



HIZBALLAH THROUGH THE FOG OF THE LEBANON WAR

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUGUSTUS RICHARD
NORTON

JPS: Before going into recent events, we thought it would be useful to take a look at Hizballah on the eve of the July war and especially what has happened in the years after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. Let's begin with Hizballah's popularity in the south compared to what it was in 2000.

Norton: The year 2000, more particularly May 2000, was an amazing moment because the impossible happened: the Israeli occupation ended. Officially, the occupation began in 1982, but actually the Israelis moved in during their so-called Litani operation in 1978 and never left. They simply turned the area they occupied over to Sa'd Haddad and what became the South Lebanese Army (SLA), the militia that Israel trained, paid, and closely supervised—literally a proxy of Israeli power. So by the time Israel withdrew, there had been twenty-two years of continuous occupation.

The incredible jubilation of May 2000 lasted into 2001 and even 2002. And not just in south Lebanon. Hizballah's success was very widely celebrated throughout the country in 2000–2001, but within a couple of years support for Hizballah outside the Shi'i community was dissipating dramatically. Many Christians, Sunnis, and others began to question why the militia component of Hizballah continued to exist.

I would say that for the people living in south Lebanon, there was much less of a tendency to ask this question. When I say the people in the south, I'm not just talking about the Shi'a. Shi'i Muslims predominate in the south, but it's a mixed population. You have a variety of Christians, Druze, and Muslims in Marja'uyun, for example, Sunnis, Christians, and Shi'a in Tyre, Maronites living in villages along the border such as Ramaysh, Druze in Hasbaya, and so on. Moreover, there is more ideological diversity than outsiders typically understand. All of these people had vivid first-hand experiences of the Israeli occupation, and they tended to buy into the idea that they needed to be defended militarily. This may have been less intensely felt by the Maronites than the Shi'a, for example, but still, there was a lot less of a tendency in southern

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Lebanon to question Hizballah's military role than there would be, say, in the Ashrafiyya neighborhood of east Beirut.

JPS: There were fears that the Christians in the south were going to be mistreated when the occupation ended, especially because of the SLA.

Norton: This did not materialize. In early 2000, the run-up to Israel's unilateral withdrawal, there was a lot of confusion and dire warnings, and what I remember clearly from this period—I happened to be living in Beirut at the time—was the extent to which Hasan Nasrallah's statements stood out for the clarity of their analysis and his calm assurances of Hizballah's careful preparations for the aftermath. He emphasized that there were not going to be retaliatory killings and revenge attacks. Nonetheless, many were predicting widespread chaos, slaughter of collaborators, and so on. In fact, apart from a few incidents that mainly involved beatings—not even serious injuries, much less deaths—there was an incredible degree of calm. This is all the more remarkable in that immediately after the Israel pullout former residents flooded into the south to take possession of their liberated homes and villages. At the prison of al-Khiyam, a horrendous place run by the SLA in close collaboration with Israel, and the site of much mistreatment not to mention torture, you had people literally tearing down doors with their bare hands to free the prisoners. Yet there was very little associated violence and certainly none of the revenge killings so widely anticipated. Many of the SLA people fled to Israel with their families. Those who remained were often tried for collaboration, typically being given sentences of four or five years and in some cases advised not to return to their villages for a time. But overall this will go down as a remarkably orderly and humane period, especially when measured against the history of internecine violence that scarred Lebanon for much of the past few decades.

JPS: Where did Syria's relationship with Hizballah fit into all this?

Norton: In the period before the Israeli withdrawal, it was quite clear that for Syria, with which Hizballah already had a strategic relationship, the conflict in south Lebanon had been very useful. It was a way of reminding the Israelis that Syria was a player and had to be taken into account. As you know, the Golan Heights had been occupied since 1967, and for the most part had been absolutely quiet; the disengagement agreement that U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger negotiated in 1974 after the October war turned out to be extremely stable, and during all those decades the most serious incidents were violations of the disengagement lines by sheep and goats. The UN force on the Golan—the UN Disengagement Observation Force (UNDOF)—actually has a report form referred to as a “Sheep-rep” or “Goat-rep” because of UNDOF's frequent coordinating role to help shepherds recollect their flocks that transgressed the lines. So the big question for Syria in spring 2000 was: now that the Israelis are withdrawing, how are we going to be able to remind Israel that we exist and have diplomatic and territorial claims to settle?

JPS: This must be where the Shaba' Farms come in.

Norton: Yes indeed. During that spring of 2000 I would bet that very few Lebanese had ever heard of the so-called Shaba` Farms. I remember going to the village of Shaba` in March of that year, almost by chance. I hadn't been there since I had been a UN observer almost twenty years before, and I went out of simple curiosity to see what had become of this relatively isolated part of south Lebanon once famous as "Fatahland" for the fighting between the Palestinians and Israel. What I found was a place where many young men were driving around in fancy, very sporty cars, and I was quickly reminded that this was a great smuggling center. There was no attempt to hide what was going on: basically they were smuggling cigarettes purchased tax free through UN lines on the Golan—they didn't say where they were getting them, but obviously it was from Israel. They would load them on donkeys (about 100 cartons per donkey) for a pretty grueling six-hour hike, link up with trucks in Syria, and then transship the goods into Lebanon; it was impossible to smuggle them directly from the occupied zone into Lebanon because of the Lebanese army checkpoints. Depending on the brand, they'd make upwards of two dollars per carton, because of the higher cigarette taxes in Lebanon. The other thing that struck me on that visit was that although the area was occupied by Israel, there were no soldiers to be seen either in Shaba` or the nearby town of Shuba. On the other hand, people talked about the fact that in the past they had been able to reach their farms in the "occupied" zone without difficulty, but that increasingly access was being denied by the Israelis. It seems that earlier there hadn't even been a fence.

Anyway, when I returned to Beirut from that visit already there was some early rumbling about the so-called Shaba` Farms. This is an area that belongs to Lebanese landowners—in fact I have list of all the Lebanese landowners—but is physically located within the recognized boundaries of the occupied Golan Heights, and is therefore officially part of Syria. It was Nabih Birri, the head of the Shi'i Amal movement and an ally of Syria, who began to talk about the Shaba` Farms in late March or early April, reputedly following a nudge from Damascus, which clearly had discovered the issue as a way of continuing its influence. Still, as late as early May 2000, senior officials in Hizballah still didn't know very much about the area. Incidentally, there are a number of other border anomalies along the Syrian-Lebanese border, including Lebanese villages within Syria and Syrian villages within Lebanon. There was once a joint Lebanese-Syrian commission to address these anomalies but it grew moribund.

The summer after Israel's withdrawal, I understand from people who were involved that there was a serious debate within Hizballah about whether to turn their focus on the Lebanese political scene and themes such as corruption or to maintain their resistance posture both in Lebanon and the Middle East. After the internal party discussions affirmed the latter, Nasrallah consulted with the Iranian *rakbar* (or leader) Ayatollah `Ali Khamenei in Iran, who gave his blessing for a continuation of the resistance, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian

theater. Shaba` Farms turned out to be the issue that made it possible to maintain this posture on the grounds that the withdrawal had not been complete.

That fall, Hizballah launched its first operation in the Shaba` Farms area, which resulted in the capture of three Israeli soldiers whose vehicle was ambushed. They all died, either on the spot or later from their wounds, and their bodies were finally returned in an exchange in January 2004. It was after that operation that Israel resumed the routine violations of Lebanese airspace and territorial waters that it had ceased in May or June 2000, when it was seeking UN certification of its withdrawal under the terms of Security Council resolution 425. From then on, there were regular overflights of Lebanese territory, sonic booms over Beirut, intelligence collecting drones, and so on. In time, Hizballah began firing anti-aircraft weapons at Israeli planes violating Lebanese airspace. As they were firing south, in the direction that the planes were coming from, the ammunition rounds would land in Israel. Hizballah also began firing Katyushas, mostly into the occupied Golan Heights, but there were also periodic episodes of Katyusha firings into Israel proper. There were several dozen incidents over the last six years, but according to Israeli sources in almost every case the rockets were fired by Palestinian *fida'iyyin*, not by Hizballah.

JPS: Why didn't any of this lead to a conflagration?

Norton: To explain, let me backtrack a little. In the course of the Israeli-Hizballah fighting during the occupation, there developed a well-understood set of rules of the game. These became increasingly concrete in the 1990s, first as an oral understanding in 1993 and then actually written down in 1996. There was even an international monitoring apparatus established in Naqura, where UNIFIL was headquartered. Basically, the "rules" specified that Hizballah would not attack Israel per se and in return Israel would not attack Lebanese civilians and infrastructure.

This system of quid pro quo, the "rule box," continued to operate after Israel's withdrawal in 2000. During the six-year "interregnum" before July 2006, there were periodic episodes of violence but they could be clearly understood within the rules of the game. Most of the attacks took place in the Shaba` Farms area, that is, in occupied territory. These rules were so well established that you'd sometimes find Israeli or Lebanese officials or Hizballah being quoted in newspapers as saying that such and such an action was within the "rules of the game."

I've done a pretty careful reconstruction of the level of casualties on the Israeli side during the six years up to July 2006, and what it reveals is that nine Israeli soldiers were killed in the Shaba` Farms area. An additional eight Israeli soldiers were killed along the Blue Line demarcated by the UN after Israel's withdrawal. This makes a total of seventeen Israeli soldiers during that period, or less than three a year compared to about twenty-five a year during the occupation.

In terms of Israeli civilians—I knew the total was low but I didn't know how low until I made my study, using Israeli data. In this entire six-year period,

there was only one Israeli civilian fatality, a teenaged boy who was killed by one of those anti-aircraft rounds that I mentioned earlier. There was also an operation in 2002 involving two Palestinian fighters who managed to cross the border and ambushed six Israelis—five civilians and a soldier. Even though Hizballah was not directly involved, there's an argument for including these deaths, since it's difficult to imagine anyone crossing the border without some Hizballah knowledge or negligence. If they are counted, the total civilian deaths would be six.

JPS: What about Lebanese casualties?

Norton: I have been unable to get a precise tally of Lebanese civilian and Palestinian casualties for the 2000–2006 period, simply because the people who might have the data in Lebanon have had more pressing concerns as a result of the war and its aftermath. With regard to the Hizballah fighters, the deaths are probably about on the same scale as for the Israeli soldiers. On the civilian side, my hunch is that less than a score of Lebanese and Palestinians were killed. There was a sixteen-year-old shepherd shot near the Shaba` Farms and maybe a couple of similar incidents, but most of the civilian deaths were from cluster bombs or mine fields laid by the Israelis before withdrawing in 2000. Israel has turned over some maps of minefields, but many of the mined areas are still undocumented. Indeed, one of the demands that Hizballah has made in prisoner negotiations is for maps of the minefields. An equally serious problem is posed by cluster bombs. I have a friend, an optometrist from Nabatiya in the south, whose four-year-old son was killed by a cluster bomb when the family was picnicking in a quiet field near their home. Cluster bombs tend to look like these Japanese “transformer” robots, and the child picked one of these up and was fatally injured. (I should add that Israel seems to have “re-seeded” south Lebanon with cluster bombs, dispersing as many as a million of them in the last days of the summer war.)

So contrary to a lot of commentary in the West and Israel, basically the south was pretty quiet during these six years. Certainly, there was tension. There was harassing fire, aggressive patrolling, and heated rhetoric by both sides. There were Israel's sonic booms and constant overflights. And on the Lebanese side of the border there were billboards facing Israel with slogans in Hebrew saying things like “If you come back, we'll come back” and Hizballah-sponsored cross-border stone throwing at Israeli positions. This kind of thing might have gotten Israel's goat, but still it was in the nature of taunting. Basically, this was a very quiet, peaceful period by historical standards, and this was frequently commented on by Israeli officials prior to this summer. The more serious clashes tended to occur in the Shaba` area of the occupied Golan Heights. By the way, Israel calls the Shaba` area “Har Dov” and western journalists frequently, hearing the Hebrew name, have reported attacks in “Har Dov” as Hizballah attacks in Israel. I even heard the late Peter Jennings, who knew the region well, make the mistake.

JPS: During this six-year period, what happened to Hizballah's presence in the south?

Norton: I don't think there's any question but that it became more deeply rooted. Keep in mind that the government does not provide much, if any, of a safety net in Lebanon, and Hizballah offers both security and social services. This is a movement with lots of nonmilitary components—construction companies, schools, hospitals, dispensaries, financing organizations, and so on. These tend to be located in predominantly Shi'i areas, but they serve whoever walks in. When you go to a hospital or clinic, for example, you're not asked whether you are a Shi'i or what are your political views, but the kinds of questions you would be asked in any medical facility—namely, what are your symptoms. The way these places work is that you pay a small set fee, which gives you access to a full range of services simply by virtue of the fact that you're there as a patient. This is important in Lebanon because state facilities are often pretty poor. Without a state safety net if you don't have access to a relatively prosperous extended family, you're often out of luck.

JPS: What you seem to be saying is that although Hizballah is an eminently sectarian organization, it behaves in a kind of nonsectarian manner.

Norton: That's right. It's also unique in Lebanon in terms of its reputation for being noncorrupt, which is another reason it has become so rooted. In fact, many of the people I've known in the Shi'i community over the last quarter century began as partisans and often members of Amal. I'm thinking of middle class professional types—engineers, army officers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other educated people—who have migrated politically to Hizballah. It's not that they have suddenly had a religious epiphany. It has more to do with the fact that Amal unfortunately became a big patronage outfit not too unlike the *za'im* (or political boss) system that it had earlier fought against. In contrast, Hizballah is widely admired, even by nonmembers, not only as a resistance force but as an extremely efficient and clean political apparatus.

JPS: What can you say about Hizballah's relationship with the Lebanese state?

Norton: Hizballah's position is that it has assumed the role of defending Lebanon because the Lebanese *need* a means of defense. And in fact, since 1978 Israel has killed about 20,000 people in Lebanon. Many of these were Palestinian or Lebanese fighters, but thousands were simple civilians. This means, according to Hizballah, that there needs to be a deterrence to keep the Israelis from attacking Lebanon again—basically Israel has to know that if it is going to attack, there is going to be a response. Moreover, it is argued that Hizballah has more leeway to act than the army precisely because it is not directly connected to the state. I should add here that up to now there has never been a serious clash between Hizballah and the army (barring one episode in 1993 when the army fired on Hizballah-inspired demonstrators) and that Hizballah has always

taken care to deal with the army respectfully, as the legitimate representative of the Lebanese state.

In any case, when the current Lebanese government was formed in summer 2005, it officially endorsed Hizballah's argument that Lebanese territory needs to be defended and that there is a legitimate role for its "national resistance." Indeed, this was the quid pro quo for Hizballah's participation in the government following the spring 2005 elections. The importance of that formulation is that it removes Hizballah from the "militia" category and thereby exempts it from requirements to disarm either under the terms of the 1989 Ta'if accord or UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of 2004.

JPS: How did the Syrian and Iranian connection with Hizballah evolve during what you call the "interregnum" between 2000 and July 2006?

Norton: This is a complicated story and needs some background, but I'll try to simplify to the minimum. As you know, Iran made a major move toward fostering Hizballah when it introduced, with Syrian assent, some 1,500 Pasdaran (revolutionary guards) into the Biqa` Valley in Lebanon after Israel's invasion in summer 1982. (Smaller numbers of Pasdaran had been since 1979.) Hizballah's emergence from a cadre of young Lebanese clerics trained largely in Najaf and Karbala, Iraq, has been told elsewhere and I won't repeat it here. Many of these young men, including Hasan Nasrallah, were affiliated with Amal at that point. Suffice it to say that when Syria consented to the formation of the new organization in 1983 under the auspices of its ally, Iran, one of its main motives was to defeat the American project in Lebanon as well as to balance the influence of its Shi`i ally, the Amal movement. During the 1980s there was a lot of tension between Amal and Hizballah and between Hizballah and Syria. There was an incident in 1987 in which Syria captured a contingent of twenty-three Hizballah members, roughed them up, shaved their heads, and then killed them all. This was supposedly in retaliation for Hizballah's holding of a Syrian army major, his driver, and an assistant, during which the driver was killed, but the real message was to show who was boss. The Iranians protested, but the point had been made. In any case, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, President Rafsanjani and the new Iranian leadership for a number of reasons began to reorient their policy more toward the broader Shi`i community and Lebanon as a whole, distancing itself from militias.

It is important to mention that while the Syrians had a presence in Lebanon during the 1980s, you could not really say they had undisputed control of the political system then. That only happened in 1990, when the quid pro quo for Syria's symbolic participation in the U.S.-led coalition to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait was that the Americans looked the other way while the Syrians consolidated their grip on the Lebanese political system.

That was when Hizballah began to "strategically coordinate" its position with Damascus more closely. The relationship with Syria was never like the one with Iran. I always remember what a friend who was close to Hizballah told me one evening during a long discussion at his home in the southern

suburbs of Beirut. He was twirling the wedding ring on his finger, and he said: “I like my ring, but I like my finger better.” What he meant was that the ring, Syria, could come off, but that the connection to Iran, through his identity as a Shi`i Muslim, was organic. Because that connection goes back five centuries, to the introduction of Shi`a into Persia by the Safavis, when Shi`i clerics from Jabal Amal in Lebanon—which was then one of the most important centers of learning in the Shi`i world—went there and contributed to the establishment of the new regime. With Syria, on the other hand, it was a matter of geopolitics. But as Nabih Birri, among others, has said, you can avoid history some of the time, but you can never ignore geography.

JPS: How did these relationships evolve since 2000? Did one relationship grow at the expense of the other? You mentioned that post-Khomeini Iran began to orient its policies away from the militias. Did that change?

Norton: Over time, Iran conceded to Syria, as the power next door, the major voice in what happened in Lebanon, where no decision was taken without consultation with Ghazi Kanaan, who was basically Syria’s proconsul in Lebanon, or then Vice President `Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who had the Lebanon file until it was taken over by Bashar al-Asad. This was accepted by Iran. It was part of the constellation of power, and it never involved any contradictions because Syria and Iran have a close and mutually beneficial alliance. They worked together. When there were hostages, for example—which were almost always held by Shi`i Muslim groups directly or loosely connected to Hizballah—Iran was the key party in the release negotiations because of its organic relationship to these groups, but Syria always wanted to have some role, even if it was providing catering facilities. On the level of social relations, shared culture, Iran was always the more important, but Syria’s role was more immediate in everyday matters.

JPS: What about Hizballah’s weaponry? Isn’t the arms buildup from Iran?

Norton: Iran provided many of the weapons, but Syria is essential too because the arms are shipped there and brought to Lebanon overland. Syria and Iran work hand in glove with regard to Hizballah. There were moments of crisis, for example when the Syrians killed those Hizballah members in 1987, but the relationship has weathered those differences.

JPS: Besides the arms buildup, what military preparations has Hizballah been making in the last six years? How was it able to hone its skills after the occupation ended?

Norton: Of course, the occupation had been a fantastic training ground, during which Hizballah became an incredibly effective fighting force. By the end of the occupation, it had managed what is virtually unheard of in guerrilla warfare: it was basically at parity with Israel in terms of casualties: for every Israeli (or allied militiaman) killed, a little more than one Hizballah fighter died. Typically, the ratio of guerrilla to conventional army losses is ten to one. In fact, that point

of parity was an important argument in Israel for withdrawal. Hizballah spent the lives of its fighters frugally.

One of the salient features of the system, which is still in effect, is that the permanent full time cadre was quite small. During the occupation period, it was 450 or 500 men. Today it is probably between 1,000 and 1,200. Basically, it is a reserve system. People undergo periodic training and when they go out on an operation they just close their shops or businesses. It's an accordion and, drawing on reserves, it can stretch rather large. This needs to be contrasted with what the Palestinians did in south Lebanon in the 1970s. Basically, they built up a military force that was in many ways a replica of a conventional army with recognizable companies and battalions and so on. Thus, when the Israelis invaded in 1982 they were confronting an army, obviously not nearly as proficient or well armed as their own, but still an army, not a guerrilla force per se. Hizballah created something very different, which they were able to do because they are part of the social fabric of Lebanon, whereas the Palestinians were outsiders for the most part.

As for military preparations during the last six years, this is not something I have focused on in my research, but from what I understand there has been a stream of Hizballah fighters to Iran for military training. In addition, whereas the primary site for the religious training of Lebanese Shi`a has traditionally been Najaf and Karbala, young men from the south are traveling to Iran in larger numbers for religious training, especially to Qum. This latter pattern has been developing for more than a quarter century, and it reflects the availability of relatively generous stipends in the Iranian madrasas and the risks associated with living in Iraq, both under Saddam and since.

JPS: Speaking of religious training, I'm wondering whether Hizballah's religio-political component has become less pronounced as it has tried to appeal to a broader constituency—whether, for example, there is still reference to an Islamic state.

Norton: I think there is by now widespread recognition among leading Hizballah officials that an Islamic state in Lebanon is totally unrealizable. In the mid-1980s, there were famous debates on the matter between Iranian officials and Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, the preeminent Shi`i cleric in Lebanon, often described inaccurately as Hizballah's spiritual guide as though he held a formal office. Fadlallah has, in fact, avoided any link to any political organization as far as I can tell, but it is obvious that many members of Hizballah are enormously attracted to his rational approach to religious and social matters. In the debates in Iran—heated arguments, really—Fadlallah insisted that the Lebanese environment is not one in which an Islamic state can be created, that Lebanon is a mixed society with a strong secular component that makes the Islamic Republic model inapplicable. Other Lebanese clerics not associated with Hizballah made the same point. The late Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, for example, another revered Shi`i cleric, told me very emphatically, not only with regard to Lebanon but also in his critique of the

errors made by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria, that it was necessary to take into account the power of secular ideas—not that he was at all promoting secularism, but that it was a reality. It is quite clear now that Hizballah leaders like Nasrallah know that an Islamic state is not on the agenda. Even the “Open Letter to the Downtrodden” of 1985, which came out at a particularly militant moment in Hizballah’s history, addresses the fact that Islamic rule cannot be imposed, that there can be “no coercion in religion,” to quote the Qur’an (2:256), and that since Islamic rule would need to be accepted by the other Lebanese communities, it was not going to happen anytime soon, if ever.

JPS: Getting back to Hizballah’s relations with Syria, what has been the impact of Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon?

Norton: It is too early to tell in any definitive sense. Certainly, the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 was an important watershed, accelerating the momentum of the anti-Syrian opposition that culminated in the famous demonstration of 14 March at which about a million people—a quarter of the Lebanese population—turned out. But people often forget that Hizballah also mobilized a pretty significant crowd of 300,000 to 400,000 a week earlier, on 8 March. Actually, Hizballah’s crafting of the demonstration was deft: the mood was pro-Syrian but the message was basically “thank you and good-bye.” The point was to express gratitude for Syria’s “constructive role” but not to dissuade them from leaving. In this way, Hizballah could sustain its relationship with Syria while not contradicting the widespread national desire for the Syrians to leave. The two demonstrations illustrated the divide within the country between those who felt they had benefited from the Syrian presence and those that did not. And those that benefited, of course, included not only the Shi`a but segments of the Christian and Sunni elites, military and business.

JPS: When did Hizballah as a “state within a state” become a big issue among Lebanese?

Norton: Concern about Hizballah’s armed presence began to be expressed in 2002–2003, but it was especially after Hariri’s assassination in 2005 and the emergence of the “Cedar Revolution,” the largely non-Shi`i coalition of forces opposed to Syria’s overweening influence in Lebanon, that the slogan “state within a state” was shouted rather than whispered. Even so, President Emile Lahoud was still speaking about the need for an armed “resistance”—basically Hizballah. Despite Hizballah’s pro-Syrian stance, it bears recalling that the movement did join the government dominated by the Cedar Revolution forces in early summer 2005. One of Hizballah’s motives for doing so was no doubt the idea that it could better divert demands for its disarmament from within the government. And as I mentioned earlier, the government actually endorsed Hizballah’s resistance role as the condition for its participation in the government. But many of the people who for political reasons were making public statements in support of the resistance, as *individuals* were more and

more worried about the “state within the state” idea, and expressed these worries privately with growing insistence.

JPS: This summer, one could say that the worries turned out to be well founded.

Norton: There is no doubt that Hizballah massively miscalculated. In a way, they were too smart by half. They thought they were still operating more or less within the rule box on 12 July when they captured two Israeli soldiers to use in negotiations for the release of the Lebanese prisoners still held by Israel. It had been done in the past—most recently in January 2004 when Lebanese prisoners were exchanged against one live Israeli and the bodies of the Israeli soldiers captured in autumn 2000. Hizballah was trying to replicate this negotiating structure—in fact last fall they tried to grab a few Israeli soldiers in the occupied Golan Heights, specifically in the Lebanese village of Ghajar which is half in Lebanon and half in the Golan Heights, but the operation was thwarted. They expressed this intention on a number of occasions.

But for the Israelis, the incident was an opportunity to forget the rule box altogether and to take out Hizballah once and for all. There is pretty good circumstantial evidence that Israel’s response was well coordinated with the U.S. In my view, when Israel and Washington looked at Hizballah, they saw Iran. So the interest in destroying Hizballah’s military capability was not just to protect northern Israel and to eliminate the Katyusha threat, but to eliminate Iran’s ability to use Hizballah as a deterrent force against Israel. I would add that Israel’s failure to defeat Hizballah seems to have lent new momentum to advocates of bombing Iran, which would be a horrendously foolish thing to do.

JPS: How could Hizballah’s capture of the soldiers be seen as within the rule box since they crossed into Israel?

Norton: Hizballah was clearly trying to stretch the rules. There’s a lot of evidence that they thought they could get away with it and that the reaction would be minor, because the byword of the rules of the game was proportionality. In short, there was a monumental miscalculation. My own view is that Hizballah invested too much confidence in deterrence and got overly confident about its ability to “read” Israel.

It is just possible that the 12 July gambit might have worked if Ariel Sharon were still prime minister. He would have been less susceptible to agitation from the Israeli military, which wanted to settle scores, and to arguments that Israel could easily destroy Hizballah’s military capability. Of course the opportunity for improving strategic options vis-à-vis Iran via Hizballah would have been attractive to Sharon as well, but in my view the military inexperience of Olmert and Peretz increased the chances of a massive attack, and Hizballah should have taken that into account. Certainly, another important factor in Israel’s response was concern over Israel’s so-called deterrence, by which they really mean Israeli hegemony—the idea that Israel’s neighbors will avoid taking any step that may

be perceived as threatening its security. Since 2000, there has been the sense that this hegemony has weakened, and this would be a means of restoring it.

JPS: In terms of the timing of Hizballah's operation, might Israel's siege of Gaza have played some role?

Norton: Only insofar as Hizballah may have calculated that because the Israelis were busy with Gaza they were more likely to limit their response—I don't think there was an intention to relieve the pressure on Hamas. I think the timing was opportunistic. Obviously Hizballah had planned to do something like this for a long time, but you need to wait for the right moment, the right size of the Israeli force, have your men in place, and all this could take months.

What I definitely do *not* think is that this was something ordered by Iran. From my own long-term study of Hizballah, I am convinced that this was something that was decided autonomously; it is not something they would have had to consult anyone about because they thought they could get away with it. On the other hand, it is plausible that the 12 July operation was intended to give Hizballah the whiphand in the Lebanese National Dialogue, which began earlier this year and that was to reconvene on 25 July 2006. The dialogue was intended to address such issues as Shaba` Farms and the tenure of President Lahoud. The dialogue was notably silent on the disarming of militias (read: Hizballah), but that question was always looming. Had there not been an over-the-top Israeli response, Hizballah would have used its successful operation to undermine calls for its disarmament.

JPS: Earlier you seemed to suggest that Israel had planned this operation beforehand. Can you elaborate?

Norton: Clearly, this was not an operation that could be put together on the fly. Prioritizing targets and establishing bombing programs, these things need to be assembled ahead of time. The first objective was clearly to suppress Hizballah's ability to respond. Basically, the idea is to create what I call a "killing box," where you cut off Hizballah's supply lines and ability to refuel, force the civilian population to flee and create a siege so that anything that moves within the zone can be attacked. So in every Lebanese town and village in the south they systematically destroyed food supplies, hitting every food store, making sure that the residents could not sustain themselves. All this was part of a plan. Much of this has already been documented in preliminary reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. What made the Israeli war plan look slapdash and improvised was that it depended on flawed assumptions.

JPS: What would you say about the performance of each side?

Norton: It goes without saying that there was fundamental miscalculation on both sides. Hizballah failed to anticipate Israel's massive response. Some people—and I am one of them—say that Nasrallah became a little too impressed with his own analytical abilities, and this may be the cause of what may be an unfolding leadership debate within Hizballah.

On the Israeli side certainly there was overestimation of their own military abilities. For that matter, Americans often exaggerate Israeli military capabilities as well. The Israeli military undoubtedly has a huge technical advantage over its adversaries in terms of its superior communications, logistics, and especially its air force. The idea that airpower may obviate the need to put troops on the ground is notoriously seductive, but given both Hizballah's preparations and southern Lebanon's irregular terrain, it was clear from the first day of Israeli bombing that the air force would not be able to deliver the "decisive and clean" victory that I gather Olmert promised to the White House.

Hizballah, by standing its ground and sustaining the assault, forced Israel to put troops on the ground. Topographically, this place is not at all like Gaza, which is rather like a tabletop. Instead, there are abrupt changes in elevation with lots of natural caves, not to mention the fact that Hizballah in the past six years has been busy building deep bunkers, fortified positions, and so on. Being on the ground also means an urban warfare environment in the sense that the stone houses and walls of the villages can be used as fortifications: again there are many places to hide, deep cellars, and so on. Troops on the ground have to concede much of their technical advantage and have to fight door to door, face to face. And on that level it is by no means clear that the Israeli soldiers are, man for man, any better than the Hizballah fighters.

One thing the war demonstrated is that while Israel has impressive intelligence gathering capabilities on the technical side, it is far weaker with regard to human intelligence. Not only did Israel apparently fail to penetrate Hizballah, but it compounded this failure by seriously underestimating its foe and misreading the broader Lebanese public. Israelis officials have consistently presumed—in 1993, 1996, and 2006—that if they bomb Lebanon mercilessly the resistance will lose support. That has not turned out to be true. Indeed, the opposite effect is usually the result.

JPS: To what extent can Hizballah's rockets, Katyushas, be aimed?

Norton: They can't in any serious sense—basically they're point-and-shoot rockets. There is no guidance system. You don't aim at a specific location so much as aim at a general area, toward a town or whatever. If you send lots of rockets there can be a lucky hit: for example, early on, in what must have sent a strategic shiver down Israel's spine, Hizballah sent salvos toward the Safad headquarters of the Israeli Northern Command and managed to destroy a number of antennas.

Hizballah also made good use of anti-tank weapons. In addition to the RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) which are shoulder-fired, relatively simple, and usually short range, they have anti-tank weapons with more sophisticated guidance systems. My information from people on the ground is that Hizballah destroyed at least eighteen armored vehicles, including twelve armored personnel carriers, and six or more Merkava tanks. My recollection is that they also knocked down a few helicopters and posed such an effective ability to hit low flying aircraft that Israel was unable to use them. They used these same

precision weapons to great effect against Israeli positions in places like Bint Jubayl.

JPS: One of the big issues of this war has been the targeting of civilians, with repeated allegations that Hizballah used human shields.

Norton: With regard to civilians, one thing that is crucial to point out is that during the entire occupation period up to 2000 Hizballah carried out relatively few attacks on Israeli civilians, and the few exceptions were during times of heightened fighting, for instance during the Israeli incursions of 1993 and 1996 when the Lebanese population was being bombed and driven north, and Hizballah would fire rockets across the border. But for the most part there was a scrupulous effort on the part of the resistance to attack only combatants or legitimate targets within the context of the “rules of the game.”

As for this last war, a lot of the charges that Hizballah was using “civilian shields” were spurious. Certainly there were cases when Hizballah fighters were positioned adjacent to civilian areas, as were weapons stores, but in a great many instances Israel attacked civilian locations where there were clearly no weapons, and this is amply documented by both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. I don’t think there is any doubt that Israel has used the blanket charge of Hizballah using human shields to hide the fact that they were committing war crimes. I’m sure you recall the well-documented cases in the West Bank where Israelis literally and directly used Palestinians as human shields, and I know of no instance where Hizballah has ever done anything like this.

JPS: There’s been a lot of talk about Israel’s systematic targeting of infrastructure, even far from Hizballah strongholds. What would be gained by this from a military standpoint?

Norton: As I mentioned earlier, one of the problems is Israel’s persistent conviction that if they pound hard enough, Lebanese support for the resistance will disappear. They should have learned by now that this doesn’t work. This was demonstrated yet again in this latest war. Initially, many Lebanese—including many Shi`a—were furious at Hizballah for giving Israel the pretext to attack and said so openly. But as these over-the-top attacks and bombings continued, the national identification solidified.

I think that there is a rather extraordinary misreading of political psychology at play here. But there is also a fundamental disregard for Lebanese lives. And when you consider things like the massive dropping of hundreds of thousands of cluster bombs on south Lebanon in the last seventy-two hours before the UN resolution kicked in, I think you can only conclude that there is a high degree of simple vindictiveness on Israel’s part, an impulse to punish the Lebanese for Hizballah’s behavior. This in addition to the so far unrealized expectation that this punishment will undermine Hizballah’s support.

JPS: We don't know what the outcome will be. Already there are very strong statements from Walid Jumblatt and others. Don't you think that when the dust settles, there may be a huge surge of anger against Hizballah?

Norton: I don't think anyone won this war. Certainly Israel didn't win it, and by virtue of not winning it you can argue that they lost it. But certainly there will have to be a serious reckoning with Hizballah for launching the 12 July operation. And I think that some of Nasrallah's statements already reflect the pressure for that reckoning. Even so, I don't think you're going to see Hizballah losing its base within the Shi'i community. The Israelis have destroyed or badly damaged thousands of residences—probably well in excess of 25,000 by one credible estimate, and most belong to Hizballah's constituents. These are not going to be rebuilt with USAID money. Where is the money going to come from? It seems that despite Lebanese government promises, Iran is going to be the source for a large share of the money for rebuilding in Shi'i areas. So while there is going to be a reckoning over the war, I think that many people are going to end up feeling grateful to Hizballah for the role it is playing in reconstruction.

JPS: But what about the other communities? What effect is this war going to have on the cohesiveness of Lebanon?

Norton: Let's take the case of Michel Aoun, who as you know is one of the main political figures in the Maronite community with broad following across confessional lines. He of course refused to join the government, and at the same time he had aligned himself with Hizballah. He was very silent during the war. After it ended, he said that Hizballah owes an explanation to the Lebanese people, clearly indicating his sense that Hizballah had overstepped the limits. So I think there is going to be a debate here, and hopefully it will be a responsible debate. It seems clear that Aoun is positioning himself for the presidency—the three-year extension of President Lahoud's term in office ends in September 2007, which means that there should be a presidential election that summer. Right now, Aoun seems to be the frontrunner, and he seems to be playing it in a way that ensures Hizballah's support but at the same time is critical enough to maintain credibility in the Christian community. Time will tell whether Aoun, who's been treated with great respect by Hizballah, can provide wise leadership for Lebanon.

JPS: Under what conditions would Hizballah disarm?

Norton: The mission of the UNIFIL force now being deployed—which after UN Resolution 1701 seems to be UNIFIL on steroids—is to ensure the deployment of the Lebanese army in the south, help reestablish sovereign Lebanese control, and so on. Nowhere in UNIFIL's rules of engagement is there any mention of disarming Hizballah. At the same time the Lebanese army being deployed is instructed to work in cooperation with Hizballah. So neither the deployment

of UNIFIL nor the dispatching of the Lebanese army to the south is going to lead to the disarming of Hizballah.

In my opinion, the only way to handle the problem of Hizballah's militia component is to integrate, at least nominally, Hizballah into the Lebanese army—it could be a “southern defense brigade,” a “resistance taskforce,” whatever you want to call it. That raises all kinds of practical problems in terms of command responsibility, but I do not see another solution and I think Lebanese officials are beginning to see this as well. Perhaps if Aoun is elected president, given his background as an army commander he could be exactly the kind of personality who can make this work. And it may be that the debate in Lebanon over the effects of this war and its causes will be sufficiently chastening for Hizballah that they will go along with this. Of course, that's a lot of “ifs.”

JPS: In the meantime, what kinds of strain do you anticipate as UNSC Resolution 1701 is implemented and the army moves into position in the south?

Norton: As I mentioned earlier, for the most part Hizballah has operated quite separately from the army, maintaining a posture of avowed respect for it as a state institution. It also bears repeating that the army rank-and-file is heavily Shi`i, and Shi`a have begun to be seen in greater numbers in the field grade and general officers ranks. During this last war, there were one or two cases in which the Israelis accused the army of taking an offensive step or two, but I am confident that those were not coordinated with Hizballah and may well have been taken on the initiative of a local officer. Notwithstanding the claim by the defense minister in the first days of the war that the army would defend Lebanon, it did not.

Recall Hizballah's argument that the greater freedom of action it enjoys (by virtue of the fact that, unlike the Lebanese army, it is not an extension of the state) allows it wider scope to defend the country. This is not a theoretical argument but an empirical one. You should not expect Hizballah to consent to its own disarming in the absence of a means by which to defend Lebanon. This position may be self-serving in part, but it also stems from the very real security problem faced especially by those Lebanese who live in the south. Too often we in the West forget that there is not only an Israeli security problem in the Israeli-Lebanese border area, but also a Lebanese one. In point of fact, far more Lebanese have been killed and far more homes destroyed by Israeli bombs than Israeli homes destroyed or people killed by fire from Lebanon.

JPS: To what extent has Hizballah been crippled or degraded militarily or even politically by this war?

Norton: Israel's claims to have destroyed half Hizballah's arsenal are clearly wishful thinking, but unquestionably it has been significantly degraded. Moreover its ability to keep its armory stocked has been seriously impeded by the international force deployment under UNSC 1701 and the high level of international attention on Hizballah's activities, not to mention by the commitment (if honored) from the Syrian government, right from the president, that Syria

will respect the arms embargo. And now there has to be a real debate about Hizballah's role in provoking the war, and it is possible that it will be politically contained in a way that was not possible before, even though it will retain a significant armed capability. I want to close, however, by reiterating that both Israel and Lebanon have legitimate security concerns, and it is not enough to address Israel's while ignoring Lebanon's. Doing so not only sustains the rationale for a militarized Hizballah but fundamentally threatens the stability of Lebanon.



Hizballah billboards—one featuring Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrallah and another stating “With resistance we liberated the land, and with resistance we shall protect it”—in the southern suburbs of Beirut, 29 July 2006. (Ramzi Haidar/AFP/Getty Images)