



at BROOKINGS

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Number 21, July 2010

LEVANTINE RESET:
TOWARD A MORE VIABLE
U.S. STRATEGY FOR LEBANON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
THE AUTHOR	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
THE IMPORTANCE OF LEBANON TO THE UNITED STATES	4
THE PROBLEMS OF LEBANON	14
A NEW U.S. STRATEGY FOR LEBANON	24

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States should adopt a new approach toward Lebanon if it wishes to secure its interests in that country and in the broader Middle East. The 1983 attack against the U.S. Marines in Lebanon was the beginning of the end of the United States' involvement in Lebanon. Since then, with the exception of a brief period during the George W. Bush administration, there has been a strong sentiment in Washington that the price of U.S. engagement is too high, and that problems in Lebanon are not threatening to American strategic interests in the Middle East. Even when Lebanon's problems boiled over on several occasions and threatened to engulf other parts of the region in conflict, the United States still assumed it could treat these problems on the cheap. When the United States did engage during the George W. Bush administration, it did so inconsistently, without a sense of purpose, and without a long-term plan in mind, thus undermining not only Lebanon's stability, but also U.S. interests in the region.

The core of a new, effective U.S. strategy toward Lebanon should entail a clear understanding by Washington of what is at stake and what it will take to achieve success. The United States has gotten it wrong in Lebanon over the years because it misdiagnosed its own interests there and misunderstood the implications of Lebanon's problems for U.S. policies.

There are three main reasons why Washington should pay closer attention to Lebanon and help it address its problems while nurturing its assets: One, Lebanon's independence and sovereignty uphold U.S. geopolitical interests in the Middle East by denying U.S. adversaries—Iran and Syria—the ability to

exploit Lebanon to improve their strategic positions in the region at the expense of the United States and its allies. Two, an internally secure and strong Lebanon that is capable of fixing or defusing its own problems boosts U.S. security interests in the Middle East and those of its ally, Israel. Three, the United States has a strategic interest in supporting democratic countries and in strengthening democratic institutions around the world. The fact that Lebanon is a democracy (even if imperfect) with liberal impulses that plays an important cultural-intellectual role in the region, but is surrounded by neighbors who are outright hostile to it should be an American concern.

The United States' past experiences and setbacks in Lebanon furnish a number of useful lessons that should guide the formulation of a new U.S. strategy toward Lebanon:

- The United States should strike the right balance between immediate needs and long-term interests.
- Washington should take concrete diplomatic action to prevent Israel from using excessive force against Lebanon during times of military confrontation with Hizballah, as large-scale punitive operations by Israel against Lebanon are counterproductive and undermine American interests in Lebanon.
- The United States should not intervene militarily to support one Lebanese camp over another. Doing so would deepen Lebanese political polarization, exacerbate existing communal cleavages, and jeopardize the entire U.S. approach.

- The United States should not use Lebanon as a battlefield against regional adversaries or as a bargaining chip in regional diplomacy. Doing so would further destabilize the country.
- Washington should implement a policy that contains Hizballah. No U.S. policy in Lebanon can succeed without an effective containment strategy for Hizballah, the single most powerful political and military actor in the country.

Because Lebanon has internal problems, such as a weak central authority, as well as external problems, such as excessive intervention in its domestic affairs by outside forces, any new U.S. policy toward Lebanon should contain a local component and a regional component. The local part of a new U.S. strategy should entail assisting Lebanon in bolstering its internal strength and stability. While USAID has already made strong contributions to strengthening Lebanese state capacity, Washington should focus on investing in the building of a strong, modern Lebanese national military and security apparatus. Indeed, no area in Lebanon's state apparatus deserves more urgent attention by Washington than the Lebanese Armed Forces. The current Lebanese military is incapable of assuming the responsibility of defending the country from major internal and external threats, given the small size of its budget and poorly trained and badly equipped combat force. Therefore, because security in Lebanon is in short supply, all attempts at reform and state building will suffer and remain incomplete unless security is achieved.

The regional part of a new American strategy toward Lebanon should address the problem of external intervention. While Hizballah is a product of Lebanon's internal weakness (the Lebanese state has been historically unable to address the political, security, and socio-economic needs of Lebanese Shi'ah), it is also the product of Iran's and Syria's interventions in Lebanese domestic politics. Indeed, Lebanon would have been able to more effectively

limit external intervention in its affairs if it were not for Hizballah's links to Damascus, and especially, Tehran. Washington's goal, therefore, should be to take diplomatic measures that help turn Hizballah into a purely local actor and end its active involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The "Syrian solution" to the Hizballah challenge (asking Syria to reign in Hizballah) should be a non-starter because its record is bleak and its price tag is high. Indeed, not only did Damascus fail to contain Hizballah when Syria was militarily present in Lebanon (1990-2005), it also harmed Lebanese democracy by maintaining a tight grip over Lebanese politics. A Syrian solution should be even more unappealing to Washington today because President Bashar al-Asad has repeatedly stated that it is in his country's interest to pursue policies that seek to bolster, as opposed to weaken, Hizballah.

The United States should also forgo military approaches to declear Hizballah. Israel's 2006 war shows (as do its previous military actions in Lebanon) that any strategy aimed at militarily destroying Hizballah—short of waging a total war against Lebanon as a whole, which would ignite a regional conflict—would likely fail and backfire. Equally important, any U.S. or Israeli military approach to the Hizballah challenge would significantly undermine other U.S. and Israeli interests in Lebanon by weakening the country and possibly causing further political breakdown and disintegration.

Only Iran, which has long invested in and nurtured Hizballah, is in a position to exert control over the group. Therefore, the United States has a good chance of *localizing* and *taming* Hizballah by engaging in direct talks with Iran. However, Washington should realize that Iran will never accept demands to disarm Hizballah (in any event, only the Lebanese people can disarm Hizballah). The most it would do is instruct it to *discontinue its regional role and adopt a more compromising posture toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli peace process*.

While it is true that a U.S.-Iranian understanding that includes an agreement on Hizballah would not eliminate Syria's influence in Lebanon (perhaps nothing would), it can significantly limit it. The main reason why Hizballah has defended Syrian interests in Lebanon over the years is because Syria sends arms to the group and facilitates weapons shipments that come from Iran, making it possible for Hizballah to be a regional, rather than a local, actor. However, if Iran were to instruct Hizballah to discontinue its regional role and armed struggle against Israel, the group would no longer need to receive weapons from Syria and would no longer feel obliged to defend Syrian interests in Lebanon. Instead, it would focus on its local interests, Islamist agenda, and role in Lebanese politics.

Yet, a strategy that reduces Syrian influence in Lebanon would not address the Palestinian issue in

Lebanon. Only an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement that successfully tackles the future of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (and elsewhere) would solve Lebanon's refugee problem.

In order for the United States to protect its interests in Lebanon, it will have to break from its past policies and look at Lebanon in a truly different light. Implementing a new U.S. strategy for Lebanon would be a difficult task, given the country's many internal and external complexities, but it is a challenge worth pursuing. The opportunity for a more principled and consistent American approach in Lebanon, one that benefits Lebanon and advances both American interests and ideals still exists, but the recent drums of war in the region serve as a stark reminder that the opportunity may not be around for much longer.

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THE AUTHOR

BILAL Y. SAAB is originally from Yarun, a small town in southern Lebanon that borders Israel. For more than a decade, Saab has studied Hizballah and has written extensively on Lebanon and the militant group. From January 2006 to September 2009, he was a Research Analyst and Internship Coordinator at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. At Brookings, his research, various publications, and speaking engagements focused on politics and security in the Levant and international terrorism. Saab is also a contracted consultant for Centra Technology Inc. Through Centra Technology Inc, he regularly briefs U.S. officials on Lebanon, Syria, and Hizballah. In addition, Saab is a regular contributor to Oxford Analytica and a number of Jane's Information Group publications, focusing on the Middle East.

Prior to joining Brookings, Saab served as Chief Officer and Editor of the Middle East desk at the Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St. Andrews in the United Kingdom, where he was a British

Council scholar. At the CSTPV, he led a team of twelve researchers who tracked and analyzed terrorist incidents in the Middle East. Previously, he worked at the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies in Beirut and managed numerous research projects on good governance in the Arab world. Before that, he conducted research on political and economic development in the Middle East at the Middle East Institute (MEI) and on post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where he was offered the Abshire-Inamori leadership award.

Saab did his undergraduate studies at the American University of Beirut and earned a master's degree from the University of St. Andrews. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Maryland's Department of Government & Politics in College Park, where he assists in teaching and conducts reviews of terrorism projects for the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).

INTRODUCTION

Will Lebanon ever be able to stand on its feet and function as a stable democratic state? Many inside and outside of Lebanon frequently ask this question, as the country has seemed unable to take advantage of Israel's decade-old pullout, reap the fruits of Syria's 2005 departure, and leap toward relative economic prosperity and political stability. Lebanon has a proud history of vibrant democracy and relative financial success, yet it has been unable to meet its potential over the past two decades. Indeed, the increasingly widening gaps between the accomplishments of the past, the troubles of the present, and the uncertainties of the future often cause great anxiety and frustration for the Lebanese people.

For a country that has claimed its neutrality in foreign affairs since shortly after its independence in 1943, Lebanon has borne much of the brunt of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Because of Lebanon's relative weakness and small size, regional and international powers have often exploited its internal divides and battled their issues and differences on its soil. The consequences have been disastrous for the Lebanese people: death and physical destruction, emigration and brain drain, economic debt, and occupation and loss of sovereignty. The heavy burdens of the Arab-Israeli conflict can be felt and

seen in Lebanon to a degree second only to the Palestinian territories.

Yet, in June 2009, Lebanon got a break. The country held free and fair national elections, the first since the 1975-90 Civil War to take place under a law that was not made in Damascus. A relatively pro-American political coalition (dubbed the March 14th coalition after the massive anti-Syrian demonstration that swept Lebanon on March 14, 2005, a month after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri) won a slight parliamentary majority, repeating the strong performance it first showed in the previous elections in May-June 2005. The electoral victory of factions friendly to the United States was a big relief for Washington, sparing it the nettlesome decision of how to deal with a coalition led by Hizballah, an organization the United States classifies as terrorist.

But despite all the initial hoopla surrounding the aftermath of the elections, sensible minds in Beirut and within the policy community in Washington have understood that Lebanon still has plenty of work to do. That political contestation moved back to the ballot box from the battlefield was surely promising, but the significance of the elections soon started to erode.¹ While a recent Saudi-Syrian

¹ "Lebanon's Elections: Avoiding a New Cycle of Confrontation," International Crisis Group Middle East Report no. 87, June 4, 2009, available at <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6130&l=1>>.

rapprochement and the May 2008 Doha Agreement effectively ended an eighteen-month-long crisis between Hizballah and the government (which could have erupted into a new civil war), the crisis's effects continue to be felt across the political spectrum.² The May 2008 Doha Agreement notwithstanding, Lebanese factions remain divided over issues that will have profound implications for the future of the country: the status of Hizballah's weapons, the future of the Lebanese power-sharing arrangement, and Lebanon's foreign policy orientation.

In a technical sense, the June 2009 elections produced a winner and a loser. However, the elections, unsurprisingly, did not change the actual balance of power in the country (it may have solidified the Sunni bloc under the leadership of the current prime minister, Saad Hariri), prompting many in Lebanon to question the usefulness of elections as a tool to advance real political change in the country. Perhaps most importantly for the United States, Hizballah, despite its electoral defeat, continues to be as politically and militarily powerful as it was prior to the elections. Moreover, Syria, which is at odds with the United States over many issues in the Middle East, seems to have restored its influence and power-broker role in Beirut only five years after the United States helped press it to leave Lebanon. The 2005 "independence uprising" did not last long and the March 14th movement lost much of its confidence due to a number of divisions within its ranks and changes in the regional environment. Those who vehemently opposed Syria's policies in Lebanon over the past five years, including Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, have switched camps and reunited with Damascus for narrow political reasons. As a result, political opposition to Syrian interference in Lebanon has diminished, with the exception of a few voices inside the Kata'eb Party and

the Lebanese Forces, and a handful of relatively independent politicians. "In Lebanon, all roads lead once again to Damascus," one news headline recently put it.³

While some may see the issue of Lebanon's challenges as a domestic matter for the Lebanese people to address, these challenges should be of concern to the United States. To be sure, like all other sovereign countries, Lebanon must secure its own domestic interests—economic wellbeing, functioning political system, and international independence and territorial integrity—but because Lebanon's internal stability and the health of its democracy touch important American interests in a region that is strategically vital to the United States, the country's success should be an American concern.

Over the years, several American presidents and other senior officials have either insinuated or clearly stated that Lebanon is a special country that can serve as a model for the region. Lebanese journalist and scholar Carole Dagher has argued that the success of Lebanon keeps alive the hopes of an invaluable experiment in the Middle East, that of "managing religious pluralism and cultural diversity, and of institutionalizing freedom, equality, respect and participation for all."⁴ While Lebanon needs help to achieve this vision, the external assistance is both different from and far less costly than what is required to bolster Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, or any other weak state in the broader Middle East. Assisting Lebanon should not require American boots on the ground, a huge economic package, or massive military aid. For all its faults, Lebanon is not a failed state (although it did collapse during the Civil War of 1975-90) and therefore is in no need of a demanding and complex nation-building exercise. However, given its

² Ibid.

³ Rana Moussawi, "In Lebanon, All Roads Lead Once Again to Damascus," Agence France Presse, April 5, 2010.

⁴ Carole Dagher, *Bring Down the Walls: Lebanon's Post-War Challenge* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 218.

particularities and fragile nature, Lebanon needs a special kind of assistance to escape its vicious cycle of instability and political violence. The United States is in a unique position to offer Lebanon that kind of assistance, which, if effectively provided, would help secure important American interests in that country and the region.

This paper is intended to help inform the American policy debate over Lebanon. It examines the challenges Lebanon faces and offers a strategy Washington should implement both to help the Lebanese people overcome those challenges and to promote American interests in the region. To this end, the paper attempts to accomplish four goals:

- One, underscore Lebanon's importance and spell out what the country offers to the region and the United States.

- Two, clarify the United States' long-term interests in Lebanon.
- Three, analyze Lebanon's problems and examine the root causes of internal weakness and external intervention.
- Four, explain why past and current U.S. policies toward Lebanon have largely failed and specify the lessons Washington can learn from its past strategies.

The paper's central argument is that Washington needs to reconsider its approach toward Lebanon if it wishes to secure the United States' long-term interests in that country and in the Middle East. Specifically, the paper lays out a strategy by which Washington can advance its long-term interests in the region by bolstering Lebanon's internal strength.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEBANON TO THE UNITED STATES

Supporters of Lebanon have long maintained that the United States should have a strong interest in Lebanon because of the country's unique character in the Middle East—a democracy with an open economy and cosmopolitan society. What is neglected, however, is the relevance of these features to various U.S. interests and goals in the Middle East.

It has often been argued that despite its location on the Mediterranean Sea and its contiguous borders with two regional powers, Israel and Syria, Lebanon holds little strategic importance to the United States. American involvement in Lebanon has more often than not been the product of concern over broader issues of Arab-Israeli peace and other regional developments in which Lebanon may have figured only tangentially. When Lebanon has managed, on occasion, to capture the attention of Washington, it has been mostly because of American moral and humanitarian considerations.

While Washington does not hold Lebanon as high a priority as other issues in the region, given its lack of vital petroleum and natural gas reserves and its comparatively small economic capital, this view misunderstands U.S. interests in Lebanon by defining them in an overly narrow, short-term fashion—a tendency that has been the wellspring of

much of the United States' unhappy involvement in the Middle East for decades. The United States should not see Lebanon's relative weakness, small size, or lack of natural resources as disqualifying it from closer U.S. attention and further support. As this paper argues, there are three main reasons why Washington cannot afford to ignore Lebanon and why it should implement a strong and coherent policy toward the country: One, Lebanon's independence and sovereignty uphold U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East by denying U.S. adversaries—Iran and Syria—the ability to exploit Lebanon to improve their strategic positions in the region. Two, Lebanon's internal strength and security boost U.S. security interests in Lebanon and those of its ally, Israel. Three, the United States has a strategic interest in supporting its international democratic allies and in promoting democracy around the world. The fact that Lebanon is a democracy surrounded by neighbors who are outright hostile to it should be an American concern.

LEBANON'S THREE VITAL ASSETS

The United States' interests in Lebanon derive in part from the country's three historical and deeply-rooted assets: Lebanon's *cultural-intellectual role* in the region as the focal point for the exchange of ideas between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds;⁵

⁵ I would like to thank Hady Amr, Director of the Brookings Doha Center and Fellow at the Saban Center at Brookings, for reminding me of this important point during a personal conversation on August 14, 2009.

its *liberal environment*, which allows for a successful projection of U.S. soft power in the Middle East; and its *democracy*.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEBANON'S CULTURE AND LIBERAL ENVIRONMENT

At a time when the United States is trying to counter extremist and violent ideologies emanating from the broader Middle East, winning the so-called “war of ideas” is a crucial U.S. objective. Lebanon is naturally endowed and well equipped to help the United States achieve this goal. Lebanon is a place where diversity of opinion and freedom of thought, expression, and political organization have long been tolerated and encouraged. Beirut’s geographical position on the Mediterranean coast and as a gateway to the East fostered trade beginning in the nineteenth century, and the city quickly became an important link between the Arab East and the West.⁶ The Lebanese capital’s cultural prominence was embodied by its regionally-renowned academic institutions. In 1866, the Syrian Protestant College, which later became the American University of Beirut (AUB), was founded.⁷ This university and others (like Saint Joseph University) made Beirut an intellectual and cultural center of the region. Beirut’s role of intellectual and cultural bridge-building between East and West continues to this day—the city is a highly favorable destination for Westerners and Americans conducting Middle Eastern studies.⁸

Lebanon’s liberal culture can be of strategic value to the United States in the latter’s efforts to project its soft power throughout the region. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States lost much of its ability to influence events in the Middle East and

shape outcomes to its favor because it relied heavily on hard power and under-utilized soft power. The United States’ persistent problems in Iraq (and Iran’s subsequent rise in the region) continue to affect its influence in the Middle East. To enhance its relative position in that part of the world, the United States needs to reinvest in soft power and effectively project it by using artful public diplomacy. Lebanon’s liberal setting—often seen by Westerners as an island in a sea of culturally traditional societies and politically authoritarian systems—can help the United States restore its image and project its liberal values and democratic norms. Specifically, since many citizens throughout the Arab world look to Lebanon because of its cultural and intellectual leadership, what happens there is communicated across the region. Therefore, the image of strong U.S.-Lebanese partnerships will make its way throughout the Middle East and bolster U.S. soft power.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEBANON'S DEMOCRACY

Lebanon is hardly an ideal democracy. However, despite its turbulent history and often dysfunctional political system, Lebanon is home to a liberal and democratic tradition, making it the freest country in the Arab world. Lebanese democracy is consensus-based (“consociational”), defined by Arend Lijphart and other political scientists as a system with a fragmented political culture that uses democratic rules to maintain stability.⁹ Although Lebanon’s confessional politics work against the basic principles of majoritarian rule, this should not fundamentally challenge the country’s democratic status. Lebanon’s open political system stands in striking contrast to the many closed systems in the region.

⁶ Michael Dumper and Bruce E. Stanley, *Cities of the Middle East and North Africa: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Oxford: ABC CLIO Inc, 2007), p. 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Hannah Wetig, “Beirut Finds Itself the New Hot Spot for Learning Arabic,” *Daily Star*, August 5, 2004.

⁹ Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy,” *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (1969), pp. 207-225; Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Theory: Problems and Prospects. A Reply,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 3 (1981), pp. 355-360; and *Thinking About Democracy: Power Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Lebanese democracy is dominated by politico-sectarian elites; “who gets what” is more a result of informal bargaining among communal leaders than anything else. The system is purposefully built to manage the various communal divisions within Lebanese society—each sectarian group (there are currently eighteen recognized sects) gets a defined portion of power and representation in the Lebanese government and bureaucracy. The National Pact of 1943 was the first agreement among Lebanese communal leaders to delineate the sectarian power-sharing arrangements, and the second one, the Ta’if Agreement of 1989, ended the 1975-90 Civil War.

While conventional wisdom holds that domestic conflict in Lebanon is inevitable, given its lack of social cohesion, a full reading of Lebanon’s history demonstrates just the opposite. In the pre-Civil War period, Lebanon’s democracy functioned reasonably well. The Lebanese political system was remarkably stable despite the country’s religious and sectarian segmentation, and parliamentary elections were held every four years and were increasingly competitive.¹⁰ Over a period of three decades, from independence in 1943 to the outbreak of the war in 1975, Lebanon experienced political pluralism, competitive elections, and orderly change in its governments, except for a brief crisis in 1958 when Lebanese politicians were divided over foreign policy issues and over President Camille Chamoun’s pursuit of a second term in circumvention of the Constitution.

Of course, in wartime Lebanon, the political system was crippled and the democratic process was put at risk. Government institutions were paralyzed and militia rule reigned supreme. When the

bullets stopped flying and a political settlement was reached in the Saudi city of Ta’if in 1989, Lebanese officials introduced authoritarian practices to the political process; some of these politicians did it for their own benefits whereas others did it because they were pressured and threatened by the Syrian intelligence services. These practices, which lasted from 1990 to 2005, made Lebanon resemble an authoritarian regime, ultimately subservient to Syria.¹¹

Yet, Lebanon’s relative success with liberal democracy may offer lessons for the region. Although Lebanon’s political fate remains uncertain, for more than eighty years, Lebanon has struggled to develop a workable, constitutional *modus vivendi* among its several religious communities, with more successes than failures. In contrast, most contemporary political systems in the Middle East have failed to handle the delicate problem of ethno-sectarian participation successfully and to provide for a properly inclusive environment. As Carole Dagher has noted, regional aspirations to “manage religious pluralism and cultural diversity and institutionalize freedom, equality, respect and participation for all” will be influenced, perhaps profoundly, by the course of democracy in Lebanon.¹² If the political endeavor in Lebanon fails to guarantee participation and political representation of minorities in public life, then ethnic emigration will likely accelerate across the region.¹³ Dagher has cautioned that “these developments would inevitably reflect on the cultural landscape of the Arab world.”¹⁴

LEBANESE DEMOCRACY AND U.S. STRATEGIC INTERESTS

By supporting autocratic regimes in the Middle East that suppress local democratic movements, the

¹⁰ Brenda M. Seaver, “The Regional Sources of Power-Sharing Failure: The Case of Lebanon,” *Political Science Quarterly* 115, issue 2, Summer 2000, p. 247.

¹¹ Farid El Khazen, “The Postwar Political Process: Authoritarianism by Diffusion,” in Theodor Hanf and Nawaf Salam, eds., *Lebanon in Limbo: Postwar Society and State in an Uncertain Regional Environment* (Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003), p. 59.

¹² Carole Dagher, *Bring Down the Walls: Lebanon’s Post-War Challenge* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 218.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

United States has often contradicted its own democratic values and norms, and as a result has harmed its strategic interests. This approach has backfired over the years, as evidenced by chronic instability in the region.¹⁵

An independent and sovereign Lebanon that is able to safeguard its freedom and ward off external intervention boosts U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. Specifically, if Lebanon can better protect itself against Syria's and Iran's attempts at destabilizing its internal balance and interfering in its domestic affairs, it would deny these two U.S. adversaries the ability to use Lebanon to enhance their relative powers and expand their spheres of influence in the region at the expense of the United States and its allies.¹⁶

Of course, for Lebanon to resist such depredations, it has to be a stable and functioning polity. The caveat is that in Lebanon's case, history has demonstrated that only a democratic system can guarantee a relatively stable socio-political order. Unlike the majority of other Middle Eastern countries who have been able to achieve superficial stability through the adoption of autocratic (and even dictatorial) measures, Lebanon cannot be stable—or even survive as an independent entity—under an authoritarian or non-democratic system of governance.

Democracy in Lebanon also has important ramifications for U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East because of the real effects it has on the security and stability of Lebanon's neighbors. If democracy falters, and as a result, instability grows in Lebanon, this instability could negatively influence neighboring countries and the Levant as a whole. In a region like the Middle East where interstate borders are

porous, politics and security tend to spill over with speed and ease.¹⁷ For example, events in Lebanon have historically affected security in neighboring Syria. The Lebanese Civil War of 1975, fought between the Christian Maronites and the Druze, sparked off a massacre in Damascus by Muslims.¹⁸ In 1976, the Syrians invaded Lebanon primarily because they feared that a Lebanese civil war would be hard to contain (they also wanted to reign in the PLO).¹⁹ Ultimately, the religious and communal tensions and cleavages that lay at the heart of the Lebanese civil wars of 1975 and 1990 induced similar eruptions in other parts of Syria.

U.S. SECURITY INTERESTS

While protecting Lebanese democracy should be a priority of the United States' approach toward Lebanon, Washington also has more traditional security concerns in the country. Specifically, the United States has an interest in upholding the security of Israel and curtailing the activities of anti-American, militant groups in Lebanon.

THE SECURITY OF ISRAEL

By unilaterally withdrawing all its troops from Lebanon in May 2000, Israel hoped it could close the "Lebanon file" once and for all and solve all its perceived security problems with its northern neighbor. However, despite Israel's exit from southern Lebanon, Hizballah did not stop regarding Israel as an existential threat and has refused to lay down its weapons, making the case to its rivals at home and enemies abroad that Israel continues to occupy Lebanese territory (the disputed Sheb'a farms area), violate Lebanon's air and land sovereignty, and pose

¹⁵ Kenneth M. Pollack, *A Path Out of the Desert: A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2008), p. xxiv.

¹⁶ The argument here is limited to the interference of Iran and Syria in Lebanese affairs. Other parts of this paper address the equally destabilizing and often destructive role played by Israel in Lebanese politics and stability.

¹⁷ For more on this subject see Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, "Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War," Saban Center Analysis Paper no. 11, January 2007, The Brookings Institution, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Files/rc/papers/2007/01iraq_byman.pdf>.

¹⁸ Adeed Dawisha, *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

a national security threat to Lebanon—three concerns that large segments of Lebanese society and successive Lebanese governments have shared.

Israel sees Hizballah as the primary security threat emanating from Lebanon. While Israel may worry about the outbreak of large-scale, internal violence in Lebanon and the potential for spillover, its number one concern remains Hizballah's allegedly increasing military arsenal and its involvement in the Palestinian theater. In Israel, there seems to be no consensus within the political establishment on how to deal with Hizballah or how to rank the various problems the Shi'i group poses. Moreover, whether Israel can live with a Hizballah that is not completely disarmed or militarily crushed is unclear. Some Israeli officials strongly believe that Hizballah, given its fundamentalist ideology, fiery rhetoric, and constant military buildup, will never accept the existence of Israel. Others judge that a deterrence model is capable of addressing the perceived military threats posed by Hizballah, and while deterrence may offer no guarantees, it could be enhanced through the acquisition of high-tech defensive weapons systems, able to intercept and destroy deadly enemy rockets. In this scenario, Israel would live, though uneasily, with an armed Hizballah.

Since the end of the 2006 war, several reports have brought light to Hizballah's growing arsenal. Analysts and various Western and Israeli public officials agree that Hizballah's missile and rocket capability has expanded both in quantity and quality over the past four years. American defense intelligence analysts generally put the Hizballah rocket force today at somewhere between 40,000 to 55,000 missiles, however this range remains far from certain.²⁰ Most of Hizballah's weapons are short-

medium-range projectiles (which still cause havoc in northern Israeli cities and to which the IDF has had no military solution), but it has been reported that the group also possesses an unknown number of long-range missiles that could hit most if not all of Israel's cities.²¹

In addition to Hizballah's expanding weapons cache and growing firepower, Israel has concerns about the group's continued involvement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and its aiding of Palestinian militants there. According to Israeli and Palestinian security officials, Hizballah has long operated in the Palestinian territories to boost its deterrence against Israel, funneling large sums of money to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.²² Since the assassination of top Hizballah military commander Imad Mughniyeh in February 2008, Israeli officials have claimed that Hizballah has become more visible in the West Bank, with the aim of recruiting Palestinians to conduct attacks against Israel and provide intelligence on Israeli targets.²³ Seen from Hizballah's perspective, the more Israel is preoccupied on the Palestinian front, the more restricted it is in its abilities regarding Lebanon. But the group has treaded lightly in provoking or promoting Israeli-Palestinian clashes. As evident from the 2008 war in Gaza, when Hizballah watched from afar, the group has tried not to overreach in the Palestinian territories for fear of Israeli reprisals and increasing accusations by fellow Lebanese of involvement in regional politics.

Hizballah poses a challenge to Israel's security, and thus to one of the United States' traditional, firmly-held interests. From 1982 to 2005, Washington relied on Damascus to curb Hizballah's militancy and check its political clout. The strategy backfired

²⁰ Author's interview of senior U.S. officials in the United States Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) who wish to remain anonymous, February 14, 2007.

²¹ Hizballah's long range weapons are the Iranian-supplied Zelzal 1 and Zelzal 2. Maximum ranges are uncertain, but are put at between 115 and 220 kilometers, meaning that they could reach Israeli targets south of Ashkelon. The Zelzal 3, with estimated ranges of up to 1,500 kilometers, would be able to reach any target in Israel. However, there is no indication that Hizballah has ever received the Zelzal 3.

²² "Hezbollah becoming More Visible in West Bank after Mughniyeh Death," Associated Press, March 13, 2008.

²³ Ibid.

because it not only failed to disarm Hizballah as Israel and the United States had hoped it would, but it also brought about devastating consequences for Lebanese stability. The question, then, is how can the United States uphold Israel's security and solve the Hizballah challenge while at the same time protect Lebanon's sovereignty and democracy? Subsequent sections of this paper propose a strategy by which the United States can accomplish that goal.

THE QUESTION OF HIZBALLAH

Until September 11, 2001, Hizballah had been responsible for more American deaths than any other paramilitary organization in the world. The group's terrorist attacks against American forces and interests in Lebanon in the 1980s—the bombings of the American embassy in Beirut in April 1983 and September 1984 that killed a total of sixty-five Americans; the October 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in which more than 241 service members were killed; the several kidnappings and murders of American citizens and public officers including Central Intelligence Agency chief William Buckley—were critical factors in President Ronald

Reagan's decision to withdraw from Lebanon in 1984. As a result, these attacks damaged America's image in the world as a nation that claims it does not back down in the face of terrorism.

Many American officials and intelligence analysts believe that Hizballah is the most capable terrorist organization in the world, given the spectacular attacks it has been accused of perpetrating against its enemies in Lebanon (1980s), Argentina (1992 and 1994),²⁴ and Saudi Arabia (1996),²⁵ and its alleged presence in all four corners of the world.²⁶ In September 2002, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage famously dubbed Hizballah the "A-Team" (and al-Qa'ida the "B-Team") of terrorism, while Senators Bob Graham and Richard Shelby, who had intelligence portfolios, remarked in November 2002 that the Bush administration should have been more concerned with Hizballah than it was with Saddam Hussein's Iraq.²⁷ In addition, testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2003, then-Director of the CIA George Tenet said that "Hezbollah, as an organization with capability and worldwide presence, is [al-Qa'ida's] equal, if not a far more capable organization."²⁸ Similarly, Federal Bureau

²⁴ Hizballah and Iran are accused of perpetrating the terrorist attack against the Jewish embassy in Argentina in 1992, killing twenty-nine people, and an attack against the Buenos Aires Jewish Community Center (AMIA) in 1994, killing eighty-five people and injuring three hundred. See Argentine court proceedings investigating the bombings of the Israeli embassy in Argentina and the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994 respectively, National Federal Court on Criminal and Correctional Matters, no. 9, Court Office no. 17, Judicial Branch of the Nation, Federal Judge Juan Jose Galeano, Federal Court Clerk Jose F. M. Pereyra, Buenos Aires, March 5, 2003. See also Larry Rohter, "Defector Ties Iran to 1994 Bombing of Argentine Jewish Center," *New York Times*, November 7, 2003.

²⁵ Hizballah and Iran are accused of involvement in the terrorist attack against the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia in June 1996, which killed nineteen American service members. Former FBI Director Louis Freeh claimed that FBI agents interviewed six Hizballah members who had participated in carrying out the attack, and "all of them directly implicated the IRGC, MOIS, and senior Iranian government officials in the planning and execution of the attack." See two opinions by Louis Freeh, "American Justice for Our Khobar Heroes," *Wall Street Journal*, May 20, 2003 and "Khobar Towers: The Clinton Administration Left Many Stones Unturned," *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2006. Hizballah denied any involvement in the attack and no "smoking gun" was ever found.

²⁶ Author's interviews of senior Middle East officers in the Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, and National Intelligence Council, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity. The interviews were conducted in Fall 2007, Spring 2008, and Spring 2010 in conferences on Hizballah in which the author presented.

²⁷ Rebecca Leung, "Hezbollah: A-Team of Terrorists", CBS, April 18, 2003, available at <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/04/18/60minutes/main550000.shtml>>. Bob Graham was the chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence from 2001 to 2003, and Richard Shelby served on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence from 1995 to 2003. Marc Perelman, "Senate Intelligence Chiefs Tell Bush: Go After Hezbollah before Saddam," *Forward*, November 12, 2002.

²⁸ Referenced in Matthew Levitt, Testimony before the Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia and the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, United States House of Representatives, "Iranian State Sponsorship of Terror: Threatening U.S. Security, Global Stability, and Regional Peace," February 16, 2005, available at <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/Iran-Testimony-2-16-05.pdf>>.

of Investigation officers testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in February 2005 that Hizballah's "main focus remains Israel. But it could conduct lethal attacks against U.S. interests quickly upon a decision to do so. It has that capability, we estimate."²⁹ Former head of the Department of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff said in his book that "having operated for more than a quarter century, Hezbollah has developed capabilities that [al-Qa'ida] can only dream of, including large quantities of missiles and highly sophisticated explosives."³⁰

Yet, despite its capabilities, Hizballah has never struck in the American homeland. While it is plausible that it has the capacity to attack the United States, the organization neither has the interest nor the green light from Iran (for now) to do so. Striking inside the United States would not only produce no real dividends for Hizballah but would also backfire, causing both a Lebanese popular uprising against the group and a massive retaliation by the American military, leading to the possible dismantling of the organization. Furthermore, Hizballah's terrorist operations are anything but disorderly or self-inspired. Hizballah's leadership has a close relationship with Iran that goes back to the formation of the Shi'i group in the early 1980s. Terrorism scholar Magnus Ranstorp suspects that formal and informal consultations between Hizballah and Iranian officials over military and terrorist activity occurs (apart from though close personal relationships) through a variety of channels and institutions, including the office of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the Ministry of Intelligence

and Security (MOIS), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and Iranian embassies in Lebanon and Syria.³¹ A major decision by Hizballah to attack the United States would have to be authorized by Tehran, whose current priority is to avoid military confrontation with the West and pursue its nuclear enrichment program instead.

However, depending on how U.S.-Iranian bilateral relations evolve, Hizballah's calculations could easily change. Given its close association with Iran, Hizballah would find it intolerable to stay quiet in the event of an American or Israeli attack against the regime that has nurtured it since its birth and offered it generous assistance and inspiration throughout the years. Most U.S. strategic planners are aware of this and continue to study the consequences of a likely mid-to-high-intensity terrorist campaign by Hizballah and Iranian agents should the United States undertake any military operation against Iran.³²

Perhaps a more urgent concern for the United States is Hizballah's active resistance to U.S. interests in the Middle East through its employment or sponsorship of paramilitary activity against American friends and allies, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and most recently Egypt. In 2006, a senior American intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that Hizballah had been training members of the Mahdi Army, the Iraqi militia led by Moqtada al-Sadr, in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley. He added that Iran had facilitated the link between Hizballah and the Shi'i militias in Iraq.³³ In Egypt, on April 8, 2009, the government announced it had arrested a Hizballah cell on charges of plotting attacks in the

²⁹ "Current Projected National Security Threats to the United States", Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, February 16, 2005, available at <<http://intelligence.senate.gov/threats.pdf>>.

³⁰ Andrew Beatty, "Former US Security Chief Warns on Hezbollah Threat," Agence France Presse, June 16, 2009.

³¹ Magnus Ranstorp, "Hizballah's Command Leadership: Its Structure, Decision-Making, and Relationship with Iranian Clergy and Institution," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6, issue 3, pp. 303-339. Also see, Bilal Y. Saab, "Israel Braces for Hezbollah's Revenge," *Jane's Foreign Report*, March 18-25, 2008.

³² See Col. Thomas F. Lynch III, "Sunni and Shi'ah Terrorism, Difference that Matter," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 29, 2008, p. 7, available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/pdf/Sunni_Shia_Differences_That_Matter.pdf>.

³³ See Michael Gordon and Dexter Filkins, "Hezbollah Said to Help Shiite Army in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 28, 2006.

country, and accused Iran of using the Shi'i group to gain a foothold in the country. Hizballah chief Hassan Nasrallah rejected Egypt's accusations but did confirm that among the forty-nine people arrested by Egyptian security agents were members of Hizballah. The arrests and public accusations were an Egyptian warning arguably intended to serve as political messages to Iran.³⁴

In addition, Hizballah has been suspected of playing a prominent role in spoiling U.S. efforts to promote an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement by sponsoring or conducting attacks against Israel. On March 30, 1996, days before Israeli and Palestinian leaders were scheduled to hold peace talks under U.S. mediation, Hizballah fired twenty-eight rockets into northern Israeli towns.³⁵ A month earlier, Israel's Shin Bet accused the group of sponsoring a wave of suicide attacks by Hamas in Israel, helping defeat Prime Minister Shimon Peres in the 1996 parliamentary elections and with him the Oslo peace process. The result was the emergence of Benjamin Netanyahu as the new Israeli prime minister, and his agenda that included opposition to a two-state solution and the Oslo process. In brief, any present or future U.S. effort to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians can be significantly harmed by Hizballah and Iran.

Overall, while it has been difficult for the American intelligence community to measure the global

potential of Hizballah or to penetrate the organization, it has been able to get a better sense of the motives and particularities of its political violence. Unlike al-Qa'ida, which seems determined to operate in a continuous war against infidels and apostates as a perennial condition, Hizballah's calculated use of terrorism, as U.S. Col. Thomas F. Lynch III argues, is by and large informed by discrete state (Iran's) and organizational (Hizballah's) objectives, especially that of group and state survival.³⁶ This is not meant to suggest that Hizballah is less dangerous than al-Qa'ida, easier to predict, or more sympathetic of the United States, but to underscore the point that there are some real differences (in form and substance) between the two organizations that dictate different policy responses.³⁷ Al-Qa'ida has rarely, if ever, accepted to compromise or negotiate with its enemy (it may have compromised internally on an ideological level).³⁸ However, there are plenty of examples where Hizballah has not only negotiated with Israel through third parties but also cut deals with it.³⁹

Today, the challenge Hizballah poses to U.S. interests in the region is multidimensional. The organization has achieved a measure of success and support in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East that make it a power to be reckoned with. It is a vital part of the Iran-Syria-Hamas axis that resists American-Israeli goals and interests in the Middle East. The organization is deeply rooted in Lebanon, well-armed, well-structured, highly skilled in

³⁴ For the arrest of the Hizballah cell, see "Hezbollah Confirms Egypt Arrest," *BBC*, April 10, 2009, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7994304.stm>; and Abdel Sattar Hatati, "Hezbollah Cell Recruited Members in the Name of Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade," *Asharq Alawsat*, April 20, 2009, available at <<http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=16468>>.

³⁵ "Hezbollah Fires Rockets into Northern Israel," *CNN*, March 30, 1996, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9603/israel_lebanon/30/index.html>.

³⁶ Col. Thomas F. Lynch III, "Sunni and Shi'ah Terrorism, Difference that Matter."

³⁷ For more on this subject, see Bilal Y. Saab and Bruce Riedel, "Vanguards at War: Hezbollah and Al Qaeda," *International Herald Tribune*, April 9, 2007. See also Col. Thomas F. Lynch III, "Sunni and Shi'a Terrorism, Difference that Matter," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, December 29, 2008, available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/pdf/Sunni_Shia_Differences_That_Matter.pdf>.

³⁸ I would like to thank Daniel Byman for the point about al-Qa'ida's likely internal compromises. Author's conversation with Daniel Byman, November 12, 2009.

³⁹ Hizballah has negotiated with Israel on the rules of war in southern Lebanon (for example, the April 1996 accord) and made a number of prisoner swaps with it, most recent of which was on July 16, 2008, when Hizballah transferred the coffins of two captured Israeli soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, in exchange for Samir Kuntar, four Hizballah militants, and bodies of about two hundred other Lebanese and Palestinian militants captured by Israel.

combat and clandestine operations, extremely disciplined, influential in a handful of relevant Middle Eastern capitals, loved by the Arab street, and perhaps most importantly, very determined to fight until the end.

THE THREAT OF AL-QA'IDA

Despite the setbacks al-Qa'ida has suffered since 2001, it is still the most dangerous terrorist organization in the world. While the United States and its allies have succeeded in disrupting many terrorist cells and networks affiliated with al-Qa'ida, arresting and killing many al-Qa'ida operatives, foiling numerous attacks against U.S. and Western targets, and tracking terrorist finances, the war is far from over. Al-Qa'ida's main leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahri are still free; the organization is enjoying a secure safe haven in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders, and is constantly looking to expand its base of operation. One such area is Lebanon.

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and other countries in the region, Lebanon has not had a deeply-rooted al-Qa'ida problem. While the terrorist movement has a few sympathizers in Lebanon, they are either unwilling or unable to form an al-Qa'ida franchise or a coordinated movement in the country. In the 1980s and 1990s, individuals and small groups based in northern Lebanon and in the country's several Palestinian camps, including Osbat al-Ansar and Jund al-Sham, espoused Jihadist ideology and engaged in Islamic militancy, but mainly for defensive purposes. Offensive warfare against apostates and infidels, as has been practiced by al-Qa'ida around the world, was rarely on the

agenda of Salafi Jihadists in Lebanon. However, the 2003 war in Iraq and its aftermath changed, perhaps profoundly, the nature of the Salafi Jihadist threat in Lebanon. The spillover effects of the Iraq war, the recent resurfacing of political and sectarian tensions in Lebanon, the 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah, and the Sunni perception of ascending Shi'i and Iranian power in the region gave new life and meaning to the Salafi Jihadist movement in Lebanon.⁴⁰

While the Salafi Jihadist movement seems to be on the rise, the good news is that a large majority of Lebanon's Sunni Islamist community vehemently opposes al-Qa'ida's ideology and militant agenda. Indeed, the events of Nahr al-Bared in the summer of 2007—when the Lebanese Army fought and defeated the Salafi Jihadist group Fatah al-Islam in the north—and Sir al Dinniyeh on December 31, 1999—when a small Lebanese Salafi Jihadist group mounted an insurgency in the mountains near Tripoli and allegedly tried to establish an Islamic mini-state in the north—demonstrate that societal support in Lebanon for al-Qa'ida is minimal. The bad news is that after the Lebanese Army defeated Fatah al-Islam in 2007, Salafi Jihadists in Lebanon, though few in number, went underground and formed a capable network of terrorist cells that have verifiable material links to al-Qa'ida's leadership in Pakistan and its franchises in Saudi Arabia and Iraq. According to the Lebanese authorities, these cells have conducted dozens of terrorist attacks against the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Israel, Lebanese politicians, and Lebanese Army personnel.⁴¹ Despite the Lebanese intelligence and security services' successes at combating

⁴⁰ For a more in depth treatment of this topic see: Bilal Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, "Al-Qaeda's Terrorist Threat to UNIFIL," The Brookings Institution and the Swedish National Defence College, June 2007; Bilal Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, "Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism," *Journal of Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 10, October 2007, pp. 825-855; Bilal Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, "Fatah al Islam: How an Ambitious Jihadist Project Went Awry," The Brookings Institution and the Swedish National Defence College, November 29, 2007; Bilal Saab, "Al Qaeda's Presence and Influence in Lebanon," *CTC Sentinel* 1, issue 12, November 2008; Bilal Saab, "Salafis' Social Networking in Lebanon," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, February 19, 2009; Bilal Saab, "Lebanon on the Counterterrorism Front," *Middle East Times*, March 20, 2008; Bilal Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, "What Zawahri's Words Really Mean for Lebanon and the 'War on Terror,'" *Al Hayat* and *Daily Star*, May 5, 2008.

⁴¹ See Bilal Y. Saab, "Lebanon at Risk from Salafi Jahadi Terrorist Cells," *CTC Sentinel* 3, issue 2, February 2010.

the Salafi Jihadist threat and breaking a number of terrorist rings, the task is too big for Lebanon to handle on its own.

Recently, several agencies in the U.S. intelligence community have privately and publicly voiced their concern about a growing presence of al-Qa'ida in Lebanon.⁴² In a 2006 interview with Reuters, then-Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte said that the United States was taking seriously the possibility that al-Qa'ida could expand its activities into Lebanon.⁴³ While the United States may be more concerned about al-Qa'ida expanding in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or Somalia, the organization's growth in Lebanon jeopardizes U.S. interests in Lebanon and the broader Middle East:

- Al-Qa'ida undermines Lebanese internal stability by fueling sectarian tensions—particularly Sunni-Shi'i—and domestic conflict in the country.
- Al-Qa'ida is a security threat to UNIFIL whose mission is to try to avert another war between Hizballah and Israel.

- Al-Qa'ida conducts attacks against Israel from southern Lebanon.
- Al-Qa'ida stands against any efforts at reaching a peace settlement between Arabs and Israelis.
- By setting up shop in Lebanon, al-Qa'ida can expand in the Middle East and plan operations against U.S. targets and allies in the region.

The United States clearly has an interest in preventing al-Qa'ida from establishing a stronger presence in Lebanon, both for the sake of its own national security and that of Israel and Lebanon. Furthermore, if UNIFIL suffers from another terrorist attack (so far, two lethal attacks have been conducted against UNIFIL, one in June 2007 and the other in January 2008)⁴⁴ and starts crumbling as a result, the task of averting another war between Israel and Hizballah (which this time could turn into a regional war) would become nearly impossible.⁴⁵ Regional stability, not just calm on the Israeli-Lebanese border, is therefore at stake.

⁴² From 2007 to 2008, the author received a sense of the thinking of most intelligence and counterterrorism agencies in the U.S. government on the issue of al-Qa'ida in Lebanon during high level conferences and briefings in which he presented. The consensus was that the United States government sees al-Qa'ida's expansion in the Middle East and its presence in Lebanon as a serious threat that should be dealt with.

⁴³ "U.S. wary of al Qaeda's Lebanese ambitions," Reuters, September 23, 2006.

⁴⁴ On June 24, 2007, three Spanish and three Colombian UN soldiers were killed when a bomb destroyed their armored troop carrier. A month later, another bomb exploded near a UNIFIL position, causing no casualties. On January 8, 2008, two members of the Irish contingent were wounded when their vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb near Rmaileh village, twenty-two miles south of Beirut.

⁴⁵ Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, "Terror Alert: Let Us Protect UNIFIL, and Fast," *Daily Star*, February 1, 2010.

THE PROBLEMS OF LEBANON

For far too long, the United States has failed to achieve any of its stated long-term goals in Lebanon. A critical reason for this is that Washington has misunderstood the nature and implications of the country's weaknesses. Lebanon suffers from a fragile domestic political environment and a situation in which foreign powers seek to use the country or factions within the country to bolster their own regional aspirations. Hizballah is perhaps the biggest symptom of this state of affairs and one of the most difficult challenges to address. Only by understanding and addressing these components can the United States have success in Lebanon and tackle the problems posed by Hizballah.

INTERNAL WEAKNESS: A DYSFUNCTIONAL LEBANESE GOVERNMENT

Most of Lebanon's internal problems are caused by an inherently weak central government, making the pursuit of politics at home and diplomacy abroad particularly challenging and often ineffective.⁴⁶ The deficiency of strong state institutions and the lack of a unified central authority are partly the result

of conscious decisions that go back to Lebanon's independence, such as splitting power among the country's sectarian groups. Additionally, the ongoing mistrust between these groups coupled with external pressures from and interventions by neighboring countries, has exacerbated Lebanon's weak political structure.

A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO CREATE A WEAK CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

When Lebanon gained its independence from France in 1943, local elites readily accepted divisive power-sharing mechanisms because they feared domination by one another and were suspicious of the central government. They envisioned the government as a mechanism to divide power among themselves and they were largely successful in ensuring that the national government that was created was not strong enough to assert real control over their communities. Formal institutions, which incorporated members of all sectors according to a proportional basis, could not act as neutral arbitrators—a situation that proved to be problematic as the power-sharing settlement did not put

⁴⁶ It is important to distinguish between state weakness and failure. Lebanon today qualifies as a weak state rather than a failed one, because its state is credible (though malfunctioning), civil war is absent (though still possible), political goods are being provided in significant quantities and quality (though not enough). Lebanon was ranked the twenty-ninth most failed state in the world by *Foreign Policy's* online annual index of June 2009. The placement is an eleven-rank improvement from last year's ranking of eighteenth, but still a far cry from the country's position as sixty-fifth in the 2006 index. See "The Failed States Index 2009," *Foreign Policy*, available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/the_2009_failed_states_index>.

an end to all internal tensions, but rather replaced inter-communal with intra-communal struggles for hegemony, particularly on the local/regional level. Since the government itself was considered a mirror of Lebanon's pluralist society, rather than an impartial actor, the solution to internecine violence was not to have the government intervene but rather to allow the feuding parties the freedom to manage on their own. This situation, which continues to this day, was primarily the result of decisions made by the country's founders, and has been maintained by subsequent communal leaders. Lebanese politicians' cynical view of the role of the state, coupled with the need to maintain a communal balance in all state institutions, has led to the decision to keep law-enforcement agencies relatively weak and small.

THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT AND THE CABINET

Politics in Lebanon rarely seeks to institute drastic reform in the system. Instead, almost all government decisions are made to ensure a certain kind of static equilibrium.⁴⁷ Lebanese governments are not made to create good public policy, nor to choose between clear-cut alternatives entailing the triumph of one set of demands over another, but to reflect faithfully the competing interests of various groups. "It is in the nature of the executive to avoid decisions that are controversial," Middle East scholar Malcolm Kerr has argued.⁴⁸ The government's function, therefore, might be said to be distributive and administrative—it maintains the flow of services. As a result, while Lebanon has representative institutions that are able to conduct (rather inconsequential) policy debates, they do not make important decisions. Similarly, the parliament rarely institutes real changes, and instead prevents changes that would alter the present balance of interests among the various political

families and communities. For example, no law addressing the issue of judicial, security, or intelligence reform has ever come out of parliament. In the Lebanese political system, whoever pushes for security reform or for amending other sensitive matters is viewed suspiciously and his/her efforts are ultimately resisted.

Until the political crisis erupted in 2004, no lasting harm had come from this situation of political inertia. This is largely because Syria had been the suzerain over Lebanese politics, always making sure that any logjam in the Lebanese system would not erupt into a crisis that would jeopardize its interests. However, after Syria was forced to leave Lebanon in 2005, old political divides resurfaced among Lebanese, bringing the country on the precipice of sectarian conflict in 2008.

DEEP POLARIZATION

The Lebanese political scene has long been polarized. As mentioned, this polarization, whose severity fluctuates depending on local and regional circumstances and which continues to take its toll on public policy formulation and implementation, has its roots in the high mistrust among the various Lebanese sectarian communities. Even though law enforcement agencies exist in Lebanon, communal groups are mentally predisposed and accustomed to seeking security and protection on their own, instead of relying on the institutions of the state.

There are numerous examples in Lebanon's history of mistrust among Lebanese communities creating political crises and even widespread conflict—most notably the 1958 civil strife and 1975-90 Civil War. The more recent November 2006-May 2008 crisis, which in reality started in 2004, soon after Security Council Resolution 1559 was issued, is another

⁴⁷ For a study of political decision making in Lebanon, see Malcolm H. Kerr, "Political Decision Making in a Confessional Democracy," in Leonard Binder, ed., *Politics in Lebanon* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1966), pp. 188-190.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

example. In effect, the crisis began when Hizballah and its allies left the Lebanese cabinet, protesting a lack of power sharing (though the real reason for their withdrawal was to undermine the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon—a tribunal formed to investigate the February 14, 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri). Backed by Riyadh and Washington, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora refused to accede to Hizballah's demand for veto power, which culminated in a governmental logjam and popular demonstrations and sit-ins in downtown Beirut by the Lebanese opposition. In May 2008, the stalemate exploded after Siniora issued two decisions that called for the investigation of Hizballah's telecommunications network and the removal of Beirut International Airport's security chief (a person close to Hizballah). Hizballah reacted violently by seizing the western sector of Beirut and attacking Druze militia forces in the Druze part of the Mount Lebanon region. It was the first time Hizballah had used its weapons against fellow Lebanese since the 1975-90 Civil War. The clashes, in which the Lebanese Army took a neutral position, led to the death of more than sixty-two people.⁴⁹ To avert another Lebanese civil war that threatened to exacerbate relations between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims across the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia stepped in and instructed their proxies to accept the invitation of Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, to fly to Doha to negotiate a political deal. After relatively lengthy negotiations, the warring Lebanese factions signed the Doha Agreement on May 21, 2008, which granted Hizballah veto powers in the cabinet, elected Lebanese Army Commander Michel Suleiman as president, and adjusted the electoral law of the country.

The November 2006-May 2008 crisis illustrates the deep-seated fears and mistrust that the Lebanese

sectarian communities have of each other. For example, many members of the pro-American March 14th political coalition believe that Hizballah will never disarm because it has a long-term interest in, among other things, maintaining its dominance over the other Lebanese political factions. Furthermore, some anti-Syrian factions in Lebanon suspect that Hizballah may have had a hand in a number of political assassinations that have taken place in the country (including Hariri's). Hizballah, on the other hand, seems convinced that some members inside the March 14th coalition are conspiring against it by planning with foreign governments—such as Riyadh and Washington—on ways to disarm the group and curtail the interests and rights of the Shi'i community in Lebanon. Some Hizballah members even accuse a handful of anti-Syrian politicians of submission to Israel.

The mistrust and antagonism runs even deeper within the Christian community. General Michel Aoun, the head of the Free Patriotic Party and who is currently allied with Hizballah, is widely reported to believe that the Lebanese Forces (against whom he fought during the last years of the 1975-90 Civil War), the Kata'eb (Phalangists), and the Maronite Church are all undermining his clout and denying his constituency and his party adequate representation in the political system. On the other hand, the Lebanese Forces and the Kata'eb blame Aoun for weakening the ranks of Christians by siding with Hizballah and thus marginalizing their overall position in the political system. For these people, it is a bitter irony to see Aoun, who for most of his career fought against Syria's presence in Lebanon, allied with a camp that is closely tied to Damascus. Finally, in the Druze camp, the two biggest families, the Jumblatts and the Arslans continue to harbor suspicions of each other, although recently a political détente seems to have emerged between the two.

⁴⁹ Anthony Shadid and Alia Ibrahim, "Factions in Lebanon Agree to Meet for Talks," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2008.

EXTERNAL INTERVENTION

One persistent factor in Lebanon's turbulent political history has been the manipulation of the country's factional and sectarian rivalries by outside forces. Since Ottoman times, hardly any major conflict among Lebanese has been free from external intervention. In a number of cases, regional and foreign powers may have actually initiated Lebanese conflicts. In nearly all cases, Lebanese discord has been used by external powers, in one way or another, to serve diverse aims which have little to do with Lebanese themselves.

While it is a mistake to argue that the root cause of Lebanese infighting over the years has been the intervention by external powers in the country's domestic politics, the divisions of Lebanese along sectarian lines and, consequently, the lack of solidarity among them as a people, have made the country an attractive target for foreign powers. Lebanese scholar Maroun Kisirwani has noted that all major crises and internal conflicts in Lebanon—1860, 1958, and 1975-90 (in addition to the recent 2004-8 political deadlock)—have awakened “dormant sectarian tensions” and have been “either initiated and prolonged by regional or foreign powers to serve their own interests, or else used in one way or another to such ends.”⁵⁰ The 1975-90 Civil War, which started as a military confrontation between Lebanese Christian militias and armed Palestinians who had settled on Lebanese soil, assumed regional and international dimensions soon after its outbreak. It was a similar situation in 1958, when regional politics and the East-West confrontation divided the Lebanese community into two camps. Many Lebanese Muslim politicians championed the cause of Arab nationalism that was led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, whereas Lebanese Christian leaders

opposed it because they viewed it as a threat to their political-religious identity. The brief civil strife that resulted from this fracture was rooted in societal divisions but its prolonged nature was due to external dimensions that were related to international and regional politics.⁵¹ More recently, while the 2004-8 political deadlock was triggered by Hizballah's insistence on acquiring veto powers in the Lebanese cabinet, it was largely the result of a regional power struggle on Lebanese soil between Syria and Iran on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the other (with Washington backing the latter camp).

LEBANON'S FAILED ATTEMPT AT NEUTRALITY IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The founders of Lebanon agreed that the state should maintain a neutral orientation between the West on the one hand and the Arab and Muslim worlds on the other. Indeed, to defuse any potential conflict among various domestic groups over the direction of the country's foreign policy, the National Pact of 1943 committed the nation to neutrality in foreign affairs. The hope was that Lebanon would remain somewhat detached from competing global powers, politically and ideologically, while at the same time retaining functional relations with both East and West.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Lebanon, as an official entity, refrained from entering into political alliances or military pacts with Arab nations, and stayed out of the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. However, Lebanon embraced the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1958, and signed (or more accurately, was forced to sign) the Cairo Agreement in 1969, twice breaching its own commitment to neutrality in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the 1975-90 Civil War period, the Lebanese state collapsed and the

⁵⁰ Maroun Kisirwani, “Foreign Interference and Religious Animosity in Lebanon,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 4 (October 1980), pp. 685-700.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

various communal factions actively sided with foreign actors in what turned out to be an internationalized conflict. As the war ended in 1990 and Syria took control of Lebanese politics for the next fifteen years, Lebanese neutrality became a fiction. Forced to sign a handful of political agreements and collective security arrangements with Syria, Lebanon effectively turned into a vassal state.⁵² Today, with Syria out of Lebanon and therefore no longer in direct control of politics and security there, an Iranian-Saudi tug of war has filled the vacuum, undermining Lebanese stability and U.S. interests as a result.

SYRIA IS OUT, IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA DIG IN

Iran and Saudi Arabia are not new players in Lebanon. Both countries have historical ties with the Lebanese people that predate the formation of the Lebanese republic. Tehran and Riyadh claim to support all Lebanese factions in their quest for freedom, sovereignty, and independence. However, it is no secret that the bulk of Iranian financial and military assistance goes to Hizballah, whereas the greater part of Saudi money goes to the Hariri family, which is led today by Saad Hariri, the current Lebanese prime minister and son of the late prime minister, Rafiq Hariri.

Since Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Saudi Arabia and Iran have played more assertive political roles in Lebanon and have periodically clashed by proxy via their Lebanese clients, causing political deadlock in Beirut. The most recent consequence of growing Saudi-Iranian friction in Lebanon (and the region) was the November 2006-May 2008 political crisis between the Hizballah-led opposition and the Hariri-led ruling coalition. While certainly caused by local actors, the crisis was also heavily influenced by the regional power struggle.

Today, the differences between Syrian, Iranian, and Saudi Arabian policy in Lebanon remain. While Syria is committed to controlling Lebanon's political fate because of the security and political benefits the country offers to the Assad regime (the economic advantages are no longer that significant), Iran and Saudi Arabia are mostly concerned with protecting the interests of their main allies, Hizballah and Saad Hariri, respectively. Syria has an interest in keeping a check on Hizballah's political goals (only to make sure that the group's growing political influence does not ultimately undermine Damascus's hegemonic ambitions and traditional strategy of divide-and-rule in Lebanon) while directing the group's militancy to suit its regional interests and balance against Israeli military superiority (although today it is much less able to do the former and arguably unable to do the latter). Iran, in contrast, has an interest in giving Hizballah as much political leeway as possible while keeping it under its strategic orbit. Indeed, Hizballah's relationship with Syria is mostly a marriage of convenience, whereas with Iran, the Shi'i group has a fully integrated partnership based on mutual trust, shared values, and strategic interests. Saudi Arabia's policy in Lebanon is reactionary in nature, seeking to deny Iran a strategic advantage in Lebanon and trying to contain Tehran's influence by bolstering the Hariri family's political clout.

Arguably, Iran's sway over Lebanon currently surpasses that of Syria, at least on a strategic level. Syria no longer has a robust intelligence and military presence in the country, and therefore has had to rely mainly on Hizballah to defend its interests in Lebanon; Iran has increased its financial assistance to Hizballah and its allies, giving them wider ranging powers of patronage and political influence. But as Michael Young, opinion editor of the *Daily Star*, has observed, "None of these aims fundamentally clash with those of Syria. What Hezbollah has gained,

⁵² The May 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination and the September 1991 Security and Defense Agreement formally gave Syria the upper hand in all issues of strategic importance between the two countries.

Syria has tried to turn to its favor.”⁵³ Arguably, Damascus has lost its ability to control the political arena in Beirut, and has had to rely instead on Hizballah to take actions that protect Syrian priorities. Still, as previously argued, Damascus is gradually regaining its influence in Lebanon and it retains the capacity to undermine Lebanese stability, mobilize militant Palestinian proxies, and thus jeopardize U.S. strategic interests in Lebanon and the region.

THE ISSUE OF HIZBALLAH

Hizballah is a product of both Lebanon’s internal weakness and Iran’s and Syria’s interventions in Lebanese domestic politics (as well as of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982), making a solution to the challenges posed by the Shi’i group doubly hard to achieve. A crucial defensive asset for Lebanon during 1982-2000, Hizballah has become a significant contributor to Lebanon’s ongoing internal weakness and fracture since Israel’s withdrawal in 2000. There is no question that the issue of Hizballah’s weapons (and their internal and external use) is a highly controversial and polarizing issue among the Lebanese people. In fact, it is perhaps the most divisive issue in Lebanese political life today. Many inside and outside Lebanon believe that the process of democracy consolidation and reform in Lebanon cannot seriously progress if one political actor remains heavily armed, controls the rules of the political game (especially in the foreign policy arena), and unilaterally decides issues of war and peace.

HIZBALLAH: PRODUCT OF A WEAK LEBANESE STATE AND BENEFICIARY OF IRANIAN INTERVENTION

Hizballah’s emergence can be understood by taking into account the history of the Shi’ah in Lebanon

and their long persecution and victimization at the hands of various actors.⁵⁴ Historically, Lebanon’s Shi’ah have been socially and politically marginalized. From the Mamluk era to the Ottoman era to more recent times, the Shi’ah had to struggle to achieve political and economic rights. Hizballah was the answer to the accumulated problems and concerns of many members of the Lebanese Shi’i community, be it physical security and protection from external enemies or political and economic rights in the Lebanese system.⁵⁵ In other words, without a strong central government to protect the Shi’ah, Hizballah emerged to fill the void.

Having liberated large swaths of territory in southern Lebanon from Israel after eighteen years of occupation (1982-2000), Hizballah can make (and has made) the claim that it is the only Lebanese party to have provided what many see as the highest form of public service. Nevertheless, despite its Lebanese “credentials,” this Shi’i movement has been profoundly influenced by the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Iran imbued Hizballah with Islamic revolutionary ideology and helped train its militants in the Beka’a Valley in the early 1980s. That Iran backs Hizballah is verifiable, but the multidimensional nature of this support seems to be misdiagnosed by analysts. Any serious treatment of the issue of Hizballah requires first and foremost a sharp understanding of the depth and limits (if any) of the Iran-Hizballah relationship.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s instruction to Hizballah in 1992 to join the Lebanese political process for the first time and his authorization of the group’s entry into the Lebanese government in 2005 (also for the first time),⁵⁶ suggest that strategic political decisions of the Shi’i group fall under the

⁵³ Michael Young, “Syria and Iran may Compete Quietly but the Core is Clear,” *National*, June 11, 2009.

⁵⁴ For a history of the Shi’ah in Lebanon, see Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986) and Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi’a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, “Hizballah and the Lebanese Crisis,” Crisis Group Middle East Report no. 69, October 10, 2007, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Author’s interview of Hizballah’s head of external relations, August 12, 2005.

jurisdiction of the Iranian supreme leader (the *wali al faqih*). However, interviews with senior members of Hizballah suggest that the group's day-to-day political and socio-economic decision making is partly the product of *regulated* competition inside the group (under the guidance of the Shura Council and Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah).⁵⁷ As this author argued in 2008, "Hizballah finds it unnecessary to consult with Tehran whenever it fields candidates in a local or national electoral race or whenever it names ministers for the Lebanese cabinet. As in any conventional Western political party, there is room for negotiation and bargaining. This quasi-democratic culture in politics does not exist in religious and military affairs, however. Here the seven-member Shura Council, Hizballah's highest body, holds sway. In this aspect, Hizballah is elitist, in keeping with the doctrine of *wilayat al faqih*. Hizballah's homogeneous clerical leadership, under the leadership of Nasrallah and often in direct consultation with Tehran, is in charge of coordinating and formulating policy at the religious and military levels in response to external threats and opportunities."⁵⁸

Hizballah began to acquire some autonomy from Tehran soon after Khomeini died in 1989.⁵⁹ Financially, Hizballah worked on securing its own sources of funding by tapping in to Shi'i religious doctrine—for the Shi'ah, there are two major forms of philanthropic resources, *zakat* (alms giving) and *khoms* (one-fifth). *Zakat* is interpreted as a 2.5 percent levy on most valuables and savings. *Khoms*, in Shi'i jurisprudence, is the donation of one-fifth of one's annual profits. Through these two forms of religious-based charity, Hizballah has amassed a

comfortable financial cushion. Although Hizballah does not disclose *khoms* figures, Nasrallah has stressed that "the funds are big, important, and they are spent on jihad, educational, social, and cultural affairs."⁶⁰ Remittances (the numbers of which are unknown) from the Lebanese Shi'i diaspora in Africa, Latin America, and the United States have added to the group's annual budget. These remittances have allowed Hizballah to develop a network of social services that provide for the Lebanese Shi'i community at home, including charitable institutions, schools, hospitals, and allowances provided to the families of "martyrs."

In military affairs, Hizballah is believed to retain much *operational* and *tactical* (as opposed to *strategic*) independence from Iran.⁶¹ In early January 2009, Nasrallah claimed Iran was not dictating Hizballah's or Hamas's decisions in the Gaza conflict. He stated: "Iran has not imposed any decision on Hamas as it did not, during the summer 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel."⁶² However, there is no question that Iran heavily influences Hizballah's strategic calculations during open conflict with Israel. For example, while it is highly unlikely that Iran ordered Hizballah to fire a specific number of salvos against Israel or bomb specific military targets during the 2006 war, it is strongly assumed that it instructed the party not to escalate to the point of no return for fear of grave consequences and possible U.S. intervention.⁶³

Overall, Hizballah does not have autonomy from Iran and importantly, the group still relies heavily on Iranian funding. Iran's largesse provides Hizballah with a constant flow of money—perhaps more

⁵⁷ Author's interview of three members of Hizballah's executive council, September 13, 2006.

⁵⁸ Bilal Y. Saab, "Rethinking Hizb'allah's Disarmament," *Middle East Policy* XV, no. 3, Fall 2008.

⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, "Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis," p. 19.

⁶⁰ *Al-Musbahid Siyasi*, May 7, 2000, pp. 12-13, referenced in Nizar Hamzeh, "Hizballah: Islamic Charity in Lebanon," in Jon Alterman and Karin Von Hippel, eds., *Understanding Islamic Charities* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press 2007), p. 129.

⁶¹ For a military analysis of Hizballah, see Andrew Exum, "Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment," Policy Focus #63, December 2006, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, available at <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus63.pdf>>.

⁶² "Nasrallah Insists Tehran not Imposing Decisions on Hizballah," Fars News Agency, January 6, 2009. Accessed through World News Connection.

⁶³ Author's interview of a Hizballah insider in Haret Harek, Beirut on August 13, 2007.

than \$1 billion annually today, compared with \$200 million in 2002.⁶⁴ Notably, Hizballah's rebuilding process in the south following the 2006 war with Israel would have encountered numerous problems and took much longer than it did had Iran not swiftly intervened and provided direct financial assistance. Furthermore, Hizballah could not have become the military force it is today without the continuous assistance of the IRGC. Reports indicate that approximately 4,500 Hizballah fighters have trained in Iran since November 2006,⁶⁵ and the group has received ongoing support in the areas of espionage and counterespionage from Iran. In sum, while Hizballah has been able to develop some independence from Tehran over the years, it is not self-sufficient, nor will it be anytime soon. Tehran is essential to the group's long-term survival, at least as an effective, well-funded and well-armed military unit.

HIZBALLAH'S GOALS AND STRATEGY IN LEBANON

From 1982 to 2000, Hizballah devoted its energy and resources to forcing Israel to withdraw from Lebanese territory. During that period, a majority of Lebanese endorsed Hizballah's goal of liberating the land. However, following Israel's pullout, Lebanese consensus on Hizballah's resistance role quickly dissipated. Since May 2000, Hizballah has struggled to justify the continuation of its armed struggle not only to the international community but also to fellow, non-Shi'i Lebanese.

Hizballah's manifestos (the 1985 Open Letter and the 2009 Strategic Manifesto), statements, and behavior since May 2000 have highlighted the group's short-term and long-term goals. In the short to medium run, Hizballah aspires to protect its special status as a political party with an autonomous military function, its "resistance agenda" (which includes creating a Lebanese "resistance society" against

Israel), and its weapons from local and foreign enemies. In the long run, like all Islamist movements, Hizballah dreams of establishing an Islamic order where *Shari'a* is the law of the land (at least in Shi'i-dominated regions like southern Lebanon and the Bekaa). However, the group has repeatedly said that it does not want to fulfill its Islamic aspirations in Lebanon by force and it is aware that its vision still faces considerable (if not insurmountable) obstacles, given the sectarian nature of Lebanese society and the secular orientation of Lebanese citizens (even those within the Shi'i community).

In addition to its local priorities, Hizballah seeks to defend Iran's interests (and Syria's by default) in Lebanon and the region. As discussed, the reasons for this are based on ideology, worldview, political pragmatism, and financial interest. Most importantly, the group's arsenal plays a big role in Iran's deterrence strategy against Israel and the United States. In that regard, one can view Hizballah as an extension of the IRGC in the Levant.

To achieve its various goals, Hizballah relies on pressure tactics and a pragmatic political strategy. It looks to broaden its domestic support base as much as possible while seeking sufficient representation in the Lebanese body politic. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Hizballah is both unwilling and unable to take over the Lebanese state (because of the sectarian system's internal checks and balances). Hizballah does not want to be distracted by the burdens of day-to-day governance and is most comfortable with one foot inside the state machinery and another outside it.

Yet, were Hizballah to have a clear political agenda for the future of Lebanon, one devoid of active participation in regional politics and armed struggle, Lebanese opposition against the group would be far less significant. But because Hizballah is not

⁶⁴ Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizballah* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004), p. 63.

⁶⁵ Robert Fisk, "Hizballah Turns to Iran for New Weapons to Wage War on Israel," *Independent*, April 8, 2008.

interested in governing and even has derailed the process of state building, many portions of non-Shi'i Lebanese society have been suspicious of the group. This situation, where Hizballah's stance fuels suspicion and long-held divisions among Lebanese, weakens Lebanon's central state authority and undermines U.S. interests in Lebanon.

THE PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON

The sizeable Palestinian refugee presence in Lebanon (estimated to be more than 400,000)⁶⁶ presents real challenges to the future of the country. As a 2009 International Crisis Group report summarized it, "Marginalized, deprived of basic political and economic rights, trapped in the camps, bereft of realistic prospects, heavily armed and standing atop multiple fault lines—inter-Lebanese, inter-Palestinian and inter-Arab—the Palestinians in Lebanon constitute a time bomb."⁶⁷ Specifically, there are three challenges: one, the potential *naturalization* of the refugees and its effects on socio-economic and political stability in Lebanon; two, the *weapons* of the Palestinian militias and their link to Syria; and three, the rise of *Salafi Jihadist activity* in the camps over the years and its spillover to regions in the north, as discussed in previous sections.

POTENTIAL NATURALIZATION

Other than the Ta'if Agreement, there are very few political issues on which Lebanese agree. However, the large Palestinian presence in Lebanon and its ultimate future in the country is something on

which all Lebanese communities, including successive Lebanese governments, have found a unified position. Specifically, there has been broad agreement to reject the permanent settlement of Palestinians living on Lebanese soil. A large portion of Lebanese society blames the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for causing the Civil War and the Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982. Lebanese scholar and parliamentarian Farid el Khazen has said that Lebanon amended its Constitution in 1990 to send a strong message to Israel and the international community on the Palestinian issue, introducing the following provision in the preamble: "There shall be... no settlement of non-Lebanese in Lebanon."⁶⁸ Yet, despite this strong sentiment, and because of its weak position and the combustible nature of the Palestinian issue, the Lebanese government has been unable to offer solutions to the Palestinian problem and as a result has sought to contain it, with mixed results.

Lebanon's rejection of the permanent settlement of Palestinians, as noted by el Khazen, can be explained by taking into account demographic, political and socio-economic factors.⁶⁹ First, the settlement of more than 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon will have "serious demographic repercussions" within a society where demographics have important political implications.⁷⁰ A permanent settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon would destabilize the fragile communal balance of the country, and could spark tensions between Muslims and Christians or between Sunnis and Shi'ah. Permanent settlement would also negatively impact the

⁶⁶ More than 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon are registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), slightly over half of whom reside in twelve official refugee camps. UNRWA and several local and international NGOs provide education, vocational training, and health services to the refugees (particularly those residing in the camps). Nevertheless, both inside and outside the camps, Palestinian standards of living are severely vitiated by the paucity of UNRWA and NGO resources, the decrease in PLO funds allocated to the diaspora communities, the degree to which public services in Lebanon have been privatized, and the Lebanese restriction of Palestinian rights. For example, while Palestinian refugees in both Jordan and Syria have the right to work in those countries, until recently the refugees in Lebanon were prohibited from engaging in over seventy manual, clerical, and professional careers. Even today, Palestinians do not have the right to own or inherit property; nor can they partake of Lebanese primary or secondary education.

⁶⁷ International Crisis Group, "Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps," Middle East Report no. 84, February, 16 2009.

⁶⁸ Farid el Khazen, "Permanent Settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon: A Recipe for Conflict," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 3, 1997.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Lebanese economy, which has yet to recover fully from the Civil War and the several conflicts and crises that the country had to deal with in the post-war period (most recently, the 2006 summer war between Hizballah and Israel). Additionally, Lebanon's gross public debt of more than \$51 billion stands at around 162 percent of its GDP.⁷¹ Given this economic state of affairs, it would be difficult for Lebanon to absorb Palestinian refugees into the labor market.⁷²

SYRIA AND THE PALESTINIANS

The Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are another instrument in the regional tug of war, and as such are another factor that contributes to Lebanon's weakness.⁷³ Syria views the Palestinian armed groups that are allied to it as cards to be used both in the context of negotiations with Israel and as allies that can impact Lebanon's domestic scene. Lebanese politicians who are wary of Syria's reach into Lebanese internal affairs view the Palestinian armed presence outside the camps as a big problem created by Damascus. These politicians regard Hamas, Fatah al-Intifada, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) as proxies that offer Damascus

important leverage in Lebanese politics.⁷⁴ Recent clashes inside the camps, which happened a few days before the start of the spring 2010 Lebanese national dialogue, suggest that Syria's influence in the camps seems to be growing.⁷⁵

Since the end of the Civil War, Lebanese politicians have had numerous discussions over the Palestinian weapons issue, but with few tangible results. Hizballah, for its part, has publicly stated that it is against the forced disarmament of Palestinians in Lebanon, perhaps because it sees it as a precedent for its own eventual disarmament (UN resolutions 1559 and 1701 call for the disarmament of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias). What complicates things for Lebanon is that the Palestinian leadership in Lebanon, like in the West Bank and Gaza, continues to be divided between Hamas and Fatah. In June 2006, fourteen key Lebanese leaders gathered for a national dialogue that included discussion of Palestinian weapons. All participants agreed on the need to remove military bases run by pro-Syrian factions outside the camps. Yet, this issue ultimately fell victim to crises that erupted, including the 2006 war and the November 2006-May 2008 political crisis, and was never resolved.

⁷¹ "Lebanon's Gross Public Debt Up 8.6 Percent in 2009 to Reach \$51 Billion," *Daily Star*, April 2, 2010.

⁷² El Khazen, "Permanent Settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon: A Recipe for Conflict."

⁷³ For an analysis of the regional dimension of the Palestinian refugee problem, see Nadim Shehadi, "Palestinian Refugees: The Regional Perspective," Chatham House Briefing Paper, April 2009.

⁷⁴ The Palestinian arms outside the camps are mainly in the hands of PFLP-GC and Fatah al-Intifada, according to Lebanese official sources. Given their direct link to Syria, one should avoid considering them "Palestinian" arms and instead keep in mind that the solution to this problem lies in Damascus and not inside the camps. The same applies to many of the arms inside the camps that are held by pro-Syrian factions. These factions have less and less legitimacy with the civilians in the camps, most of whom want to lead normal lives and resent the image that portrays them as islands of insecurity.

⁷⁵ Elias Sakr, "Palestinian Arms Outside Camps Once More Under Spotlight," *Daily Star*, April 12, 2010.

A NEW U.S. STRATEGY FOR LEBANON

Because of Lebanon's history of instability, Washington has repeatedly, though halfheartedly, intervened to defuse crises there. Yet, Washington has rarely gotten its Lebanon policy to produce the results it sought, partly because its policies have been reactive. These setbacks and the overall history of U.S. intervention in Lebanon furnish a number of lessons that should guide the formulation of a new U.S. strategy toward Lebanon.

LESSONS FROM PAST EXPERIENCES

LESSON #1: STRIKE THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND LONG-TERM INTERESTS.

The first lesson—balance immediate and long-term interests—is universal in nature, but particularly relevant for U.S. policy toward Lebanon. Lebanon is an example of a place where Washington has done reasonably well over the years in protecting its short-term needs but only at the expense of its long-term goals, thus affecting its overall strategic position in the broader Middle East. The July 1958 U.S. intervention in Lebanon serves as a useful illustration of this argument. There is an emerging consensus among historians and former American officials that Washington viewed the 1958 intervention in Lebanon as largely successful. Yet, a closer scrutiny of that short episode suggests that while Washington was indeed able to fulfill its de-

clared objectives, it failed to safeguard its long-term interests.

On July 15, 1958, approximately fourteen thousand U.S. Marines landed in Lebanon. The mission was to assist in restoring civil order in Lebanon and to head off a gathering political crisis precipitated by President Camille Chamoun's bid to seek a second term in circumvention of the Constitution. However, the American intervention was based on other reasons that had to do with regional developments and considerations—notably the crisis produced by a coup d'état against the pro-Western regime in Iraq on July 14, and Washington's assessment of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser as a menacing force, serving Soviet objectives at the expense of the United States.

On the whole, the U.S. intervention had the welcome effect of stabilizing Lebanon. Lebanese Army General Fouad Shehab was elected as successor to Chamoun on July 31. Under Shehab's presidency, Lebanon recovered quickly from its civil strife, witnessed the emergence of a strong executive, and developed rapidly. By carefully intervening in Lebanon, the United States managed to prevent the spread of Nasserism and communism to the remaining pro-Western Arab regimes, deter Soviet adventurism in the area, preserve stability in Jordan, and generally enhance U.S. credibility as an ally and a superpower.

As Barry Blechman and Stephen Kaplan argue in a 1987 Pentagon study, the key to the success of Washington's Lebanon policy in 1958 lay in its restrained military intervention, smart use of diplomacy, and perhaps most importantly, in its well-defined objectives.⁷⁶ Without the skilled work of American diplomat Robert Murphy, the smooth transition from Chamoun to Shehab would have been doubtful. At the same time, had the United States instituted a more extensive military involvement in Lebanon, clashes between Lebanese and U.S. troops would likely have erupted. This would have reduced the likelihood of Murphy being able to help negotiate a political settlement, and would have increased the chances of the United States getting embroiled in a civil war on behalf of the incumbent regime. Eisenhower struck the right balance between no action and overreaction, thus protecting both his political flank at home and his ability to influence events in Lebanon and the region toward a constructive outcome.⁷⁷ In addition to the general competence of the U.S. intervention, luck might have also played a role in its success.⁷⁸ Indeed, Blechman and Kaplan maintain that “a balanced assessment of U.S. behavior in the [1958 crisis] is made difficult by the suspicion that the outcome might have been much the same if the United States had done nothing. Even Eisenhower expressed some doubt on this score [in his memoirs].”⁷⁹

Yet, despite its successes in meeting its short-term goals in Lebanon in 1958, the United States did not have a strategy to achieve its long-term objectives, namely the stabilization of Lebanon and the protection of its democracy. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, external pressures on Lebanon mounted, leading to a severe crisis in 1969 over the issue of the Palestinian military presence in the country. In subsequent years, tensions remained acute, and

Lebanese political life began to polarize along a complex sectarian and class-based line. By 1975, civil war had once again engulfed Lebanon, resulting in the Syrian military intervention of early 1976. In short, the 1958 crisis and the following U.S. intervention had done little to help shield Lebanon from the storms of the Middle East or help solve its many internal problems.

LESSON #2: TAKE CONCRETE DIPLOMATIC ACTION TO PREVENT ISRAEL FROM USING EXCESSIVE FORCE AGAINST LEBANON DURING TIMES OF MILITARY CONFRONTATION WITH HIZBALLAH, AS LARGE-SCALE PUNITIVE OPERATIONS BY ISRAEL AGAINST LEBANON UNDERMINE AMERICAN INTERESTS IN LEBANON.

As mentioned above, several conditions led to the creation of Hizballah as an armed movement in the early 1980s—the Lebanese Civil War, an unfavorable political and socio-economic condition of the Lebanese Shi'ah, and Iran's and Syria's interventions in Lebanese internal affairs. However, there is no question that Israel's 1982 invasion and subsequent occupation of a large part of southern Lebanon precipitated Hizballah's emergence.

For eighteen years (1982-2000), Hizballah, with the support of Iran and Syria, worked to drive Israel out of Lebanon. Hizballah relied mostly on guerilla tactics against Israeli forces, which in several instances escalated to conventional warfare, resulting in Hizballah firing Katyusha rockets into Israel and the Israeli Air Force (IAF) conducting air campaigns against Hizballah strongholds and Lebanese civilian infrastructure. The clearest examples of military escalation between Hizballah and Israel were during Israel's 1993 “Operation Accountability,” 1996 “Operation Grapes of Wrath,” and its 2006 “Second Lebanon War.” These large-scale

⁷⁶ Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1978), pp. 256-8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace 1956-1961* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1965), p. 266.

military campaigns share three things in common: First, they were all Israeli wars of choice, not necessity. Second, according to the United Nations, Israel used excessive force to achieve its objectives, causing massive civilian casualties and physical destruction on the Lebanese side.⁸⁰ Third, and perhaps most importantly, none of these military operations succeeded or ultimately enhanced Israel's security. On the contrary, Hizballah rebounded and became stronger after each campaign.

While Israel has the right under international law to defend itself against unprovoked aggression, Israel has employed a liberal interpretation of self-defense, as evidenced by its frequent use of excessive force against irregular forces that are no match to its military and do not pose existential security threats. This is not meant to imply that Israel should ignore or dismiss the threat posed by Hizballah (or Palestinian militants for that matter). However, it does suggest that effective policies of containment against Hizballah, in consultation with the United States, would work better than military policies that lead to escalation.

What, then, explains Israel's decisions to use excessive force against Hizballah on multiple occasions? Israel's decisions are driven largely by the belief that a military/technological solution to the perceived Hizballah threat is possible and that the goal of absolute security is achievable. Many senior Israeli officials continue to believe that strategic bombardments of Hizballah strongholds in Beirut and other Lebanese civilian infrastructure can crush Hizballah or at least cause a rift between the Shi'i group and Lebanese society (the assumption being that non-Shi'i members of Lebanese society would blame Hizballah for provoking Israel and turn against it). Yet, as argued, Israel's military campaigns against Lebanon have achieved the opposite of what Israel had hoped for. Furthermore, Israel's operations de-

stabilize Lebanon and as a result harm American interests (for instance, Israel's 2006 Second Lebanon War undermined the pro-American government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and significantly weakened its ability to pressure Hizballah to disarm).

Therefore, the United States should apply diplomatic pressure on Israel to prevent it from responding with excessive force to potential provocations from Hizballah. Hizballah, despite its aggressive rhetoric, is nowhere near capable, by any objective standard, of challenging the existence of the state of Israel. Furthermore, the United States should convince Israel to withdraw from the Sheb'a farms, stop its violations of Lebanese airspace, and deny Hizballah any justification for future provocative behavior.

LESSON #3: DO NOT MILITARILY INTERVENE TO SUPPORT ONE LEBANESE CAMP OVER ANOTHER. THIS WILL DEEPEN LEBANESE POLITICAL POLARIZATION, EXACERBATE EXISTING COMMUNAL CLEAVAGES, AND JEOPARDIZE THE ENTIRE U.S. APPROACH.

In the summer of 1981, President Ronald Reagan sent the Marines back to Lebanon to help keep the peace and squelch the fires of the Civil War. The outcome was nothing short of disastrous. On October 23, 1983, Hizballah perpetrated twin terrorist attacks against U.S. and French forces in Lebanon, leaving 241 U.S. Marines and 47 French paratroopers dead. A previous truck-bomb attack by Hizballah on the American Embassy building in April had left over 30 dead and 100 wounded. Not only did the United States suffer a large amount of casualties (more than 278 Americans in total, military and civilian) but the U.S. troops left in defeat two-and-a-half years later. The crisis in Lebanon worsened and had ripple effects throughout the region, and emboldened the United States' regional adversaries—Syria and Iran.

⁸⁰ "Secretary General's Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East," Secretary General, Office of the Spokesperson, July 20, 2006, available at <<http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=2142>>.

Washington failed to accomplish any of its declared policy goals, leaving it with a relatively weaker position in the Middle East and with a tarnished image throughout the world.

The primary reason why the United States suffered losses in Lebanon in the 1980s was because Washington picked a side in the Civil War—the Christian forces—and actively helped it defeat its adversary—a coalition of leftist, mostly Muslim forces. Initially, the majority of the Lebanese factions welcomed the Marines as a presence that would help restore stability and end eight years of war. Until the summer of 1983, the U.S. forces were perceived as neutral. But by September 1983, the status of the United States and the Marines began to erode as the Lebanese Shi'ah started to mobilize militarily.⁸¹ On September 19, as Christian forces were losing to the Druze militias in the now-infamous battle of Souk al-Gharb, Lebanese Army commanders, supported by the Lebanese president, requested American support. The U.S. military called in naval and air fire *not* to defend the Marines or any U.S. personnel, but to support the besieged Lebanese Army. American journalist Robin Wright argues that “in effect, the Marines were going on the offensive for the first time, taking sides in the Lebanese conflict. The USS *Virginia*, a nuclear-powered cruiser, fired more than seventy rounds against the Druze militia. American warplanes, already in the air, were turned back only at the last minute.”⁸² Thirty-four days after Souk al-Gharb, a Hizballah suicide bomber blew up the Marine compound in Beirut, marking the beginning of the end of America’s adventure in Lebanon.

While the U.S. *military* intervention in Lebanon in support of one side against another did not produce positive results for Washington, this does not mean that the United States should not take

diplomatic actions to protect its interests there, as this paper will argue. The United States must work with its Lebanese allies in the short run, in the hope that these allies will expand their bases of popular support and broaden their political capital.

Although it is true that the current strategic environment in Lebanon and the Middle East is different from that of the early 1980s, and no one in Washington is currently proposing that the United States should intervene militarily in Lebanon, present or future American administrations could decide to change course. (For example, the George W. Bush administration threatened to intervene militarily in Lebanon in March 2008 and ordered the military to mobilize the USS *Cole* in response to Syria’s destabilizing actions in Lebanon. Therefore, it is worth noting the costs the United States incurred in the 1980s when it chose sides in Lebanon.)

LESSON #4: DO NOT USE LEBANON AS A BATTLEFIELD AGAINST REGIONAL ADVERSARIES OR AS A BARGAINING CHIP IN REGIONAL DIPLOMACY. IT WILL FURTHER DESTABILIZE THE COUNTRY.

The George W. Bush administration’s democratization plan for the Middle East, along with Iran’s growing influence in the region and Syria’s opposition in 2003 to the U.S.-led war in Iraq brought Lebanon back on Washington’s radar. President Bush believed Lebanon could serve as a bellwether for the region, saying on September 19, 2006 at the United Nations: “For many years, Lebanon was a model of democracy and pluralism and openness in the region. And it will be again.”⁸³ A year earlier, President Bush stated that “if Lebanon is successful, it is going to ring the door of every Arab regime.”⁸⁴ But Washington’s new interest in and approach to Lebanon was not exclusively rooted in idealistic

⁸¹ See Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage* (New York: Linton Press/Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 77.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸³ “President Bush’s United Nations Address,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/19/world/19bush_transcript.html>.

⁸⁴ “Bush Sees Arab World Moving to Democracy,” Associated Press, March 8, 2005.

considerations. President Bush's close Middle East advisors believed that the United States could curb Iran's growing regional influence by fighting it on Lebanese territory.⁸⁵ The 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel, while not caused by the United States, quickly turned into a proxy war between the United States and Iran.⁸⁶

While the George W. Bush administration elevated the international status of Lebanon and verbally championed its cause like no other previous administration, it ultimately hurt the country with its stance during the summer war of 2006. Washington's contradictory position—backing Lebanon on the global stage while also supporting Israel's military campaign—left even the staunchest pro-U.S. politicians in the Lebanese government perplexed and frustrated with the United States. Until the war in 2006, the Bush administration had done almost everything right in its Lebanese allies' eyes: it helped kick Syria out of Lebanon, it protected Lebanon politically at the United Nations, it helped jumpstart an international tribunal to try the killers of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, it offered financial and military assistance (though in relatively small amounts), and it conducted a multilateral policy that was coordinated with France and other European countries. Yet, Washington's enablement of Israel's war, which caused heavy damage to the country in terms of lives lost, people injured, and infrastructure destroyed, and which strengthened Hizballah, ultimately nullified the previous gains. Indeed, during the George W. Bush administration's tenure, a huge opportunity to strengthen Lebanon and start a process that would safeguard long-term U.S. interests in the country was missed.⁸⁷

The outcome of the George W. Bush administration's policy in Lebanon was a stronger Tehran-Damascus-Hizballah axis. Hizballah grew in strength and popularity in the Arab world after its 2006 war with Israel. Meanwhile, Syria slowly broke out of the U.S.-imposed isolation by consolidating its rule at home and re-meddling in Lebanon's internal affairs. In short, Washington's strategy of using Lebanon to wage war against its adversaries backfired. Whether it was conducted under the umbrella of "promoting democracy" or "fighting evil," the results were the same—the further destabilization of Lebanon.

LESSON #5: CONTAIN HIZBALLAH. NO U.S. POLICY IN LEBANON CAN SUCCEED WITHOUT AN EFFECTIVE CONTAINMENT STRATEGY FOR HIZBALLAH, THE SINGLE MOST POWERFUL POLITICAL AND MILITARY ACTOR IN THE COUNTRY.

Since 1982, Washington has not had much success with its Lebanon policy in large part because of a single Lebanese actor who has been determined to undermine U.S. interests and resist its plans in Lebanon and the Middle East—Hizballah.

As discussed earlier, President Reagan's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Lebanon in the wake of the 1984 embassy bombing was the result of the campaign of terrorism and political violence launched by Hizballah in the early to mid 1980s. Although Syria could claim some political credit for the United States' humiliating exit, given its logistical and military assistance to Hizballah, it took the determination and commitment of the Shi'i group, motivated by Iran and its own reasons, to carry out operations on the ground.

⁸⁵ Author's interview of Elliott Abrams, Washington, D.C., May 14, 2009.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Elliott Abrams, the chief architect at the Bush White House of Washington's policies toward Lebanon and Syria, strongly believed that "U.S. strategy for Lebanon could have worked had the administration's Syria policy been more robust." The setbacks of U.S. policy toward Syria "undermined what the administration was trying to accomplish in Lebanon," Abrams added. Author's interview of Elliott Abrams, Washington, D.C., May 22, 2010.

More than two decades later, the importance of having a Hizballah strategy became clear again. While several factors account for the ultimate failure of President George W. Bush's policy in Lebanon, it can be argued that Hizballah had a big hand in the many setbacks of his administration's policy. If the goal of the Bush administration's policy was to bolster the pro-U.S. government of Fouad Siniora, Hizballah, by effectively undermining the authority and legitimacy of the Lebanese government through various pressure tactics during the political crisis (protests, sits ins, political resignations, and eventually armed assault), worked against the realization of that goal. Meanwhile, if Washington was intent on limiting Syria's and Iran's influence in Lebanon, Hizballah, a defender of (now mostly) Iranian and (by default) Syrian interests, hindered that objective.

Moving forward, the challenge of Hizballah remains. If Washington has any plans of promoting peace between Lebanon and Israel, Hizballah (and Iran), would likely stand in the way. If Washington has any hopes of protecting Lebanon and shielding it from the storms of the Middle East, Hizballah, in consultation with Tehran, will likely keep Lebanon involved in the regional power struggle against Israel and America's allies in the Arab world.

A NEW APPROACH

Washington needs a new strategy if it wishes to advance American interests in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East. This new strategy should have a local component and a regional component in order to address Lebanon's two fundamental problems—a weak central authority and excessive intervention by external forces in the country's domestic affairs.

BOLSTER LEBANON'S INTERNAL STRENGTH BY CREATING A STRONGER LEBANESE STATE APPARATUS

The local part of a new U.S. strategy toward Lebanon should be guided by a simple principle: Washington should protect U.S. interests by helping Lebanon bolster its internal strength and stability. Washington should focus its efforts on providing the Lebanese people with the necessary tools needed to move toward national reconciliation. This way Washington can help Lebanon create a sense of national unity—the most important pillar of a strong state.

History has shown that Lebanon's state weakness and insecurity have profoundly hampered U.S. interests in that country. In order for the United States to protect its interests in Lebanon, it must adopt an overall approach that prioritizes Lebanese security and that helps Lebanon tackle several internal problems, the thorniest of which is Hizballah's insistence on remaining armed. Because internal security is often lacking in Lebanon and tends to impact local politics, the United States should treat this issue as an utmost priority.⁸⁸ All efforts at rebuilding the state in Lebanon will suffer if general security and stability are in short supply.

Specifically, Washington should commit to investing in the building of a strong, modern Lebanese national military and security apparatus. The current Lebanese military is incapable of securing the country, given the small size of its budget and poorly trained and badly equipped combat force. Although the United States has provided some financial and technical assistance to Lebanon since the Syrian withdrawal of 2005, it remains a very small amount compared to what it regularly provides to other Arab allies (not to mention Israel) that are in much less need of it.⁸⁹ To do its job

⁸⁸ Amitai Etzioni has rightly argued that when it comes to U.S. or Western efforts that seek to bolster weak and developing states, security should come first. Amitai Etzioni, *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, July 2007).

⁸⁹ Arshad Mohammed, "U.S. Relieved at Lebanon Election Result," Reuters, June 8, 2009.

capably, the Lebanese military needs a significant upgrade of funding from Washington (no less than 20 percent more of what it currently receives),⁹⁰ as well as military hardware that includes a modern air-defense system to protect the country from any violations of Lebanese air space, helicopters for counterterrorism purposes, and counterintelligence equipment to defend against terrorist networks and foreign spy rings operating inside the country.⁹¹ Moreover, the United States should help the Lebanese Army in the areas of leadership, soldier training, communications, organizational skills, and research and development. While there are other areas in Lebanon's state apparatus that could use additional U.S. assistance, none are more important and urgent than the military and security services.

Washington has already made investments in Lebanon through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID has helped Lebanon boost its state capacity by funding projects that have improved local infrastructure and electric power centers in various under-served regions, as well as providing technical assistance to several state institutions and helping improve public education.⁹² Yet, merely allocating additional resources to these areas would not advance overall U.S. interests in the country because any gains made in the governance or educational arenas may be jeopardized by insecurity and instability in the country. Washington should therefore support projects that strengthen Lebanon's defense and security because an internally secure and strong Lebanon is not only crucial for U.S. interests, but a necessary precursor for Lebanese gains in the economic, political, and social spheres.

HELP SHIELD LEBANON FROM THE REGIONAL POWER STRUGGLE

Over the years, many Arab regimes have used regional instability in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular as excuses for their own internal failures and to justify diverting resources to their militaries. The Lebanese people have blamed Israel and Syria for their internal woes, but unlike other Arab nations (especially those who are at peace with Israel), they have a compelling case. Fifteen years of direct Syrian intervention in Lebanon's post-Civil War internal affairs, eighteen years of Israeli occupation of a large segment of Lebanon's southern region (with intermittent episodes of high-intensity hostilities and continued war with the Israeli military), and ongoing violence either sparked or fueled by external actors have had a devastating and lasting effect on Lebanon's reform efforts. For example, the 2006 war with Israel left 1,200 dead and 4,400 wounded (mostly Lebanese civilians) and cost the Lebanese government around \$2.8 billion.⁹³ Therefore, while Lebanon *can* implement many political and economic reforms to ameliorate its current situation, the process would be in jeopardy if it is not better protected from external threats. As long as Lebanon is dragged by Hizballah into a regional power struggle, all domestic reform attempts will suffer and remain incomplete.

Hizballah presents a challenge to the vision of a Lebanon that is relatively insulated from the power struggles in the region. Lebanon would have a better chance of escaping the heavy burdens of the region if it were not for the group's external military aims and its link to Damascus, and especially, Tehran. Of course, while nearly all confessions in

⁹⁰ Author's interviews of senior Lebanese Army commanders who are in charge of the U.S. military assistance file, August 2, 2007 and July 21, 2009.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² For a comprehensive profile of USAID in Lebanon and its efforts there, see USAID's website devoted to its Lebanon projects, available at <<http://www.usaid.gov/lb/>>.

⁹³ "Hizballah-Israel War: Economic Consequences for Lebanon," MEMRI Economic Blog, July 22, 2008, available at <<http://memrieconomicblog.org/bin/content.cgi?article=227>>.

Lebanon have maintained (and continue to maintain) public and secret relations with outside forces (be it with Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United States, or Israel), only one group—Hizballah—has developed a fully integrated relationship with a foreign country—Iran—whose regional aspirations often come at the expense of Lebanese national interests. Washington’s goal, therefore, should be to take measures that help turn Hizballah into a purely local actor and end its active involvement in the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.

A U.S. STRATEGY FOR HIZBALLAH

Many past U.S. policies failed to address Washington’s concerns vis-à-vis Hizballah, so any new policy should avoid repeating previous mistakes. For Washington to *localize* and *tame* Hizballah, it must employ diplomacy adeptly, instead of outsourcing the problem to Syria or seeking a military solution, whether directly or through Israel.

The “Syrian solution” did not work in the past and there is no reason to believe that it would work today. President Bashar al-Asad has repeatedly stated that it is in his country’s interest to pursue policies that seek to bolster, as opposed to weaken, Hizballah. Breaking ties with or ending military support of Hizballah goes against Syria’s hegemonic goals in Lebanon and its relationship with Iran. Weakening Hizballah would significantly hamper Syria’s influence in Lebanon and cause serious tensions with Iran (it may also lead to the breakup of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, something that Syria has worked hard to avoid). Additionally, Syria’s termination of its support to Hizballah could undermine the regime’s legitimacy at home and reduce its popularity in wider Arab circles.

Even if Syria were to be in a position in which it were forced to change course (a highly unlikely prospect), Damascus would still be unable to offer much with regard to the Hizballah issue. While Syria could end its weapons shipments to Hizballah, the Shi’i group

has other sources of military support. Hizballah’s political network in Lebanon effectively controls Beirut’s airport, which Tehran allegedly uses to send arms to the group through cargo planes. Should Syria seal vast areas of the Lebanese-Syrian border to arms smuggling, Iran would likely compensate by increasing its air shipments directly to Beirut.

Another equally flawed option available to the United States is to adopt a military approach to decapitate Hizballah. Indeed, history has shown this to be an unwise strategy. As stated above, many observers viewed the 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah as a proxy war between Iran and the United States. The George W. Bush administration was perhaps convinced that a successful IAF bombing campaign against Hizballah’s heavily fortified underground-missile and command-and-control complexes in Lebanon would ease Israel’s security concerns. The results of the 2006 war (and previous wars) illustrate that any strategy aimed at militarily destroying Hizballah is bound to fail and backfire. Equally important, a U.S. military approach to the Hizballah problem would significantly undermine other U.S. interests in Lebanon by weakening the country and possibly causing further political breakdown and disintegration.

TEHRAN: A BETTER ADDRESS FOR DEALING WITH HIZBALLAH’S WEAPONS

If neither the use of force nor Syria’s potential cooperation (if ever secured) would solve the Hizballah challenge (and simultaneously protect other U.S. interests), then what would? Only Iran, the country that has long invested in Hizballah and has made consistent efforts to turn it into a powerhouse is in a position to effectively tame and exert control over the group. In short, Iran has unmatched influence and leverage over the Shi’i group. Yet, given the notoriously opaque and factionalized nature of the Iranian regime, it is unclear who is directly in charge of developing military relations with Hizballah. The most likely assumption is that the IRGC (possibly

the elite Quds Force unit within it) are in direct contact with Hizballah. Overseeing the IRGC-Hizballah relationship is arguably Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose input on strategic and religious affairs is always consulted in advance.

The United States has a good chance of *localizing* and *taming* Hizballah by engaging in direct bilateral talks with Iran. The question is at what price would Iran be willing to cooperate with the United States over Hizballah? Given the many unknowns surrounding the Iranian leadership, it is difficult to come up with sensible predictions. Furthermore, it is highly questionable that Iran would be willing to talk to any Western foreign powers (particularly the United States) about the future of Hizballah, especially after the June 2009 presidential election and its aftermath, which renewed the term of hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.⁹⁴ However, Tehran could soon realize it cannot delay talks forever. Therefore, it may only be a matter of time before the mullahs reopen to the world and restart the interrupted dialogue with the United States over the Iranian nuclear program, and perhaps other issues, including Hizballah.

It is not inconceivable that Iran and the United States cooperate on issues that divide them. In the aftermath of 9/11, Iran supported the American-led campaign in Afghanistan on the side of the Northern Alliance, which Iran had long backed against the Taliban. In an unprecedented display of diplomatic cooperation, American and Iranian envoys at the December 2001 UN-sponsored conference in Bonn that convened to construct a new Afghan government exceeded their official directives and opted to work together. This launched the only prolonged period of direct diplomatic contact between the two nations in over thirty years.⁹⁵

If Tehran accepts Washington's invitation to talk about Hizballah, Washington should realize that Iran will refuse to disarm the group. Instead, Iran could be persuaded to instruct its ally to *discontinue its regional role, turn into a purely local actor, and adopt a more compromising posture toward Israel*. Iran would prefer to keep Hizballah as an armed, strategic reserve for two main reasons: One, absent a comprehensive overhaul of Iranian-American relations (which is highly unlikely any time soon), Iran would still want to rely on Hizballah to serve as a deterrent to a potential American (or Israeli) strike against it, should things escalate between the two countries. Two, Iran understands that Hizballah's weapons not only protect it (and the Lebanese Shi'i community) against various security threats inside Lebanon (al-Qa'ida and armed Palestinians) that the Lebanese state is unable to address but also help it bargain with Lebanese rivals over the pace of its eventual disarmament and full integration into the Lebanese state apparatus.

THE DISADVANTAGES OF THE IRAN OPTION

Critics of the Iran option may argue that it does not address the problem of Syrian intervention in Lebanese internal affairs and sponsorship of Palestinian militants. Given Syria's geographical proximity and historical role in Lebanon, Damascus will always be in a position to intervene in Lebanese politics and derail, whenever it wishes, any process of Lebanese democracy consolidation and state-building. Indeed, if history is any guide, Syria would make it clear to the United States (and Iran) that its interests in Lebanon should not be ignored and that no solution in Lebanon would be possible without Damascus's blessing. Syria has (and has used) a number of options to obstruct progress in Lebanon, the deadliest of which include political assassinations of Lebanese figures and mobilization of Palestinian militants in the camps.

⁹⁴ Numerous articles and studies on Iran's post-elections crisis have been written. For example, see Suzanne Maloney, "Misreading Iran," *National Interest Online*, June 26, 2009, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0626_iran_maloney.aspx?p=1>.

⁹⁵ Bilal Y. Saab, "Rethinking Hizballah's Disarmament," *Middle East Policy* XV, no. 3, Fall 2008.

While it is true that a U.S.-Iranian understanding would not eliminate Syria's negative influence in Lebanon (perhaps nothing would), it could significantly limit it. As previously argued, since its 2005 military exit from Lebanon, Syria has had to rely on Hizballah to protect its interests in Lebanon. The main reason why Hizballah has defended Syrian interests is because Syria sends arms to the group and facilitates weapons shipments that come from Iran, making it possible for Hizballah to play a regional role. However, if Hizballah is instructed by Iran to discontinue its regional role and armed struggle against Israel, it would no longer need to receive weapons from Syria. As a result, Hizballah would no longer feel obliged to defend Syrian interests in Lebanon and would focus instead on its new local role in Lebanese politics.

Yet, this still does not address the Palestinian problem in Lebanon. How can the Palestinian problem in Lebanon be solved? Only an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement which successfully addresses the future of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (and elsewhere) would solve Lebanon's refugee issue.

FINDING A PERMANENT SOLUTION TO HIZBALLAH'S WEAPONS

A *localized* and *tamed* Hizballah is not the same as a *disarmed* Hizballah. In other words, even if Iran were to instruct Hizballah to adopt a purely defensive posture vis-à-vis Israel and to end (or reduce to minimal levels) its support for Palestinian militants in the West Bank and Gaza, the organization would still retain its military arsenal at home (an outcome that Israel, as argued previously, may still find suboptimal). However, the fact that there is little chance Hizballah will disarm does not mean there are no options for dealing with its weapons.

As messy and uncertain as the Lebanese labyrinthine political process is, only the Lebanese people

can engage in the necessary negotiations with Hizballah over the future of its weapons, the nature of political representation of its constituency—the Lebanese Shi'ah—and the eventual integration of its armed unit into the Lebanese Armed Forces. The Lebanese government has always asked the United States and the international community to treat the issue of Hizballah as a Lebanese domestic affair. The difficulty is that local negotiations with Hizballah over its weapons have so far led nowhere, given the direct linkage of the Shi'i group's arms to Iran's foreign policy agenda. Therefore, what is needed, as suggested above, is for Washington to break this linkage through smart diplomacy with Tehran, alongside a process in Lebanon in which Lebanese actors work to convince Hizballah to transform into an unarmed political party. The process may be lengthy and strenuous, given the high mistrust between Hizballah and its Lebanese political rivals, but it is the only peaceful way to find a permanent solution to Hizballah's and the Lebanese Shi'i community's grievances.

THE LOCAL PART VERSUS THE REGIONAL PART OF U.S. STRATEGY

An Iranian-American understanding on Hizballah would be hard to attain. It is difficult to determine how deeply entrenched the issue of Hizballah is in Tehran's strategic calculus, and how much value the Islamic Republic places on the group's regional role. In the event that Iran refuses to cooperate on Hizballah or stalls indefinitely, would the local part of U.S. strategy for Lebanon—properly bolstering the Lebanese state apparatus—be enough to help the country stand on its own feet? Some, including American researcher Nicholas Noe, have answered in the affirmative and have argued that the solution to the Hizballah challenge lies primarily at home.⁹⁶ In other words, if the Lebanese state were to become a strong and “just” entity, able to properly

⁹⁶ Nicholas Noe, “Re-imagining the Lebanon Track: Toward a New U.S. Policy,” Century Foundation, 2009, available at <<http://www.tcf.org/publications/internationalaffairs/Noe.pdf>>.

integrate the Shi'i community and protect the country from external aggression, these analysts argue, Hizballah's rationale for keeping its arms would be significantly weakened. It follows that the implications for U.S. policy would be to prioritize bolstering the Lebanese state.

While U.S. assistance to help bolster Lebanon's internal strength is crucial, it may not be enough to ensure stability because of the external dimension of the Hizballah military challenge. This challenge, as this paper has posited, can only be dealt with through an understanding between Washington and Tehran. Therefore, because both components of the proposed U.S. strategy—local and regional—are vital to its success, Washington should promote both parts simultaneously and help its allies in Lebanon call Hizballah's bluff (the bluff being that Hizballah will only disarm once a strong Lebanese state is created). Should the local component of the policy succeed but the regional component fail, all Washington (and its Lebanese allies) can do is hope that the momentum of success at the local level (arguably a less challenging strategy to conduct) would offset any potential setbacks at the regional level. But this would be unlikely to yield tangible results. For instance, U.S. allies in Lebanon might capitalize on the fact that they helped create a strong state with a strong army, and as a result negotiate with Hizballah from a position of perceived strength. Yet, Hizballah, as previously discussed, is not an isolated or foreign entity in the Lebanese social fabric; the group has a multi-communal support base and a number of Lebanese political allies, and it could always call on Syria and Iran for help (though Syria will obviously name its price). So should the United States succeed in protecting its interests in Lebanon by helping create a strong state, Washington's allies would still have to enter into complex negotiations with the Shi'i group over its future. Of course, Lebanon's dysfunctional politics and sectarian system will not vanish once Hizballah surrenders its weapons, but Shi'i disarmament and reintegration would surely

create ample space for all Lebanese to peacefully and methodically address the problems that have traditionally dogged their democracy.

THINKING FORWARD

From the moment the Marines left Lebanon in 1983 to the day the George W. Bush administration decided to take diplomatic action in 2004 and sponsor Security Council Resolution 1559, the United States kept itself largely disengaged from Lebanon. By turning a blind eye to Israel's 1982-2000 occupation of a large area in southern Lebanon and by acknowledging Syria's dominant role in Lebanon following the 1975-90 Civil War, the United States shot itself in the foot and undermined its own interests in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East.

For Washington, disengagement from Lebanon looked like the right approach, given the bitter experiences of the past and the seemingly low value of intervention. However, disengagement, as has been argued, proved to be counterproductive in the long run. By abandoning Lebanon, the United States allowed Israel, Syria, and other foreign powers to repeatedly harm the country and trample on the only bastion of democracy in the Arab world. An unprotected Lebanon also allowed Iran to project its power through Hizballah across Israel's northern border. With the assistance of Syria, Iran turned Hizballah over the years from an unexceptional guerilla force to a highly professional and well-armed paramilitary organization that would undermine U.S. interests in the region as well as Israel's national security. As a result of their unchecked powers in Lebanon, Syria and Iran were able to enhance their relative positions in the Middle East at the expense of the United States and its Arab allies, and actively undermine, through their proxies, U.S. diplomatic efforts at brokering peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

It is unclear what President Barack Obama's plans for the Middle East are. The president has yet to

unveil a serious, practical approach for Arab-Israeli peace. On foreign policy matters, the war in Afghanistan has consumed most of President Obama's time and energy, leaving very little for a methodical treatment of a set of issues in the Middle East, including Lebanon.

However, like previous administrations, the Obama administration has a clear position on Lebanon—it supports the country's sovereignty, independence, and democracy, and has real concerns about Hizballah's role and military activities in Lebanon and the region—yet it has no viable strategy to achieve its declared objective. To be sure, Washington's repeated statements and reassurances to the Lebanese people that no deal or understanding between Syria and the United States will come at the expense of Lebanese sovereignty, while important, do not constitute real policy.⁹⁷

In order for the United States to protect its interests in Lebanon, it will have to break from its past policies and look at Lebanon in a truly different light. The United States should realize that its past experiences in Lebanon not only fell short and led to disastrous consequences, but also undermined its credibility as a great power in a tumultuous region that is vital to U.S. strategic interests. It also tarnished the image of the United States as a champion of democracy around the world. A new U.S. strategy for Lebanon that could present a model for the region is long overdue. It will be a difficult task given its many internal and external complexities, but it is a challenge worth pursuing. The opportunity for a more principled and consistent American approach in Lebanon, one that benefits Lebanon and advances both American interests and ideals still exists, but the recent drums of war in the region serve as a stark reminder that the opportunity may not be around for much longer.

⁹⁷ Nicholas Kimbrell, "Mitchell: No Peace Deal at Lebanon's Expense," *Daily Star*, June 13, 2009; "Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Reassures Lebanon on Overtures to Syria," Associated Press, April 26, 2009.

THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The Saban Center for Middle East Policy was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

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The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Vice President of Foreign Policy at Brookings, was the founding Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director. Within the Saban Center is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs

to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers. They include Bruce Riedel, a specialist on counterterrorism, who served as a senior advisor to four presidents on the Middle East and South Asia at the National Security Council and during a twenty-nine year career in the CIA; Suzanne Maloney, a former senior State Department official who focuses on Iran and economic development; Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Hady Amr, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Shibley Telhami, who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland; and Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings.

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