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### France and Hizbullah: The End of the Affair

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In 1960, during a joint press conference with then French President Charles De Gaulle, David Ben Gurion, Israel's then prime minister stated that France was Israel's greatest friend. At that moment, De Gaulle interrupted him abruptly, asserting that "France has no friends, just interests." This statement summarizes much of French foreign policy. It certainly applies to the French relationship with Hizbullah. Indeed, there has been a noticeable recent change in France's attitudes vis-à-vis Hizbullah to such an extent that France's stance on the Lebanese Shia organization now seems almost identical to the American one. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether France and the United States can work together effectively on the problem of Hizbullah.

The French and American experiences in Lebanon have been quite similar in many ways, particularly when it comes to Hizbullah. The "Party of God" (Hizbullah) is considered a terrorist group by much of the Western world, though not by France or by any Arab country. It was created in 1982, (in part) to expel foreign forces from Lebanon—i.e. the Israeli forces then occupying southern Lebanon and the Italian, French and American forces present in Beirut under a UN peacekeeping mandate.

As a result, relations between France, the U.S. and Hizbullah got off to a very bad start. In April 1983, Hizbullah targeted French soldiers with a rocket attack, although they did not cause any casualties and attacked the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people and injuring more than 120. In October 1983, things got even worse when Hizbullah bombed nearly simultaneously, the French and U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983, killing 241 U.S. Marines and 58 French soldiers. In November 1983, in retaliation for the deadly October attack on its soldiers, France sent fighter jets to bomb Hizbullah's camp in Baalbek. The U.S. response to Hizbullah's attack was more timid: some shelling from the battleship USS New Jersey at hostile positions beyond Beirut. It appears that then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger scrapped a mission to hit Hizbullah's positions with more force. In December 1983, Hizbullah attacked French soldiers in South Lebanon, killing ten. This time the French did not retaliate and in 1984 French and U.S. troops left Lebanon for good—undoubtedly to Hizbullah's great satisfaction.

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Despite this disengagement, Hizbullah began targeting France and the U.S. again in 1985. Between 1985 and 1987, Hizbullah kidnapped sixteen French citizens and twelve Americans, mostly journalists and diplomats. Some of the hostages remained in captivity for as long as four years and one was executed. In this instance, Hizbullah, funded and supported by Syria and Iran, was basically acting as a contractor for those two countries.

In fact, Sheikh Fadlallah, “spiritual” leader of many Hizbullah members, told an interesting story back in 1986 at the time that French hostages were being held in Lebanon: “France is standing in front of a locked vault. There are three keys to open it. The smallest is the Lebanese one. So even if I was holding your countrymen, I could not free them by myself. My little key is not enough. The Syrian key is larger. But it is not enough too. You need to get the third key, that of Iran.”<sup>1</sup>

So, in order to free their citizens, both France and the U.S. had to deal with Iran—and both decided that negotiation was the only option. The U.S. exchanged arms for the hostages in what became the Iran-Contra affair. France meanwhile gave in to many of Iran’s demands. Iran’s then ruler, Ayatollah Khomeini, was angry at France for many reasons, particularly because of the asylum granted to prominent figures from the Shah’s regime, including former Prime Minister Chapur Bakhtiar, and because of France’s support for Iraq, then engaged in a bloody war against Iran.

The hostage crisis was not the only front on which Hizbullah waged war against France. Indeed, it brought the war to the streets of Paris. Hizbullah helped carry out a wave of terrorist attacks in Paris between December 1985 and September 1986 that killed 13 and injured hundreds. While Hizbullah’s responsibility for the attacks remains controversial, many elements point towards a role. First, the DGSE—roughly the French equivalent of the CIA—concluded that the explosives used during this wave of bombings were the same as those used a car bomb that Hizbullah set in front of the French embassy in Kuwait City in December 1983. Second, the main culprit arrested in 1986, Fouad Ali Saleh, was very close to many of Hizbullah’s top leaders, including Hussein Mazbuh, the main bombmaker for the organization. Third, Saleh was a protégé of Wahid Gordji, the unofficial number two Iranian diplomat in Paris who was later expelled from France after a tense standoff with French police at the Iranian Embassy in Paris.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Second Phase**

During the 1990s, there was little direct conflict between Hizbullah and either France or the United States. But things have been quite different since 2000.

First, in February 2000, Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin described Hizbullah as a “terrorist” group during a press conference in Israel. The French foreign Minister Hubert

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Figaro* (Paris) Sep. 17, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this, please see Didier Bigo, “Les attentats de 1986 en France : un cas de violence transnationale et ses implications (Partie 1),” *Cultures et Conflits*, no. 4, available at <http://www.conflits.org/document.php?id=129>

Vedrine, who was traveling with Jospin whispered to his ear, “you went a little too far there!”<sup>3</sup> President Chirac took more forceful action to remind Jospin that the president shapes France’s foreign policy, not the prime minister. Possibly because he remembered the 1985-86 bombings and kidnappings, Chirac did not want to antagonize Hizbullah. Despite Hizbullah’s blood-soaked pedigree, Chirac invited Hassan Nasrallah, the group’s Secretary General, to attend the Francophone Summit in Beirut in October 2002. When they met, Chirac bestowed legitimacy upon Hizbullah by asserting that “Hizbullah is an important component of Lebanese society.”

Despite these overtures, France’s relationship with Hizbullah deteriorated dramatically in December 2003. Chirac’s support of the ban of the hijab —the veil worn by Muslim women— in France’s public schools incurred the wrath of Sheikh Fadlallah. The latter wrote an official letter to Chirac threatening “likely complications” for France if the law banning the hijab was passed.<sup>4</sup> The ban passed into law nonetheless, and with Chirac’s support, in March 2004.

Despite France’s unintentional confrontation with Hizbullah, France did not turn completely against the organization. Indeed, in May 2004, the French ambassador to the United States, Jean-David Levitte declared that Hizbullah served mostly as a “social” organization. Levitte argued that there was no reason to put the group on the European Union’s list of terrorist organizations.<sup>5</sup> Many inside the EU, including most recently Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot, strongly advocate putting Hizbullah on the list. But France, which has posed particularly strong resistance to including it, insists that Hizbullah is a political party and that declaring it a terrorist organization could destabilize Lebanon.

But simultaneously France adopted a tougher stance toward Hizbullah by banning their satellite television channel Al-Manar in December 2004. The rabid anti-Semitism expressed in many Al-Manar programs created tremendous pressure from French politicians and the public alike to ban the station. It could not be ignored any longer, particularly given the very tough French laws on Anti-Semitism. The U.S. followed suit a few days later.

Interestingly, it seems that Nasrallah did not hold grudge against France for this action. Indeed, in an April 2005 op-ed entitled “Letter to a French friend”, clearly destined to Chirac, in the Lebanese newspaper *Assafir*, Nasrallah played the friendship card. “France is being asked to help push forward national dialogue and internal reconciliation in its position as a friend (...) The Lebanese do not like to see France held hostage to the savage and aggressive American

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<sup>3</sup> Christophe Deloire and Christophe Dubois, *Les islamistes sont déjà là*, (Albin Michel: Paris, 2004), p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> *Proche-Orient.info*, December 23, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-David Levitte, French ambassador to the United States, interview with the author, Washington D.C., May 7, 2004.

hegemony.” He ended the letter: “Please accept, dear friend, the assurance of my sincere friendship.”<sup>6</sup>

Surprisingly, France reacted to this attempt at friendship by adopting a yet tougher stance towards Nasrallah’s organization. Indeed, in August, Globecast, a major satellite provider and subsidiary of France Telecom—which is partly owned by the French state—removed Al Manar from its Asian lineup. And on August 29, 2005, Chirac stated publicly that every aspect of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 must be enforced. According to the Lebanese daily *The Daily Star*, Chirac told Lebanon to disarm Hizbullah and deploy its army along the border with Israel.<sup>7</sup> This was confirmed by Philippe Douste-Blazy, the French foreign minister, in an interview with *Asharq Al Awsat* on September 5, 2005 when he said: “As for the disarmament of Hizbullah, I wish to say that our goal is to disarm militias, just as it is the goal of Resolution 1559. We want this resolution to be implemented in all its provisions.” He also added in another interview on September 23 that the issue of disarming Hizbullah was a joint French-US objective even though he saw it primarily as a Lebanese issue. And his colleague, Catherine Colonna, Minister of European Affairs, went as far as to say that France condemned Hizbullah’s “illegal and violent actions” against Israel.

With this action, France is acknowledging that the disarmament of Hizbullah would have quite positive implications. It would ease tensions inside and outside Lebanon. Indeed, by giving authority back to the Lebanese Army, the rule of law could finally be restored and one could envision a potential peace treaty with Israel down the road.

This quite clear pattern of declarations from French officials constitutes quite a remarkable turnaround and means that French and US policies regarding Lebanon have almost completely converged. Of course, there is still the issue of putting Hizbullah on the EU’s terrorism list. It seems that France is not ready for that; even if it is getting closer than ever to associating the “T-word” (Terrorism) with Hizbullah. Indeed, Gerard Araud, French Ambassador to Israel declared on September 27, 2005 that France wants to give Hizbullah “a share in the democratic process and to understand that in this democratic process there’s no place for weapons and for terrorism.” But he also went on to say that putting Hizbullah on the terrorism list would only play into the hands of the Arab world, which would see this action as “an American-Zionist plot”. And France “does not want to give them that pleasure.”<sup>8</sup> The United States, in contrast, asserts that putting Hizbullah on the EU list would have several advantages, such as allowing the freezing of Hizbullah’s European financial assets and stopping fundraising for the organization throughout Europe.

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<sup>6</sup> *As-Safir* (Beirut), April 13, 2005; *Middle East Online*, April 13, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *The Daily Star* (Beirut), August 30, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> *Jerusalem Post*, September 28, 2005.

But after all is said and done, the main reason for this French-US diplomatic alliance on Hizbullah is to get at Hizbullah's two sponsors: Syria and Iran. Indeed, by toughening its stance against Hizbullah, France in particular is sending a new, clear and loud message to Damascus and Tehran. And it is no coincidence that France is simultaneously putting pressure on Syria to clean up its act in Lebanon and also on Iran to end its nuclear program. In closing the gap between them on the Lebanon issue, France and the United States are moving beyond the tensions caused by the Iraq War and proving that they are much more effective when they join forces.