into Israel. These villages fell within the boundaries of *Le Gran Liban* (Greater Lebanon), as defined by France during the mandate period. Some of these villages were populated predominantly by Shi'i Muslims. Other Lebanese forces have attacked Israel's "security zone" as well, including Amal and a variety of secular militants belonging to Ba'hist, Communist, and Nasserist organizations, but Hizballah has conducted the lion's share of attacks. None of the other Lebanese groups espouses goals other than liberating the south.

The 350,000 or so Palestinians refugees in Lebanon are another matter. Many of them have roots in Haifa and the villages of the Galilee, areas that are now very much part of the state of Israel. Although the camps were nominally disarmed in 1991, significant arms caches remain, and camps like 'Ain al-Hilwah, near Saida, are strongholds that the Lebanese army skirts. A number of armed Palestinian factions reportedly maintain cooperative relations with Hizballah. These groups could certainly choose to mount independent sporadic attacks against Israel, as the Islamic Jihad did in October 1999 when it launched ineffectual attacks on two SLA positions. Nonetheless, these Palestinian factions lack the broad social base of Hizballah, and they would risk a further exacerbation of their already difficult relations with the Lebanese authorities if they persist.

Fadlallah admits with some delight that a unilateral 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, and so even after an Israeli withdrawal Jerusalem remains on the agenda. He adds that Jerusalem is not a responsibility that the Lebanese Muslims must shoulder on their own. The purpose of the attacks against the Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon is to end the occupation of Lebanese soil. He tacks on the politically correct position that "we would also insist on the liberation of the Golan Heights."⁵⁰

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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, whether unilaterally or as a result of negotiations with Lebanon and Syria. This is also the firm impression that one gains from the supporters of Hizballah who hide neither 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 pertinent 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 palpable momentum. While Hizballah denounced the Oslo accord, echoing the Iranian government, 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.

The fate of Israel's allies in southern Lebanon remains a matter of obvious concern for Israeli decisionmakers. It is encouraging that the withdrawal of the SLA from the Jezzine salient in May 1999 did not evoke widescale acts of retribution, although Hizballah continues to hold several SLA officers that it snatched prior to the withdrawal and has refused to turn them over to Lebanese authorities. There is no question that SLA principals, such as General Antoine Lahad and his principal deputies, will leave should Israel withdraw its forces. Moreover, SLA morale has dropped like a stone in the wake of Barak's expressed intention to withdraw by July 2000, if not sooner. For

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more than two years it has been rumored that Lahad and other leading SLA officials have secretly been granted Israeli citizenship, and Israel is reputedly prepared to provide a refuge of hundreds of SLA militiamen and their families. It is well known that Lahad has a comfortable home in Paris and would prefer to seek refuge there.⁵¹ As if to partially defuse the retribution issue, Hizballah has proposed a limited amnesty bill in parliament, though it remains without action. Under the draft legislation, only those who have not wounded or killed civilians or resistance fighters would be eligible for amnesty.⁵²

While Hizballah's enmity for Israel is not to be dismissed, the simple fact is that it has been tacitly negotiating with Israel for years, although the currency of negotiations has been the katyusha rocket on the Hizballah side and the artillery shell and bomb on the Israeli side. When either side has stepped out of the rule box that has been drawn with increasing specificity over the course of almost two decades, the other side has loudly voiced its objections. Habitually, the first reaction is with deadly force, but UNIFIL offers a useful conduit for indirect communications. More formally, since 1996, a monitoring committee (consisting of France, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and the United States and established after Israel's "Grapes of Wrath") has been in operation. The commission, based at Naquora, the site for the UNIFIL headquarters, operates on the basis of unanimity. Even so, it has been able to reinforce the rules. Most remarkably, both Israel and Hizballah have apologized for actions that fall outside the rules, as in November 1998, when Hizballah apologized for a katyusha firing that it not only did not authorize but condemned. Israel has occasionally acted with marked restraint after suffering major casualties, on the argument that a given Hizballah attack was permitted by the rules.

As the Israeli rhetoric over withdrawal accelerated in 1999, even tightlipped Lebanese officials have voiced their assurances, no doubt encouraged by their Syrian friends. Thus in October 1999, Colonel Bashar al-Asad, no mere field grade officer but the heir apparent to Hafez al-Asad, stated: "When the causes that led to the resistance are gone, I believe its members will go

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back to normal life and will choose other ways to serve their country after achieving the long-cherished victory.” Bashar’s comforting words were followed by those of Salim al-Huss, the prime minister, who emphasized that government support for the resistance would end “once the occupation has ended.”⁵³

Of course, Syria’s assurances are linked to expectations of looming negotiations with Israel over the Golan Heights. The possibility remains that Israel will opt to withdraw unilaterally, attracted by the possibilities for undermining Syria’s negotiating hand, if not propelled by the frustration at Syria’s preconditions for negotiations. The technical-military problems inherent in a unilateral withdrawal can be overcome, but Israel’s penchant for someone to “hand the keys to” (as Uri Lubrani once said) argues for using the promised unilateral withdrawal as a negotiating lever rather than a policy. Even so, should Israel withdraw independent of resuming opening negotiations with Syria, the Syrians will find themselves confronting a very disadvantageous chess game. Hizballah’s social base will simply not support attacks into Israel, given the likely costs of retribution. There is no appetite for taking the fight to Israel. Syria (or any other party for that matter) could spark episodic attacks, but this is not a free option. Israeli retaliation is not a trivial possibility, and Damascus would forfeit the legitimacy and international support it badly needs to face the gargantuan domestic economic challenges that lie ahead.

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 and consistent financial support from Tehran, but that moment has passed. Now Hizballah faces the reality of an Iranian patron with shifting priorities, notwithstanding spurts of support when support suits Tehran’s momentary interests, especially following Israeli air and ground campaigns. For his part, Khatami follows Rafsan-

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jani's path, which leads away from privileged support for Hizballah and toward broader cultural and social ties to Lebanon. Closer to home, in Damascus, Hizballah's role is utilitarian and transient, and mutual suspicion reigns. Under these circumstances, Hizballah has little choice but to plant its feet firmly in Lebanon.

For the first time in more than three decades, Lebanon held municipal elections in the summer of 1998. The elections clearly illustrated the prevailing patterns of political loyalties among the Shi'a. Hizballah demonstrated its strong base in Beirut and especially in the *dahiya* where it soundly thrashed Nabih Berri's candidates. Thus, in the suburbs of Bourj al-Barajnah and Ghubairi, Hizballah slates carried the day. In Ghubairi, the slate of 18 was led by Muhammad Sa'id al-Khansah, a security committee member and the scion of a much respected and extensive family. Majlis Speaker and Amal leader Nabih Berri's slate performed credibly in the south, where Amalists won control of Tyre, but Hizballah held its own by capturing the municipality of Nabatiyyah and in Sarafand it aligned with the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party to share control of the municipal council. Meanwhile, in the Biqaa valley, Amal captured Ba'albak through a deal with secular parties and farmers. Tufayli, still in hiding in Brital, captured his hometown as well as neighboring Tarayya, while splitting a large adjoining village with Hizballah. On the scene election observers note that the elections were clean, especially in comparison to the 1996 parliamentary elections that were transparently manipulated by the government.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the May 1997 Iranian presidential election continues to reverberate in Lebanon. 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 an ideological descendant of the reformist 'alim al-Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, but he maintains close links with Musa's sister Rabab, who lives in Tyre in southern Lebanon. (Rabab married into the respected Sharaf al-Din family, which has produced a number of respected clerics, including the late Shi'i mufti whose death

nearly 45 years ago provided the context for Musa al-Sadr to take up residence in Lebanon.)

Khatami also paid a long visit to speaker Nabih Berri, who continues as the president of Amal, and Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi 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. For his part, Fadlallah has made a point of recognizing Ayatollah Sheikh Ali Sistani rather than Ayatollah Khamene'i as the marji' taqlid, so Khatami's snub was related to this fact, and his reluctance to become embroiled in the then heated debate over Shi'i leadership.

During the visit, when asked whether he deemed a government based on Shari'a more legitimate than one based on popular elections, he was quick to prefer the latter. One Islamist at the meeting objected, 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, including Christians. 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 paramilitary focus.⁵⁵ Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, who visited Lebanon in March 1998, voiced support Hizballah's ambiguous position vis-à-vis Israel, while emphasizing that should Israel withdraw unconditionally, the Islamic resistance would have achieved victory and fulfilled "one of its goals." Khatami has been much more straightforward, as during his Paris visit in October 1999, when he underlined that Iran "would not interfere in the Middle East peace process."⁵⁶ In this October 1999 visit, Kharrazi urged unity between the resistance and the people and the government. This was taken to mean that Hizballah should not interfere with any initiative to make peace with Israel.

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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, especially if negotiations between Israel and Syria, and therefore Lebanon, are revived—as it seemed in late 1999. Hizballah's underlying strength is its impressive constituency among a wide range of Lebanese Shi'is, including the growing middle class. A Trotskyist project of permanent revolution does not sit well with this constituency, and the Hizballah leadership is nothing if sensitive to its constituency. A quiet dialogue with the United States has not yet begun, but U.S. policymakers have increasingly come to understand that such a dialogue is needed. For their part, a few of the pragmatic politicians that dominate Hizballah have already signaled their interest.

Politics, whether among Muslims or non-Muslims, are dynamic and contingent. It may be tempting to assume that behavioral verities are driven by ideological commitments, but the lessons of Shi'i politics in Lebanon point in a very different direction. Political constraints and opportunities are the desiderata of political behavior and ideology takes a back seat. None of this diminishes the dedication that adherents avow or their commitments to the betterment of their societies, but these are political movements that face structural constraints and very real existential dilemmas. The game of politics may erode ideals, but the vast majority of Hizballah's followers want to be in the game. In this sense, they are little different than the leaders who, if nothing else, have exemplified a sophisticated understanding of Lebanese politics.

NOTES

*The author gratefully acknowledges
permission to draw upon earlier articles in
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¹ The 1999 annual list of legally mandated list of terrorist organizations and states that sponsor terrorism was released by the Department of State in October 1999.

¹ See *al-Nahar*, May 24, 1997.

² H. Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 145–68.

³ In the post-Ta'if period, there are 19 recognized confessions with the addition of the 'Alawis and the Kurds.

⁴ See A.R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987): 16–23.

⁵ J. Chamie *Religion and Fertility: Arab Christian-Muslim Differentials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 44.

⁶ J.P. Harik "Between Islam and the System: Sources and Implications of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hizballah" in *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40:1 (March 1996): 50.

⁷ F. Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shi'a of Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); A.R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

⁸ F. Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shi'a of Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); A.R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

⁹ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 105.

¹⁰ Interview with the author on July 31, 1997.

¹¹ H. Vaziri, "Iran's Penetration of Lebanon, 1979–Present: Exporting Islamic Revolution." Paper presented to a conference on Lebanese-Iranian relations at Harvard University, December 7–8, 1996: p. 50.

¹² A. McDermott and K. Skjelsbaek, *The Multinational Force in Beirut, 1982–1984* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991); D. C. Martin and J. Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War Against Terrorism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

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¹³ The translated text is in A. R. Norton *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 167–87.

¹⁴ A. R. Norton, “(In)security Zones in South Lebanon,” in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23:1 (Autumn 1993): 61–79.

¹⁵ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 183–4.

¹⁶ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 184.

¹⁷ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 178.

¹⁸ May 9, 1987: 12

¹⁹ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 179.

²⁰ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 170.

²¹ Cited in the *International Herald Tribune*, August 24, 1989

²² A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 184.

²³ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 170.

²⁴ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 171.

²⁵ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 173.

²⁶ A. R. Norton, “Lebanon,” in *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs, 1987: Parties and Revolutionary Movements* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987): 449–53; A. R. Norton, “Lebanon,” in *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs, 1988: Parties and Revolutionary Movements* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1988): 422–25; A. R. Norton, “Lebanon,” in *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs, 1989: Parties and Revolutionary Movements* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1989): 491–94.

²⁷ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 170.

²⁸ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 169.

²⁹ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 179.

³⁰ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 173.

³¹ In Shi'i Islam, in the absence of the “Awaited Imam” (Imam al-Muntazar), the adherent must “imitate” (*taqlid*) the legal rulings of a cleric qualified to independently interpret religious law and responsibility (a *mu-jtahid*). This is the doctrinal foundation for the influence of the clerics in Shi'ism, in contrast to Sunni Islam, which entertains a more fluid conception of religious authority. For both Sunni and Shi'i muslims, Islam is a system of law, and individuals have been known to “convert” from one legal school to another or from one clerical authority to another in order to exploit a more advantageous legal interpretation. Thus, the present

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prime minister of Lebanon, Salim al-Huss (decidedly a Sunni Muslim) performed a technical and temporary conversion to the Shi'ism in order to gain full inheritance rights for his daughters under the Shi'i Ja'fari legal school. (Shi'i Islam does not reduce the inheritance shares of daughters as do the Sunni schools of law.)

³² A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 186.

³³ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 173.

³⁴ A. R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a* (1987): 175.

³⁵ Giandomenico Picco, *Man Without A Gun* (New York: Times Books, 1999).

³⁶ A. R. Norton, "Lebanon: The Internal Conflict and the Iranian Connection," in *The Iranian Revolution*, ed. John Esposito (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990): 132.

³⁷ Dirani was kidnapped by Israeli forces from his Biqaa valley village in 1994.

³⁸ Author interviews, July 1995, July 1996, and July-August 1997.

³⁹ Iranian officials, including 'Ali Akbar Natiq Nuri, Speaker of the Majlis, confirmed their support for Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and took pains to divorce themselves from any suggestion that Iran was connected or sympathetic to Tufayli. Beirut, Radio Lebanon, in FBIS, Near East and South Asia, February 5, 1998.

⁴⁰ A. Ehteshami and R. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997): 133.

⁴¹ See for example *Haaretz*, October 19, 1995.

⁴² H. Nasrallah, "An Interview with Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah," in *Middle East Insight* 12:4-5 (May-August 1996): 38-43, 84-86.

⁴³ Nasrallah's third three-year term required an amendment to the organizational charter by the party congress, which so acted in July 1998.

⁴⁴ H. Nasrallah, "An Interview with Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah," in *Middle East Insight* 12:4-5 (May-August 1996): 38-43, 84-86.

⁴⁵ R. Hollis, *Lebanon on Hold* (London: Chatham House, 1996).

⁴⁶ See the important report, J. Hilterman, *Civilian Pawns* (Washington D.C.: Middle East Watch, 1996).

⁴⁷ *Al-Abram*, September 24, 1999.

⁴⁸ *Al-Nahar*, October 14, 1999.

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⁴⁹ Interview with author, July 1996.

⁵⁰ As recently reported by Nabil Khoury, *al-Abram*, October 17, 1999. A report in *al-Hayat*, December 9, 1999, indicates that Lahad has presented his resignation. The report is denied as “far from the truth” by Israeli sources, but there is no doubt that Lahad is extremely unhappy with Barak’s voiced intention to withdraw from Lebanon by a date certain.

⁵¹ *Al-Safir*, May 26, 1999.

⁵² *Daily Star* (Beirut), October 9, 1999.

⁵³ The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is a valuable source of reports on the elections, including its easily accessible *Lebanon Report*, a quarterly publication.

⁵² *Ettela’at*, June 3, 1997, p. 9. The author thanks Houchang Chehabi for sharing this information.

⁵⁴ *Reuters*, October 29, 1999. It is also important to note that Iranian “Trotskyites,” such as former Prime Minister Hossein Mousavi and Ali Akbar Mohtashemi have been steadily marginalized in Iranian politics. This trend began under Hashemi Rafsanjani and has continued under Khatami.

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON is Professor of International Relations and Anthropology at Boston University and was formerly Professor of Political Science at the United States Military Academy.

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