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Lebanon: The Paradox of Hezbollah's Arms

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There is no easy solution to the predicament of Hizbollah's armed status. Thus far, the organization and the new Lebanese government have resisted calls by the United States and the international community to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, which urges the state to disarm all militias. If anything, Hizbollah's resolve to keep hold of its weapons indefinitely has only hardened over the past months, with the party now claiming that its resistance role surpasses that of mere "liberation" and includes ongoing strategic "defense," while rejecting any notion of subsuming its arms under the central command of the Lebanese army. For its part, the Lebanese government has followed the path of its predecessors by endorsing the resistance in its policy statement, thereby perpetuating the uneasy yet thus far stable formula of an armed group that is at once auxiliary and extraneous to the Lebanese army.

In response, the Bush administration has anchored its demands for Hizbollah's demilitarization within the framework of its democracy agenda for the region, by repeating the "there can only be one authority in a democracy" mantra while continuing to brand the movement a terrorist organization. Yet, as problematic as the preservation of Hizbollah's arms is, the prospect of attempting to disarm the organization against its will through the use of force or immense political pressure risks further radicalizing the organization and the Shiite community behind it. Such a development would not bode well for Lebanon's stability, or by extension for the U.S. democratic initiative in the region.

The paradox is that Hizbollah's arms actually have been conducive to its full political integration and resultant moderation in several ways. The need to legitimize its resistance was one of the principal motivations that induced Hizbollah to enter the political mainstream in 1992, when it contested the first post-war parliamentary elections. With the recent withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon and the consequent loss of Syrian political cover, Hizbollah's arms lay exposed to the pressure brought on by Resolution 1559. In order to transform the Lebanese state into a substitute security net that could allow Hizbollah to shield its resistance to Western diktat, Hizbollah was compelled to reach out to other groups during the latest parliamentary elections, for example striking electoral alliances with constituent groups of the Sunni-Christian-Druze coalition in exchange for securing their public pledges to support its

resistance priority. In this connection, Hizbollah opened up to all major forces across the political spectrum, even reconciling with the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces, a one-time ally of Israel. Hizbollah then took the unprecedented step of participating in the Lebanese government both indirectly, through a minister close to the party and directly, by appointing a minister from within its own ranks. In effect, the preservation of Hizbollah's arms has necessitated its adoption of a two-pronged strategy of full submersion in the democratic arena and rapprochement with groups of all political persuasions.

If Hizbollah's arms are the condition for, rather than the obstacle to, its political moderation, it logically follows that any attempt to bring about the group's involuntary disarmament will deprive it of an incentive to maintain this stance. Subjected to strong pressure to disarm, the party might threaten to pursue radical changes in the political system such as redressing Shiite political under-representation by pursuing the abolition of political confessionalism, a move sure to meet with strong protest from Lebanese Christians. It is also possible that Hizbollah and the Shiite community might not content themselves with political steps to resist disarmament, or might decide that no political measures could compensate for the loss of arms. Hizbollah's armed activities have fostered a culture of resistance among the Shiites, some 95 percent of whom support the resistance according to a survey conducted in June by the Beirut Centre for Research and Information. Hizbollah leaders have repeatedly raised the specter of renewed civil war should the organization be driven underground.

So long as the United States actively pursues the disarmament of Hizbollah alongside its promotion of democratic reforms, it runs the risk of achieving neither. Hizbollah's disarmament should be the voluntary result of an internal Lebanese dialogue that is free from foreign intervention. Such a dialogue can only come about once the justification for Hizbollah's arms—the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict—is resolved via a comprehensive regional peace agreement.

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