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Michele Dunne, Editor

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### **Lebanon: Hizbollah's Enduring Myth**

*Emile El-Hokayem*

Serious thinking about reforming Lebanon's fragile and inefficient system of governance has been among the casualties of the recent war. Political reform has never topped the agenda of Lebanon's leaders, including the one actor most people believe would benefit most: Hizbollah. A closer look at the reasoning behind Hizbollah's political strategy can explain why it is unenthusiastic about amending Lebanon's confessional system, and how it uses its special status to justify resistance against Israel and avoid disarmament.

Hizbollah, the Shiite movement that has become Lebanon's dominant party, realizes that Lebanon's sectarian nature will not allow it to dominate the country's consensus-based politics. This sets Hizbollah apart from other Islamist organizations in the region, some of which can realistically hope to come to power if free elections were held. Hizbollah has recalibrated its ambitions accordingly. It lifted its initial opposition to the 1989 Taif Accord (which ended Lebanon's civil war and redistributed power among sects) and gradually integrated into Lebanese political and social life.

Hizbollah's pragmatism, however, should not be mistaken for genuine acceptance of Lebanon's confessional system and the constraints that come with it. Since Hizbollah cannot tear down the formal sectarian power-sharing structure and impose its preferred system of governance, the party has worked around this obstacle by formally accepting the Taif state while developing ways to remain, in effect, above the system.

Hizbollah has placed itself above the Lebanese political system, considering itself purer and more principled than other parties, which are dismissed as incompetent, corrupt, and perfidious. Furthermore, Hizbollah has always called for political and social reform in its electoral platforms, and it has been rightly praised for its good management practices, which stand in stark contrast to the corrupt and nepotistic ways of Lebanon's traditional elite.

Because of this contrast, Hizbollah is able to avoid sharing the blame for Lebanon's ills, even though it is the country's pivotal party and holds considerable sway over domestic and foreign policies. It is also able to cultivate the notion that some of its policy choices, including perpetual resistance against Israel, cannot be questioned.

Hizbollah, according to conventional wisdom, exists in part to right the wrongs of political underrepresentation and economic disenfranchisement of Lebanon's large Shiite community. It would therefore make sense to expect Hizbollah to champion political reform; after all, more institutionalized Shiite power would translate into more Hizbollah power. But to believe that Hizbollah seeks to advocate Shiite rights within the state framework is to fundamentally misread its objectives. Reform would actually undermine the political strategy that has enabled Hizbollah to maintain its special status and impose its objectives on the rest of the country. Hizbollah has built parallel quasi-governmental structures that provide its followers with a sense of empowerment in lieu of advancing their interests within the framework of the Lebanese state—not because Hizbollah cannot, but because it prefers not to. In other words, Hizbollah by far prefers being a state within a state to any alternative, barring perhaps a complete (and unlikely) domination of Lebanon's political scene.

In Lebanon's consensus-based politics, monopolizing Shiite representation guarantees that no combination of political forces can compel Hizbollah to abide by rules or principles it deems contrary to its interests, unless its opponents are willing to risk civil war. By promoting the belief that its disarmament would be tantamount to turning back the clock on Shiite progress, Hizbollah has built a sectarian shield for its weapons.

Thus, Hizbollah has exploited Lebanon's openness and democratic inclinations. To be fair, the rest of Lebanon's political elite is also not serious about political reform. Yet the difference between Hizbollah and Lebanon's other politicians is fundamental; the former hijacks the system for ideological reasons and the latter abuse it to promote parochial political and economic interests.

Hizbollah cannot be a reformist force in Lebanese politics so long as it seeks to remain inside and above the system at the same time. Reform should rank high on the list of Lebanese politicians' priorities, because calling Hizbollah's bluff by pointing out that it does not seek institutional reform provides an opportunity to undermine one of Hizbollah's main levers of power and influence.

Such an emphasis on reform is unlikely, however, because after the recent conflict Lebanon has entered a new era of political paralysis and brinksmanship.

The failure of the dialogue initiative launched recently by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri shows Lebanese politicians' lack of commitment to addressing the fundamental issues plaguing the country. Such initiatives actually feed the deadlock by turning the focus of Lebanese to details such as timing, topics, participants, and format. The reverberations of the tense regional environment will only exacerbate this sad state of affairs by providing more opportunities for grandstanding and finger-pointing at the expense of a much-needed dialogue over reform.

*Emile El-Hokayem is a research fellow at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington DC.*