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**The Problem that is Also a Solution:
Lebanese Fears Play into Hizbollah Hands**

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In recent months there have been clear signs, along with much discussion in the public discourse, of Hizbollah's legitimacy rebound in Lebanon's political and civilian spheres. Given Lebanon's delicate sectoral and community balance, any fluctuation in the public mood is likely to steer the entire country in general and Hizbollah in particular in a new direction, with potential changes in policy on a host of issues, including vis-à-vis Israel.

Rumors that began to circulate in late 2011 regarding Hizbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime were denied by the organization. However, already then Hizbollah soldiers were likely involved in advising and assisting the regime's forces, and were possibly already engaged in actual fighting as well. In 2013, Hizbollah's actions in Syria came under public scrutiny with the admission by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah that Hizbollah operatives were participating in the fighting. At the time, many in Lebanon regarded Hizbollah as a warmonger bringing disaster on the country, and the organization was subject to intense criticism by its opponents in Lebanon. On the international front, following the July 2012 terrorist attack on Israeli citizens in Burgas, Bulgaria, the European Union classified the military wing of Hizbollah as a terrorist organization, and the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri focused on Hizbollah as the principal suspect. It appeared that the prestige enjoyed by Hizbollah in the preceding decade, mainly due to its campaign against Israel in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, had dissipated, with the organization's legitimacy undermined both inside and outside Lebanon. The principal charge was that Hizbollah's actions would cause the Syrian civil war to spread to Lebanon.

Over time, Hizbollah began to see successes on the Syrian battlefield. In May-June 2013, about a month after Nasrallah first publicly admitted that the organization was operating in Syria, Hizbollah, together with Assad's forces, scored a victory against the rebels in al-Qusayr in the Homs district, a strategically important location. This victory strengthened the Iranian-Syrian axis fighting to preserve the regime, whose forces had been hit hard by the rebels in the months preceding the battle. Hizbollah also took part in the fighting in

the Qalamoun Mountains, in Damascus, and on other fronts, achieving much while garnering prestige and military experience. These and other operational successes helped Shiites on Syrian soil stand tall, which in effect give Hezbollah a symbolic achievement.

Nonetheless, Hezbollah's leadership was hard pressed to persuade the Lebanese public that the organizational and military benefits of fighting in Syria were necessary for the country's security – until unexpected help came in the form of Salafi Sunni Islam. Under direct influence from Syria, where the civilian rebellion began to assume a Salafi-jihadi tone and diverge from the more moderate tendencies, many supporters of Sunni terrorist organizations operating in Syria began to appear in Lebanon. This phenomenon was especially pronounced in the refugee camps in northern and southern Lebanon and in Tripoli, where strife was rampant. Against this background, Lebanon experienced a series of severe security-related developments, including car bomb attacks, which aroused much anxiety in Beirut. The atmosphere intensified with the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the summer of 2014, whose extreme jihadist ideology won many admirers among the Sunni population in Lebanon, combined with growing sympathy for the Jabhat al-Nusra organization – the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda.

The kidnapping of Lebanese security personnel in the border town of Aarsal in August 2014 – an incident that has not yet been concluded – and the conflicts in Tripoli in October clearly highlight the challenge facing Lebanon. The border with Syria has become a porous area marked by anarchy. Salafi Islam has asserted its power, and is threatening to subvert the political order at a time that the Lebanese political system is essentially paralyzed by its lack of a president and the lack of a parliament in session. This governmental vacuum suits Hezbollah well. Moreover, Lebanon's army is trying to portray itself as the country's defender and a unifying force, although it has never been capable of standing up to the challenging array of threats facing the country, and certainly not on this scale.

On the other hand, Hezbollah is standing steadfast against the external threat. Ironically, Hezbollah played a role in creating this threat, yet has since become the most effective means of dealing with it. For example, Hezbollah is a mediator in the negotiations with the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra for release of hostages, and has helped restore quiet to Tripoli, at least temporarily. In their despair, more than a few Lebanese are looking to Hezbollah to rescue the country from the dangers threatening to aggravate the already prevailing instability.

Fortified by this new backdrop, Hezbollah is openly demonstrating growing confidence, claiming that its contentions that it had a duty to intervene as Lebanon's defender against external threats have been validated. Hezbollah continues to justify its fighting in Syria, while at the same time not neglecting its original purpose – defender of Lebanon and

leader of the resistance (*muqawama*). In a speech in Beirut on Ashura Day on in early November 2014, Nasrallah stressed the importance of the fighting in Syria and defense against “takfiris” (a derogatory term for apostate used by Muslims, in this case against Salafi Islam organizations, especially the Islamic State).

At the same time, against the background of last summer’s escalation between Israel and Hamas and the increased tension in Jerusalem, Nasrallah unveiled his traditional perspective on the expected conflict with Israel. The clear message is that Hizbollah, together with the Lebanese defense forces, is part of Lebanon’s national defense. Senior Hizbollah official Nabil Qaouk said, “Thanks to the all-inclusive formula of the people, the army, and the resistance, Lebanon has become the most invulnerable country in the region to the two threats: the takfiri threat and the Israeli threat.” This rhetoric has been accompanied by a change in operational policy. In October 2014, Hizbollah staged an operation against IDF forces in Shab’a farms (Har Dov) – rare activity since the 2006 war. This measure does not indicate deliberate escalation, but it is a clear statement of intention on the organization’s part with respect to its capabilities. Perhaps the recent airstrikes – attributed to Israel – against the weapons stockpiles in Damascus will figure in Hizbollah’s strategic considerations that encourage escalation along the border with Israel.

Hizbollah’s experience echoes the processes occurring elsewhere in the Middle East. In both Syria and Iraq, the Alawite and Shiite regimes, respectively, were marked early in the confrontations as troublemakers that should be neutralized in order to restore quiet. Yet once a worse threat emerged, these regimes were no longer punching bags for either the local populations or the West, but became possible partners in blunting the threat, even if not publicly.

The situation in Lebanon, however, is distinguished in several ways from the events in the neighboring countries. At present it is not certain that Hizbollah is capable of drawing widespread support from the Lebanese public and political systems, and a great deal must occur before the organization can claim the victory it seeks. As of now, it can take comfort in the fact that given the immediate dangers facing Lebanon, many among the population regard Hizbollah as the most stable and reliable element. At the same time, it is difficult to assess whether Hizbollah is capable of moving another step forward toward the national consensus. One indication of this design could be its role in the effort to end the presidential crisis in Lebanon. In the near future, Hizbollah is scheduled to negotiate with its rival party, al-Mustaqbal, led by Saad al-Hariri, for the purpose of resolving the crisis and selecting a president acceptable to all factions. If Hizbollah’s candidate, former General Michel Aoun, is chosen, it will be a foothold for Hizbollah in the very heart of the Lebanese national consensus and will signify its return to the status of the unofficial

defender of Lebanon. In turn, Hizbollah's freedom of action, including on the border with Israel and in the Golan Heights, would be greater. Israel will then have to reexamine its assessment of the organization's intentions and readiness for a military confrontation in the near future, and weigh how this escalation might best be prevented.

