

Hizbollah: a primer

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Hizballah, the Lebanese Shi'i movement whose militia is fighting the Israeli army in south Lebanon, has been cast misleadingly in much media coverage of the ongoing war. Much more than a militia, the movement is also a political party that is a powerful actor in Lebanese politics and a provider of important social services. Not a creature of Iranian and Syrian sponsorship, Hizballah arose to battle Israel's occupation of south Lebanon from 1982-2000 and, more broadly, to advocate for Lebanon's historically disenfranchised Shi'i Muslim community. While it has many political opponents in Lebanon, Hizballah is very much of Lebanon — a fact that Israel's military campaign is highlighting.

THE LEBANESE SHI'A AND THE LEBANESE STATE

In Lebanon, the state-society relationship is "confessional" and government power and positions are allocated on the basis of religious background. There are 18 officially recognized ethno-confessional communities in the country today. The original allocations, determined in 1943 in an unwritten National Pact between Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims at the end of the French mandate, gave the most power to a Maronite Christian president and a Sunni Muslim prime minister, with the relatively powerless position of speaker of Parliament going to a Shi'i Muslim. Other government positions and seats in Parliament were divided up using a 6:5 ratio of Christians to Muslims. These arrangements purportedly followed the population ratios in the 1932 census, the last census ever undertaken in the country.

This confessional system was stagnant, failing to take into consideration demographic changes. As the Shi'i population grew at a rapid pace in comparison to other groups, the inflexibility of the system exacerbated Shi'i under-representation in government. Meanwhile, sect became a means of gaining access to state resources, as the government shelled out money to establish sect-based welfare networks and institutions like schools and hospitals. Because the Shi'a were under-represented in government, they could channel fewer resources to their community, contributing to disproportionate poverty among Shi'i Lebanese. This effect was aggravated by the fact that Shi'i seats in Parliament were usually filled by feudal landowners and other insulated elites.

Until the 1960s, most of the Shi'i population in Lebanon lived in rural areas, mainly in the south and

in the Bekaa Valley, where living conditions did not approach the standards of the rest of the nation. Following a modernization program that established road networks and introduced cash-crop policies in the countryside, many Shi'i Muslims migrated to Beirut, settling in a ring of impoverished suburbs around the capital. The rapid urbanization that came with incorporation into the capitalist world economy further widened economic disparities within Lebanon.

ORIGINS

Initially, this growing urban population of mostly Shi'i poor in Lebanon was not mobilized along sectarian lines. In the 1960s and early 1970s, they made up much of the rank and file of the Lebanese Communist Party and the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party. Later, in the 1970s, Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, a charismatic cleric who had studied in the Iraqi shrine city of Najaf, began to challenge the leftist parties for the loyalty of Shi'i youth. Al-Sadr offered instead the "Movement of the Deprived," dedicated to attaining political rights for the dispossessed within the Lebanese polity. A militia branch of this movement, Amal, was founded at the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. Alongside al-Sadr, there were also other activist Lebanese Shi'i religious leaders, most of whom had also studied in Najaf, who worked to establish grassroots social and religious networks in the Shi'i neighborhoods of Beirut. Among them were Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, today one of the most respected "sources of emulation" among Shi'i Muslims in Lebanon and beyond, and Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah. A "source of emulation" (*marja' al-taqlid*) is a religious scholar of such widely recognized erudition that individual Shi'i Muslims seek and follow his advice on religious matters. Among the Shi'a, the title of sayyid denotes a claim of descent from Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

Between 1978 and 1982 a number of events propelled the nascent Shi'i mobilization forward and further divorced it from the leftist parties: two Israeli invasions of Lebanon, the unexplained disappearance of Musa al-Sadr and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In 1978, while on a visit to Libya, al-Sadr mysteriously vanished, and his popularity surged thereafter. That same year, to push back PLO fighters then based in Lebanon, Israel invaded the south, displacing 250,000 people. The initial consequence of these two events was Amal's revitalization, as Amal militiamen fought PLO guerrillas in south Lebanon. There were increasing Shi'i perceptions that the Lebanese left had failed, both in securing greater rights for the poor and in protecting the south from the fighting between the PLO and Israel. The following year, the Islamic Revolution in Iran set a new sort of example for Shi'i Muslims around the world, and provided an alternative worldview to Western liberal capitalism different from that espoused by the left.

The final, and doubtless the most important, ingredient in this cauldron of events was the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. This time Israeli troops, aiming to expel the PLO from Lebanon entirely, marched north and laid siege to West Beirut. Tens of thousands of Lebanese were killed and injured during the invasion, and another 450,000 people were displaced. Between September 16-18, 1982, under the protection and direction of the Israeli military and then Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, a Lebanese Phalangist militia unit entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, and raped, killed and maimed thousands of civilian refugees. Approximately one quarter of those refugees were Shi'i Lebanese who had fled the violence in the south. The importance of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon to the formation of Hizballah cannot be underestimated.

Following the events of 1982, many prominent members of Amal left the party, which had become increasingly involved in patronage politics and detached from the larger struggles against poverty and Israeli occupation. In these years, a number of small, armed groups of young men organized

under the banner of Islam emerged in the south, the Bekaa Valley and the suburbs of Beirut. These groups were dedicated to fighting the Israeli occupation troops, and also participated in the Lebanese civil war, which by this time had engaged over 15 militias and armies. Initial military training and equipment for the Shi'i militias was provided by Iran. Over time, these groups coalesced into Hizballah, though the formal existence of the "Party of God" and its armed wing, the Islamic Resistance, were not announced until February 16, 1985, in an "Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World."

STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Since 1985, Hizballah has developed a complex internal structure. In the 1980s, a religious council of prominent leaders called the majlis al-shura was formed. This seven-member council included branches for various aspects of the group's functioning, including financial, judicial, social, political and military committees. There were also local regional councils in Beirut, the Bekaa and the south. Toward the end of the Lebanese civil war, as Hizballah began to enter Lebanese state politics, two other decision-making bodies were established, an executive council and a politburo.

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah is often described as "the spiritual leader" of Hizballah. Both Fadlallah and the party have always denied that relationship, however, and in fact, for a time there was a rift between them over the nature of the Shi'i Islamic institution of the marja'iyya. The marja'iyya refers to the practice and institution of following or emulating a marja' al-taqlid. Fadlallah believes that religious scholars should work through multiple institutions, and should not affiliate with a single political party or be involved in affairs of worldly government. In these beliefs, he is close to traditional Shi'i jurisprudence, and distant from the concept of velayat-e faqih (rule of the clerics) promulgated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran.

Hizballah and its majlis al-shura officially follow Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the successor to Khomeini as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but individual supporters or party members are free to choose which marja' to follow, and many emulate Fadlallah instead. The point is that political allegiance and religious emulation are two separate issues that may or may not overlap for any single person.

Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah is the current political leader of Hizballah. While he is also a religious scholar, and also studied at Najaf, he does not rank highly enough to be a marja' al-taqlid and instead is a religious follower of Khamenei. Nasrallah became Hizballah's Secretary-General in 1992, after Israel assassinated his predecessor, Sayyid 'Abbas al-Musawi, along with his wife and 5 year-old son. Nasrallah is widely viewed in Lebanon as a leader who "tells it like it is" — even by those who disagree with the party's ideology and actions. It was under his leadership that Hizballah committed itself to working within the state and began participating in elections, a decision that alienated some of the more revolution-oriented clerics in the leadership.

HIZBALLAH AND THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, Hizballah is generally associated with the 1983 bombings of the US embassy, the Marine barracks and the French-led multinational force headquarters in Beirut. The second bombing led directly to the US military's departure from Lebanon. The movement is also cited by the State Department in connection with the kidnappings of Westerners in Lebanon and the hostage crisis that led to the Iran-contra affair, the 1985 hijacking of a TWA flight and bombings of the Israeli embassy and cultural center in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s. These associations are the

stated reasons for the presence of Hizballah's name on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations. In 2002, then Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage famously described Hizballah as the "A-Team of terrorists," possessing a "global reach," and suggested that "maybe al-Qaeda is actually the B-Team." Hizballah's involvement in these attacks remains a matter of contention, however. Even if their involvement is accepted, it is both inaccurate and unwise to dismiss Hizballah as "terrorists."

There are several major reasons for this. First, Hizballah's military activity has generally been committed to the goal of ending the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Since the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal, they have largely operated within tacit, but mutually understood "rules of the game" for ongoing, low-level border skirmishes with Israel that avoid civilian casualties. In addition, Hizballah has grown and changed significantly since its inception, and has developed into both a legitimate Lebanese political party and an umbrella organization for myriad social welfare institutions.

Another aspect of the US listing of Hizballah on the terrorist list is related to the group's reputation as undertaking numerous "suicide attacks" or "martyrdom operations." In fact, of the hundreds of military operations undertaken by the group during the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon, only 12 involved the intentional death of a Hizballah fighter. At least half of the "suicide attacks" against Israeli occupying forces in Lebanon were carried out by members of secular and leftist parties.

A third element in the US insistence on labeling Hizballah a terrorist group is related to the notion that Hizballah's *raison d'être* is the destruction of Israel, or "occupied Palestine," as per the party's rhetoric. This perspective is supported by the 1985 Open Letter, which includes statements such as, "Israel's final departure from Lebanon is a prelude to its final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation." One might question the feasibility of such a project, particularly given the great asymmetry in military might and destructive power that is now on display. Hizballah's large-scale rocket barrages of July 2006 commenced after the Israeli bombardment had begun (there was a smaller diversionary rocket attack in the Galilee on the morning of July 12, just prior to the cross-border raid to capture Israeli soldiers). Those barrages have thus far killed 19 civilians and damaged numerous buildings — nothing like the devastation and death wrought by Israeli aircraft in Lebanon. There is also reason to question Hizballah's intent, despite frequent repetition of the Open Letter rhetoric. Prior to May 2000, almost all of Hizballah's military activity was focused on freeing Lebanese territory of Israeli occupation. The cross-border attacks from May 2000 to July 2006 were small operations with tactical aims (Israel did not even respond militarily to all of them).

Hizballah's founding document also says: "We recognize no treaty with [Israel], no ceasefire and no peace agreements, whether separate or consolidated." This language was drafted at the time when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon had just given rise to the Hizballah militia. Augustus R. Norton, author of several books and articles on Hizballah, notes that, "While Hizballah's enmity for Israel is not to be dismissed, the simple fact is that it has been tacitly negotiating with Israel for years." Hizballah's indirect talks with Israel in 1996 and 2004 and their stated willingness to arrange a prisoner exchange today all indicate realism on the part of party leadership.

RESISTANCE, POLITICS AND RULES OF THE GAME

In 1985, Israel withdrew from most of Lebanon, but continued to occupy the southern zone of the country, controlling approximately ten percent of Lebanon using both Israeli soldiers and a proxy

Lebanese militia, the Southern Lebanese Army (SLA). Hizballah's Islamic Resistance took the lead, though there were other contingents, in fighting that occupation. The party also worked to represent the interests of the Shi'a in Lebanese politics.

The Lebanese civil war came to an end in 1990, after the signing of the Ta'if Agreement in 1989. The Ta'if Agreement reasserted a variation of the National Pact, allotting greater power to the prime minister and increasing the number of Muslim seats in government. Yet while the actual numerical strength of confessional groups in Lebanon is sharply contested, conservative estimates note that by the end of the civil war, Shi'i Muslims made up at least one third of the population, making them the largest confessional community. Other estimates are much higher.

When the first post-war elections were held in Lebanon in 1992, many of the various militia groups (which had often grown out of political parties) reverted to their political party status and participated. Hizballah also chose to participate, declaring its intention to work within the existing Lebanese political system, while keeping its weapons to continue its guerrilla campaign against the Israeli occupation in the south, as allowed by the Ta'if accord. In that first election, the party won eight seats, giving them the largest single bloc in the 128-member parliament, and its allies won an additional four seats. From that point on, Hizballah developed a reputation — even among those who disagree vehemently with their ideologies — for being a “clean” and capable political party on both the national and local levels. This reputation is especially important in Lebanon, where government corruption is assumed, clientelism is the norm and political positions are often inherited. As a group, Lebanese parliamentarians are the wealthiest legislature in the world.

While the party's parliamentary politics were generally respected, levels of national support for the activities of the Islamic Resistance in the south fluctuated over the years. Israeli attacks on Lebanese civilians and infrastructure — including the destruction of power plants in Beirut in 1996, 1999 and 2000 — generally contributed to increases in national support for the Resistance. This was especially true after Israel bombed a UN bunker where civilians had taken refuge in Qana on April 18, 1996, killing 106 people.

The occupation of south Lebanon was costly for Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak made withdrawal a campaign promise in 1999, and later announced that it would take place by July 2000. A month and a half before this deadline, after SLA desertions and the collapse of potential talks with Syria, Barak ordered a chaotic withdrawal from Lebanon, taking many by surprise. At 3 am on May 24, 2000, the last Israeli soldier stepped off Lebanese soil and locked the gate at the Fatima border crossing behind him. Many predicted that lawlessness, sectarian violence and chaos would fill the void left by the Israeli occupation forces and the SLA, which rapidly collapsed in Israel's wake. Those predictions proved false as Hizballah maintained order in the border region.

Despite withdrawal, a territorial dispute continues over a 15-square mile border region called the Shebaa Farms that remains under Israeli occupation. Lebanon and Syria assert that the mountainside is Lebanese land, while Israel and the UN have declared it part of the Golan Heights and, therefore, Syrian territory (though occupied by Israel). Since 2000, Lebanon has also been awaiting the delivery from Israel of the map for the locations of over 300,000 landmines the Israeli army planted in south Lebanon. Unstated “rules of the game,” building on an agreement not to target civilians written after the Qana attack in 1996, have governed the Israeli-Lebanese border dispute since 2000. Hizballah attacks on Israeli army posts in the occupied Shebaa Farms, for example, would be answered by limited Israeli shelling of Hizballah outposts and sonic booms over Lebanon.

Both sides, on occasion, have broken the “rules of the game,” though UN observer reports of the numbers of border violations find that Israel has violated the Blue Line between the countries ten

times more frequently than Hizballah has. Israeli forces have kidnapped Lebanese shepherds and fishermen. Hizballah abducted an Israeli businessman in Lebanon in October 2000, claiming that he was a spy. In January 2004, through German mediators, Hizballah and Israel concluded a deal whereby Israel released hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the businessman and the bodies of three Israeli soldiers. At the last minute, Israeli officials defied the Supreme Court's ruling and refused to hand over the last three Lebanese prisoners, including the longest-held detainee, Samir al-Qantar, who has been in jail for 27 years for killing three Israelis after infiltrating the border. At that time, Hizballah vowed to open new negotiations at some point in the future.

HIZBALLAH'S NATIONALISM

As noted, Hizballah officially follows Khamenei as the party's marja', and has maintained a warm relationship with Iran dating to the 1980s, when Iran helped to train and arm the militia. Hizballah consults with Iranian leaders, and receives an indeterminate amount of economic aid. Iran has also continued military aid to the Islamic Resistance, including some of the rockets in the militia's arsenal. This relationship does not, however, mean that Iran dictates Hizballah's policies or decision-making, or can necessarily control the actions of the party. Meanwhile, Iranian efforts to infuse the Lebanese Shi'a with a pan-Shi'i identity centered on Iran have run up against the Arab identity and increasing Lebanese nationalism of Hizballah itself.

A similar conclusion can be reached about Syria, often viewed as so close to Hizballah that the party's militia is dubbed Syria's "Lebanese card" in its efforts to regain the Golan Heights from Israel. While the party keeps good relations with the Syrian government, Syria does not control or dictate Hizballah decisions or actions. Party decisions are made independently, in accordance with Hizballah's view of Lebanon's interests and the party's own interests within Lebanese politics. After the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005, and the subsequent Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizballah's position was often inaccurately described as "pro-Syrian." In fact, the party's rhetoric was carefully chosen not to oppose Syrian withdrawal, but to recast it as a withdrawal that would not sever all ties with Lebanon, and that would take place under an umbrella of "gratitude."

There is no doubt that Hizballah is a nationalist party. Its view of nationalism differs from that of many Lebanese, especially from the Phoenician-origins nationalism espoused by the Maronite Christian right, and from the neo-liberal, US-backed nationalism of Hariri's party. Hizballah offers a nationalism that views Lebanon as an Arab state that cannot distance itself from causes like the Palestine question. Its political ideology maintains an Islamic outlook. The 1985 Open Letter notes the party's desire to establish an Islamic state, but only through the will of the people. "We don't want Islam to reign in Lebanon by force," the letter reads. The party's decision to participate in elections in 1992 underscored its commitment to working through the existing structure of the Lebanese state, and also shifted the party's focus from a pan-Islamic resistance to Israel toward internal Lebanese politics. Furthermore, since 1992, Hizballah leaders have frequently acknowledged the contingencies of Lebanon's multi-confessional society and the importance of sectarian coexistence and pluralism within the country. It should also be noted that many of Hizballah's constituents do not want to live in an Islamic state; rather, they want the party to represent their interests within a pluralist Lebanon.

The nationalist outlook of the party has grown throughout Hizballah's transition from resistance militia to political party and more. After the Syrian withdrawal, it became evident that the party would play a larger role in the Lebanese government. Indeed, in the 2005 elections, Hizballah

increased their parliamentary seats to 14, in a voting bloc with other parties that took 35. Also in 2005, for the first time, the party chose to participate in the cabinet, and currently holds the Ministry of Energy.

Hizballah does not regard its participation in government as contradicting its maintenance of a non-state militia. In fact, the first item on Hizballah's 2005 electoral platform pledged to "safeguard Lebanon's independence and protect it from the Israeli menace by safeguarding the Resistance, Hizballah's military wing and its weapons, in order to achieve total liberation of Lebanese occupied land." This stance places the party at odds with UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias" in September 2004, and with those political forces in Lebanon that seek to implement the resolution. Prior to the July events, Nasrallah and other party leaders attended a series of "national dialogue" meetings aimed at setting the terms for Hizballah's disarmament. The dialogue had not come to any conclusions by the beginning of the current violence, in part because of Hizballah's insistence that its arms were still needed to defend Lebanon.

But the party has a social platform as well, and views itself as representing not only Shi'i Lebanese, but also the poor more generally. The Amal militia formed by Sayyid Musa al-Sadr developed into a political party as well, and has been Hizballah's main political rival among Shi'i Lebanese, though they are now working in tandem. The longtime speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, Amal's leader, is the intermediary between Hizballah and diplomats inquiring about ceasefire terms and a prisoner exchange. The party also plays the usual political game in Lebanon, where candidates run on multi-confessional district slates rather than as individuals, and it allies (however temporarily) with politicians who do not back its program. In the 2005 parliamentary contests, the Sunni on Hizballah's slate in Sidon was Bahiyya al-Hariri, sister of the assassinated ex-premier. Since the elections, the strongest ally of the Shi'i movement has been the former general, Michel Aoun, the quintessentially "anti-Syrian" figure in Lebanese politics. Aoun's movement, along with Hizballah, was an important component of enormous demonstrations on May 10 in Beirut against the government's privatization plans, which would cost jobs in Lebanon's public sector.

SOCIAL WELFARE

Among the consequences of the Lebanese civil war were economic stagnation, government corruption and a widening gap between the ever shrinking middle class and the ever expanding ranks of the poor. Shi'i areas of Beirut also had to cope with massive displacement from the south and the Bekaa. In this economic climate, sectarian clientelism became a necessary survival tool.

A Shi'i Muslim social welfare network developed in the 1970s and 1980s, with key actors including al-Sadr, Fadlallah and Hizballah. Today, Hizballah functions as an umbrella organization under which many social welfare institutions are run. Some of these institutions provide monthly support and supplemental nutritional, educational, housing and health assistance for the poor; others focus on supporting orphans; still others are devoted to reconstruction of war-damaged areas. There are also Hizballah-affiliated schools, clinics and low-cost hospitals, including a school for children with Down's syndrome.

These social welfare institutions are located around Lebanon and serve the local people regardless of sect, though they are concentrated in the mainly Shi'i Muslim areas of the country. They are run almost entirely through volunteer labor, mostly that of women, and much of their funding stems from individual donations, orphan sponsorships and religious taxes. Shi'i Muslims pay an annual tithe called the khums, one fifth of the income they do not need for their own family's upkeep. Half

of this tithe is given to the care of the marja' they recognize. Since 1995, when Khamenei appointed Nasrallah and another Hizballah leader as his religious deputies in Lebanon, the khums revenues of Lebanese Shi'a who follow Khamenei have gone directly into Hizballah's coffers. These Shi'a also give their zakat, the alms required of all Muslims able to pay, to Hizballah's vast network of social welfare institutions. Much of this financial support comes from Lebanese Shi'a living abroad.

WHO SUPPORTS HIZBALLAH?

As one of Israel's stated goals in the current war is the "removal" of Hizballah from the south, it is critical to note that the party has a broad base of support throughout the south and the country — a base of support that is not necessarily dependent on sect. Being born to a Shi'i Muslim family, or even being a practicing and pious Shi'i Muslim, does not determine one's political affiliation.

Nor does one's socio-economic status. It is sometimes assumed that Hizballah is using its social organizations to bribe supporters, or that these organizations exist solely to prop up "terrorist activities." These views both betray a simplistic view of the party. A more accurate reading would suggest that the party's popularity is based in part on its dedication to the poor, but also on its political platforms and record in Lebanon, its Islamist ideologies, and its resistance to Israeli occupation and violations of Lebanese sovereignty.

Hizballah's popularity is based on a combination of ideology, resistance and an approach to political-economic development. For some, Hizballah's ideologies are viewed as providing a viable alternative to a US-supported government and its neo-liberal economic project in Lebanon and as an active opposition to the role of the US in the Middle East. Its constituents are not only the poor, but increasingly come from the middle classes and include many upwardly mobile, highly educated Lebanese. Many of its supporters are Shi'i Muslim, but there are also many Lebanese of other religious backgrounds who support the party and/or the Islamic Resistance.

"Hizballah supporter" is itself a vague phrase. There are official members of the party and/or the Islamic Resistance; there are volunteers in party-affiliated social welfare organizations; there are those who voted for the party in the last election; there are those who support the Resistance in the current conflict, whether or not they agree with its ideology. To claim ridding south Lebanon of Hizballah as a goal risks aiming for the complete depopulation of the south, tantamount to ethnic cleansing of the area.

In terms of the current conflict, while Lebanese public opinion seems to be divided as to whether blame should be placed on Hizballah or Israel for the devastation befalling the country, this division does not necessarily fall along sectarian lines. More importantly, there are many Lebanese who disagree with Hizballah's Islamist ideologies or political platforms, and who believe that their July 12 operation was a mistake, but who are supportive of the Islamic Resistance and view Israel as their enemy. These are not mutually exclusive positions. One of the effects of the Israeli attacks on selected areas of Beirut has been to widen the class divides in the Lebanon, which may serve to further increase Hizballah's popularity among those who already felt alienated from Hariri-style reconstruction and development.

THE CURRENT VIOLENCE

On July 12, 2006, Hizballah fighters attacked an Israeli army convoy and captured two soldiers. The party stated that they had captured these soldiers for use as bargaining chips in indirect

negotiations for the release of the three Lebanese detained without due process and in defiance of the Supreme Court in Israel. As noted, there is precedent for such negotiations. The raid had been planned for months, and the party made at least one earlier attempt to capture soldiers. Nasrallah had stated earlier that 2006 would be the year when negotiations would take place for the release of the three remaining Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails. In a July 20 interview on al-Jazeera, he also stated that other leaders in Lebanon were aware of his intention to order a capture attempt, though not of the details of this particular operation.

After the capture of the soldiers, Israel unleashed an aerial assault on Lebanon's cities and infrastructure on a scale unseen since the 1982 invasion. This attack was accompanied by a naval blockade, and more recently, a ground invasion. The ground invasion is being strongly opposed by Hizballah fighters along with fighters from other parties. Both the Lebanese Communist Party and Amal have announced the deaths of fighters in battle. At least 516 Lebanese have been killed, mostly civilians; the Lebanese government's tally of the dead stands at 750 or more. A UN count says one third of the dead are children. In several cases, villagers who were warned by Israeli leaflets or automated telephone messages to leave their homes were killed when their vehicles were targeted shortly thereafter. On July 30, Israeli planes bombed a three-story house being used as a shelter in Qana, killing at least 57 civilians and reawakening memories of the 1996 Qana massacre. The Lebanese government estimates that 2,000 people have been wounded since July 12, while as many as 750,000 people have been displaced from their homes. Hizballah has responded, since early on in the Israeli bombing campaign, by firing hundreds of rockets into Israel, killing 19 civilians thus far. An additional 33 Israeli soldiers have been killed in combat.

In Lebanon, entire villages in the south have been flattened, as have whole neighborhoods in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Runways and fuel tanks at Beirut International Airport, roads, ports, power plants, bridges, gas stations, TV transmitters, cell phone towers, a dairy and other factories, and wheat silos have been targeted and destroyed, as well as trucks carrying medical supplies, ambulances, and minivans full of civilians. The UN is warning of a humanitarian crisis, and has indicated that war crimes investigations are in order for the targeting of civilians in both Lebanon and Israel. Human Rights Watch has documented Israel's use of artillery-fired cluster munitions, which it believes "may violate the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks contained in international humanitarian law" because the "bomblets" spread widely and often fail to explode on impact, in effect becoming land mines. Eyewitnesses in Beirut report that the pattern of destruction in hard-hit neighborhoods resembles that caused by thermobaric weapons, or "vacuum bombs," whose blast effects are innately indiscriminate. Lebanese doctors receiving dead and wounded have alleged that Israeli bombs contain white phosphorus, a substance that, if used in offensive operations, is considered an illegal chemical weapon.

Israel's initially stated goal of securing the release of the two captured soldiers has faded from Israeli discourse and given way to two additional stated goals: the disarmament or at least "degrading" of Hizballah's militia, as well as its removal from south Lebanon. According to an article in the July 21 San Francisco Chronicle, "a senior Israeli army officer" had presented plans for an offensive with these goals to US and other diplomats over a year before Hizballah's capture of the two soldiers. Though Israel is not in compliance with several UN resolutions, the Israeli army appears to be attempting singlehandedly — though with US approval — to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1559.

It is unclear how the aerial bombardment of infrastructure and the killing of Lebanese civilians can lead to any of these goals, especially as support for Hizballah and the Islamic Resistance appears to be increasing. Outrage at Israel's actions trumps ideological disagreement with Hizballah for many Lebanese at this point, and as such, it is likely that support for the party will continue to grow.

P.S.

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