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Hizbollah: Besides God's Party, Whose?

By Andrew Tabler

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BEIRUT, Lebanon–Of the political groups in the Levant today, perhaps none is more controversial than Hizbollah. Born following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Hizbollah (which means "Party of God") champions Lebanon's "resistance" to Israel in the Shebaa Farms — a 12-square-mile plot of disputed land between Lebanon and Syria. Hizbollah carries out attacks on Israeli positions in Shebaa and along Lebanon's southern border, and the party's militias have *de-facto* control over south Lebanon, as well as large parts of the Bekaa Valley. Its leader, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, is notorious for denouncing Israeli and Western "arrogance" in fire-and-brimstone speeches so popular that they have even been mixed into hedonistic western dance tunes playing in discos across the Arab World.

Hizbollah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, famous for fire and brimstone speeches, is carefully leading his party deeper into Lebanon's political system.

Photo: Nicholas Blanford

Ask most Americans how they view Hizbollah and you are likely to get a vague lecture on terrorism, hijacking and kidnappings based on the painful lessons of American involvement in Lebanon's 15-year civil war. Many Lebanese, however, now see Hizbollah as one of Lebanon's most powerful political parties. Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon last April, Hizbollah formally entered the Lebanese government for the first time in July. It also holds sway over another four "sympathetic" ministers. Hizbollah and its parliamentary faction are walking a careful line, working with other parties but opposing direct foreign interference in Lebanese affairs — including the U.N. probe into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

How does Hizbollah see itself? Since joining government, Hizbollah has largely stopped talking to the Western media. A period of openness following the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, which included organized trips for correspondents to Hizbollah-positions in the south, has come to an end. Nevertheless, in late November I was able to secure an interview with Hussein Naboulsi, spokesperson for Hizbollah. What I found was not only an organization clearly hell-bent on Israel's destruction, but also a party that has used the Israeli threat to secure popular recognition and to mobilize Lebanon's Shiite Muslims — the country's poorest, but arguably largest, sect — in cautiously demanding their fair share of power. What is unclear, however, is just how far the party will go to keep the West out of Lebanese affairs.

To understand Naboulsi's answers, where Hizbollah is today and where it is going, it is first necessary to take a look at the historical position of Shiites in Lebanon's political mosaic, Hizbollah's evolution during the country's 15-year civil war, and its careful post-war move onto Lebanon's domestic political scene.

Third-class citizens

In many ways, Hizbollah was the product of two festering and still-unresolved political problems in Lebanon and the Middle East: modern nation building and the Arab-Israeli problem. The former Ottoman Empire, which encom-

passed much of today's Middle East, was administered by what was called the "Wilayat" or "Nations" system. Over 400 years of Ottoman rule, the religious sects that inhabited the Fertile Crescent were given local autonomy in exchange for allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan. Naturally, these sects came to form strong and distinct political identities.

Following the Ottoman collapse during World War I, France was given control over the territory that would become today's Lebanon and Syria. French-Mandate authorities created the state of "Greater Lebanon" by combining the former Ottoman Mutassarifate (special administrative region set aside for Christians and Druze) of Mount Lebanon with areas formerly administered from Damascus, most notably the Bekaa Valley, areas south of Mount Lebanon to what is today Lebanon's southern border, and the city of Tripoli and its hinterland. (See AJT-7).

France had multiple, often conflicting reasons for the annexations. On the surface, the French seemed to be giving into the demand of their Maronite Christian allies, who complained that the former Mount Lebanon was not an economically viable entity because it lacked sufficient agricultural areas. In reality, the addition of these areas was the product of France's "minorities policy" — a scheme that supported the creation of small, supposedly manageable states ruled by whatever religious sect happened to be a "majority" in a certain geographic area and — often more importantly — was cooperative with the French-Mandate authorities.

At the same time France was adding areas to Lebanon and attempting to create a viable state with the Maronites at the helm, they were carving up adjacent areas under their mandate, which include areas of today's Syria and Turkey in ways that bore little resemblance to historic familial and economic ties. While it claimed to be championing the rights of minorities, France was more concerned with containing Arab-nationalist political movements developing in Sunni-dominated areas. To strangle the economic base of Damascus and Aleppo (trade), the French divided today's Syria into multiple states in order to deny both cities access to a single Mediterranean port. The annexations of 1920, while a short-term victory for Greater Lebanon proponents, went a long way toward destroying a *de-facto* Christian majority in Lebanon, since the inhabitants of these new areas were largely Muslim.

To counteract this, the Christian elite encouraged Sunnis of the port cities to participate in the system. The Sunnis found that, by playing their cards right, they could manipulate candidates for office in Christian areas, and were themselves given offices by the French-Mandate authorities for cooperating.

Largely outside this government alliance was Lebanon's Shiite-Muslim community. While different Shiite figures cooperated with the government, the Shiites were kept on the periphery of state decision-making. When internal squabbling over representation reared its head, the Mandate carried out its first and only Lebanon census in 1932. It found a Christian majority of only 52 percent. The census' reliability has long been called into question, not only over Christian efforts to distort the count, but also over the overrepresentation of Sunni Muslims at the expense of their Shiite counterparts.

To settle sectarian bickering over government posts, Lebanon's leaders introduced the National Pact of 1943. The presidency, to which the council of ministers was responsible, was earmarked for a Maronite Christian. The Prime Minister would be a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim. Lebanon's other sects were guaranteed a certain number of cabinet positions, based on the results of the 1932 census.

In reality, however, Lebanese politics remained very much a Christian-Sunni affair. Beirut and Mount Lebanon received most of the country's infrastructure development, including telephones, electricity, schools and universities. Second came the other coastal cities and the Shuf Mountains. A distant third were the areas annexed in 1920 — home to Lebanon's Shiite Muslim population.

Over time, the demographics naturally changed. Eco-

nomic development occurred more in Christian and Sunni-dominated areas, meaning couples had fewer children. In vastly poorer Shiite areas, economic activity remained agrarian and families were large. Excess labor migrated to the southern suburbs of the capital. These areas became known as "belts of misery" due to their horrid living conditions and lack of modern facilities. Those lucky enough to enter Beirut schools were reportedly treated to a physical examination to see if they had a tail — a derogatory joke about Shiites that circulates even today. Needless to say, Shiites felt very much outside the system, despite growing and obvious evidence that Shiites were in fact the largest sect in the country.

The Civil War and the birth of Hizbollah

In March 1974, on the eve of civil war ostensibly between Christian militias and Palestinian groups, Shiite Iman Musa Sadr, the Iranian-born President of the Islamic Shiite Council, formed the Movement of the Deprived — a movement basically against Lebanese state negligence of rural areas. Sadr became a close ally of Syria when in the same year he issued a religious ruling declaring Hafez al-Assad's religious sect, the Alawites, Shiite Muslims. (This was necessary for Assad, since the Syrian constitution stipulates that the President of Syria must be a Muslim). When hostilities broke out the following year, Sadr and another Shiite leader, Nabih Berri, created the militia called Amal (Hope). According to Hizbollah author Amal Saad-Ghorayab, while hostilities at the beginning of the war were supposedly between Christian militias and Palestinians, it was Shiites who incurred the severest losses during the war's first year at the hands of Maronite militias.

In 1978, two events further radicalized Shiites. Israel invaded southern Lebanon in March, displacing thousands of Shiites who in turn fled to Beirut's southern suburbs. Then in August, Imam Sadr vanished, perhaps in Libya (where he was last seen *en route* to a visit with Libyan Leader Muammar al-Qaddafi). According to the Libyan version, he canceled the Qaddafi appointment at the last minute and flew to Italy (Italian authorities insist he never arrived). Sadr's wife insists he was last seen in Damascus.

Amal ranks quickly grew, as did its level of organization. In 1979, Shiite mobilization received a massive shot in the arm with the onset of the Iranian Revolution. Shiites region-wide began to flex their muscle. Following Sadr's disappearance, another Shiite cleric, Sayyid Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah, began to organize younger members of Amal into militant groups, including "Hala al Islamiyya"(Beauty of Islam) and the Committee Supportive of the Islamic Revolution.

Shiite political organization changed radically with Israel's massive invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. Supposedly launched to create a zone free of Palestinian fighters from Lebanon's southern border north to the Litani River, the invasion was in fact part of a deal between Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon and Maronite Phalangist Leader Bashir Gemayel to encircle the PLO in West Beirut, leading to its disarmament and Gemayel's election as President.

To help repel the invasion, Syria allowed an estimated 1,500 Pasdaran — Iranian Revolutionary Guard — access to the Bekaa through Syrian territory to mobilize Shiite resistance. This worked well for Syria, since the Lebanese Shiites could go where Syrian forces could not. According to the unofficial 1976 "Red Lines Agreement", a pact brokered by the US between Israel and Syria, Syrian forces were not allowed to move south of a line between Sidon on the coast to the Syrian border, and were therefore not held responsible for activities in that area.

For Shiites, the 1982 invasion was brutal. According to Saad-Ghorayab, around 19,000 Shiites lost their lives, 32,000 were injured, and 80 percent of Shiite villages in the south were heavily damaged. Shiites fled in droves north into Beirut's southern suburbs. In the September 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Chatila Palestinian refugee camps, where Maronite militias killed at random as Israeli forces looked on, around one-fourth of the victims were Shiite.

To replace the PLO in West Beirut, President Elias Sarkis formed the National Salvation Committee, which included Maronite leader Bashir Gemayel. When Amal leader Nabih Berri agreed to join the committee, a number of Amal members broke away from the movement in protest to Amal's presence at the same table as Gemayel. These members included Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Subhi al-Tufayli, Muhammed Yazbek, Husayn al-Khalil, Na'im Qassim, Muhammed Ra'id, Abbas al-Mussawi, Ibrahim al-Amin al-Sayyid and Husayn al-Mussawi. Members of this group — with Pasdaran assistance — established the "Committee of Nine" — today considered the first Majlis al-Shura (supreme decision-making council) of today's Hizbollah.

While Israel eventually withdrew, its battles with the Shiites continued. According to Saad-Ghorayeb, between 1982 and 1985, half of south Lebanon's population was detained or imprisoned by Israeli forces in one way or another without prisoner-of-war rights. Hizbollah organized resistance attacks against Israeli positions, and by means of battles of attrition, forced a gradual Israeli withdrawal to a 15-kilometer-wide "security zone" in South Lebanon.

During this same period of time, a number of suicide bombings occurred against American and French targets in Lebanon that would put Hizbollah and Washington on a collision course that continues to this day. In April 1983, a van packed with explosives destroyed the US Embassy in Beirut, killing 63, including 17 Americans and the CIA's Middle East director. The following October, 241 US servicemen were killed when a suicide bomber with about 5,400kg of explosives in his truck de-

stroyed the US Marine Barracks near Beirut Airport. Twenty seconds after the blast, another bomb destroyed the French paratrooper's headquarters. The bombing marked the largest single overseas Marine-Corps death toll since the Battle of Iwo Jima.

Responsibility for the attacks was claimed by "Islamic Jihad" — a previously unknown group. Hizbollah categorically denies any links to Islamic Jihad. Washington, on the other hand, believes that Islamic Jihad was simply a "phantom" organization backed by Hizbollah to carry out the attacks, and points to similarities between Hizbollah and Islamic Jihad slogans and organizational doctrines during that period. Hizbollah was duly placed on Washington's list of terrorist organizations and the party's name entered American popular parlance as a synonym for terrorism.

Photo: Nicholas Blanford/Focusmideast.com

A Hizbollah fighter prepares an attack on Israeli positions.

While the US and France withdrew its troops from Lebanon, the battle against "foreign" influence in Lebanon did not subside. In 1985, a group supposedly associated with Hizbollah hijacked a TWA jet at Beirut airport and murdered a US serviceman. Throughout the 1980s, Islamic Jihad took 87 Westerners hostage; a few were executed as "spies" in captivity. To gain their release, members of the Reagan Administration engineered Israeli arms sales to Iran in what became known as the Iran-Contra affair.

As the war raged on in the late 1980s, so did tensions between Amal and its Hizbollah defectors. When Western forces withdrew from West Beirut, Amal and the Druze Militia, PSP, took their place. In 1985, Amal surrounded the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Chatila and battled Palestinian forces headquartered there in what became known as "The War of the Camps". Hizbollah and the PSP supported the Palestinians, which led to armed confrontation between Amal and Hizbollah. Under intense international pressure, Syria was forced to intervene to support Amal (its strongest ally in Lebanon), leading to a short battle with Hizbollah in February of 1987. In return for letting Syria have is way in West Beirut, Damascus concluded a deal with Hizbollah where it would allow the organization to continue to receive support from Iran to carry out its resistance activities against Israel in the southern Lebanon.

From resistance to domestic politics

This arrangement served as the catalyst for Hizbollah's transformation from a resistance group to a functioning political party. Hizbollah focused its attention on fighting Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory. And fought they did. The party organized one of the most effective insurgency campaigns of the last century, using "martyrdom" operations against Israeli forces and their client, the Christian-dominated South Lebanese Army (SLA). Tactics included rocket attacks, as well as car and suicide bombings.

On the domestic scene, Hizbollah at first preferred to stay out of the political system. It was not a major party to the talks in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, which produced the accord of the same name that ended the civil war. Instead, Shiite interests were promoted by Amal chief Nabih Berri, who continued to work closely with Syria.

Following Ta'if's conclusion, a debate raged in Hizbollah over whether the party should participate in the 1992 elections. In the end, Khameni, who also serves as Hizbollah's Wali al-Faqih or "spiritual jurisconsul," ruled that Hizbollah could participate in the elections. This led to the resignation of Hizbollah's then-secretary-general Subhi al-Tufayli (who later threatened to burn down the polling stations in his home town in protest). Sayyid Abbas al-Mussawi, who led the faction that participation in secular, democratic politics, was appointed secretary general, but was shortly thereafter assassinated by Israel in February 1992. His successor, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, has furthered Mussawi's line of Christian-Muslim reconciliation and integration into the Lebanese political system.

In the elections of 1992, 1996, 2000 and this year, Hizbollah allied itself with Amal, creating electoral lists (see AJT-4) that were unopposed in South Lebanon. Hizbollah has added more and more seats with every election, winning a record 14 this year. While it made its voice heard in Parliament, especially through its long-time MP, Mohammed Fnaish, Hizbollah stayed out of government until this year, despite Hizbollah's soaring popularity following Israel's hurried withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000. The party continued to focus on liberating the Shebaa Farms — the last corner of Lebanon under Israeli tutelage.

With the external threat diminishing, Nasrallah turned his party's attention toward assimilation into the political system. Political Islam might at first glance seem incompatible with multi-sectarian politics — since the ultimate idea of creating an Islamic state would seem to necessitate changing the face of Lebanon. Hizbollah thus far has taken a different approach. According to Saad-Ghorayeb, as early as 1985, Hizbollah issued a statement citing the Quranic injunction, 'let there be no compulsion in religion' — which indicated to many that Hizbollah recognized that achieving an Islamic state in Lebanon would not be accomplished by forcing people's hands.

Photo: Nicholas Blanford/Focusmideast.com

Hizbollah fighters cruising atop a T-55 tank following Israel's withdrawal from the South Lebanon village of Aitroun.

Hizbollah believes in the ideal of an Islamic state, but unlike many Sunni fundamentalist movements in the Arab World, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizbollah does not aspire to return to a "golden age" of Islamic history. Its article of faith holds that only when the "Mahdi" — the "Hidden Imam" who disappeared in 874 AD — returns can the true Islamic state be established. Short of that, Hizbollah looks to Iran as the best model for the moment, and has adopted party tenets from the Iranian constitution.

Instead of Islamicizing from above, Hizbollah claims to seek the opposite: the gradual Islamicization from below. How this Islamic grounds would be measured remains unclear. However, Hizbollah has indicated on a number of occasions that an Islamic state will come in Lebanon when an overwhelming majority of Lebanese are Muslims, not only a simple majority. Even if Lebanon conducts a census anytime soon, and finds what many people suspect — that the Shiites are now Lebanon's largest sect — Hizbollah says it will not seek to impose an Islamic state over all of Lebanon's 10,542 square kilometers of territory. According to Hizbollah, a secular state is far more palatable than occupation by Israel.

Hizbollah's nationalist line is not only drawn *vis-à-vis* Israel, but also toward the West. The party believes that the West is the in process of implementing an "arrogant scheme" to undermine the Islamic World. Plans such as Washington's current democracy campaign in the Arab World are viewed by Hizbollah with great suspicion since they believe the West seeks to highlight religious and sectarian differences in order to divide and rule. During the civil war, Hizbollah regarded Western journalists and aid workers as secret agents, who the party claims helped exacerbate political tensions and kept the war going.

The Syrian withdrawal and Hizbollah's inclusion in government

Syrian-occupied Lebanon meant that Hizbollah and Amal divided the Shiite share of Lebanese governance. Berri accepted the Shiite position of Speaker of Parliament, and Hizbollah grabbed headlines fighting Israel. Hizbollah was also allowed considerable security autonomy in the areas it dominated: South Lebanon and large parts of the Bekaa. In many ways, Hizbollah became very much like the "state within a state" that the PLO factions had become on the eve of the Civil War, with one major difference — Hizbollah was Lebanese. Syria continued to allow Iran to supply Hizbollah through the Bekaa Valley, and the party in turn used those weapons to fight Syria's archenemy, Israel.

When Syria was forced to withdraw from Lebanon last April, Hizbollah was suddenly caught in a bind. After all, Security Council Resolution 1559 not only called for Syria's withdrawal, but also the disarming of all militias (Hizbollah's specific name was taken off the penultimate draft of 1559 due to French pressure not to single out the party). With Syria gone from the domestic scene, and facing the first post-war parliamentary elections without a Syrian presence, Hizbollah again formed an alliance with Amal. But the "anti-Syrian" coalition, led by Saad Hariri, son of the late Rafik al-Hariri, was unable to secure enough seats to form a government, making Hizbollah's inclusion essential when Hariri's talks with General Michel Aoun's party collapsed (see AJT-4).

Long-time Hizbollah MP Muhammed Fnaish became Hizbollah's first-ever minister in June 2005, taking the Energy and Water portfolio. A close Hizbollah ally, Trad Hamade, was appointed minister of labor. A closer look shows that a number of ministers are also known to be "sympathetic" with Hizbollah in other political matters, and have supported the party's direction thus far. These include Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh, Health Minister Muhammed Khalifeh (who is close to Amal and Nabih Berri), and Agriculture Minister Talal Sahili. All in all, Hizbollah and its allies now control at least of a fifth of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's current government, compared with the 13 ministers of Hariri's "Anti-Syrian" coalition.

The effect of Hizbollah's inclusion in government has mostly been to rein in elements of Fouad Siniora's government who seek a heavy Western hand in restoring

Photo: Nicholas Blanford/Focusmideast.com

A Hizbollah sign welcoming visitors on a road just after a checkpoint at the entrance of Israel's former occupation zone in south Lebanon.

Lebanese "sovereignty" following Syria's withdrawal. For example, Hizbollah supported the international enquiry, led by Detlev Mehlis, into Hariri's assassination, but was quick to criticize the commission's findings as biased, especially the leak of a penultimate version of Mehlis' first report which named specific members of the Syrian regime (see AJT-6). When Assad finally rejected Mehlis' first report in a hard-line speech in early November, in which he called Siniora a "slave" of the international community, the prime minister called a cabinet meeting the next day to discuss the speech. Hizbollah and its ministers immediately walked out of the meeting, earning them scorn from the Sunni, Christian and Druze elements active in the anti-Syrian coalition. When the second Mehlis report was issued on December 12, the same day that Gebran Tueni, editor of Lebanon's *An-Nahar* newspaper and premier Syria-critic, was assassinated, a member of Siniora's cabinet, Marwan Hamade, demanded a cabinet session to call for an international investigation into the string of bombings. When Hizbollah deputies discovered that the cabinet was discussing the issue in private and was about to issue the investigation demand as a *fait accompli*, the party immediately threatened to pull out of government, which would bring Siniora's house down and force him into the hands of General Michel Aoun.

Tête-à-tête

To shape my questions ahead of the Hizbollah interview, I spent considerable time talking with Christian and Sunni Muslim Lebanese about their impressions of Hizbollah. The bias against the organization in Christian areas was general, although many Christian youth who did not come from wealthy families expressed admiration for Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's charismatic speeches. Interestingly enough, almost all of those I spoke with expressed respect for the party's shrewdness in maneuvering Lebanon's complex sectarian system and for Hizbollah's famous discipline. In many ways, it reminded me of my British friends who have a sort of loathing awe of Germans.

Many Sunnis I spoke with have similar views, but intra-faith tensions are apparent. After all, most Sunnis believe that Hizbollah's version of Islam is not "correct." But somehow, I felt that the reasons were more of this world than the world of doctrine. It is generally understood that some kind of adjustment to Lebanon's constitution will have to be made in the medium term if the country is to deal with its demographic realities. The effect of the Ta'if Accord was to weaken the powers of the Maronite Presidency, placing executive power in the hands of the council of ministers — led by the Sunni Prime Minister — and changing the ratio of Christian to Muslim deputies from 6:5 to an even split. Thus, the power of the Shiite speaker of parliament was strengthened — but only marginally.

Should another census finally be held as a result of a peace treaty with Israel or another regional political shift, the Shiites are widely expected to demand greater executive power, which in today's Lebanon would come at the expense of the Sunni Prime Minister. The Sunni-Maronite cooperation of the last century that created modern Lebanon could then be altered, if not ended. Just what kind of reconfiguration would be in order is unknown, but whatever formula that comes about would likely include a significant Shiite role.

Harder to understand are Shiite sentiments. A quick look at the last election shows that Amal ended up with 15 seats to Hizbollah's 14 — an almost even split. However, it is widely known that support for Amal is waning, due to its close association with Syria, as well as Hizbollah's continued resistance efforts. On November 21, for example, Hizbollah launched the largest attack on Israeli positions since the withdrawal of 2000, grabbing headlines in Lebanon and the region. Few missed the fact, however, that the raid came exactly one week after Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki visited Syrian President Bashar al Assad. Mottaki also met with Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command chief Ahmed Jabril, and Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal, as well as a reported conference with Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.

As I waited in the reception area of Naboulsi's office, I sat facing two giant murals of Iranian Ayatollahs Khomeni and Khameni. They reminded me of how many signs of Iranian influence I had seen in Lebanon over the past year. But that memory faded as I realized that, other than the murals, this could be the office of any other political party in Lebanon.

"I am sorry about everything," Naboulsi said in reference to my repeated calls to interview him. "The Western media is biased against Hizbollah. We have met so many over the last year, and when their stories come out, they publish lies about what our party is all about. We want the world to understand us. We are from the Islamic World. In the Arab World, we are the model for ideal resistance."

I began by asking why Hizbollah had finally decided to enter government.

"The time for us to be on the offensive is here," Naboulsi said. "Thus far, we have been in tenth place in Lebanon. If you read history, life is a cycle, and things are turning. It's our time now."

According to Naboulsi, Hizbollah's decision to enter government is not a result of the Syrian pullout, but rather circumstances that changed following the 2000 Israeli withdrawal.

"There have been many armies and movements that collapsed following achieving their goals," said Naboulsi. "Our resistance continues against Israel. But following

Photo: Nicholas Blanford

A nurse and patient in the Saleh Ghandour hospital, Bint Jbeil. The hospital is named after a suicide bomber who blew himself up outside the facility in 1995 when it was run by Israel.

our victory, we decided to be modest. We did not demand power. We were skeptical to join the government, since the government was corrupt. We believe in changing the 'hearts and minds' of people in Lebanon first. Now we have the Energy and Water ministry, and we have cut the millions of dollars in payoff over fuel purchases. This is why we stayed outside until now, to make sure we stayed clean."

Naboulsi says Hizbollah's activities on the ground in Shiite areas make the party's move into government a natural progression of the party's expansion.

"The government in Beirut has ignored our areas for years," Naboulsi said. "In Hermel [North Bekaa, see AJT-7], there was no infrastructure. We brought water, sanitation services. We have built two hospitals in the Bekaa, two in south Lebanon and one in Beirut, as well as a number of clinics."

Naboulsi dodged the question of whether he believed that the Shiites were the largest sect in the country, and instead pointed to a few basic indicators.

"Property in Shiite areas is much more expensive than in similar Christian areas," Naboulsi said. "That's because demand is so much higher. If you are Christian and want to join the army, they take you right away to maintain the sectarian balance in the military. So many Shiites join that they turn many way."

He went on, "Muslim birth rates are high, and Christians are leaving the country. Twenty or thirty years from now, it will be a disaster. It is not in the interest of Lebanese Christians to seek support from France and America. Outside interference in internal affairs is over. Ta'if means the [Maronite Christian] President does not appoint the Prime Minister. Parliament does."

When I asked Naboulsi about the statements of some Beirutis that Hizbollah is just Iran working in Lebanon, and a Syrian client, and has therefore naturally worked outside the system, I came to understand how deep the resistance issue cuts through Lebanese society.

"When people spend all of their time on Mono Street [the nightlife district close to my home in the East Beirut neighborhood of Ashrafieh], or on the resort beaches, all the while we were spilling our blood to fight the Israeli occupation, they have no pride in their country. They have no right to accuse us of not being Lebanese. We are friends with Iran and Syria. It is our honor."

It was then that I noticed a long, thick scar down the left side of Naboulsi's neck that ran down into his shirt. When I asked him if he himself had fought in the resistance, Naboulsi pointed to the scar, as well as a few other points on his torso where bullets and shrapnel had penetrated his body.

As Hizbollah moves deeper into state decision-making, Naboulsi claimed that focusing on the Israeli threat continued to be its organizational core.

"Israel continues to occupy our land, and we are the best suited to confront this occupation," Naboulsi said. "We took Israeli soldiers hostage in 1985, and forced them to swap them for our people in 2001-2. They only listened to us when we captured Israeli soldiers."

For Naboulsi, focusing on internal divisions in Lebanon only plays into the hands of its enemies in the West and Israel that seek to divide the country.

"The problem is not inside Lebanon, it's outside," Naboulsi said. "We need to come together to expel Israel. We should not fight each other, but Israel instead."

Concerning the issue of disarming Hizbollah under Security Council Resolution 1559, Naboulsi minced no words.

"Israel will continue to be a threat, even if it withdraws from the Shabaa Farms," says Naboulsi. "We will never lay down our arms — they will have to take them from our dead hands. Resistance includes organizations like us, the Lebanese Army and the people. When we work together as Lebanese, we can work miracles."

For Naboulsi, suggestions concerning Hizbollah's absorption into the Lebanese army are unacceptable.

"That doesn't work," Naboulsi said. "Ta'if says we only have to hand over our heavy weapons. Every militia in Lebanon still carries automatic weapons and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. We have excellent relations with the Army, and with parliament."

How far will they go?

Meeting a spokesman for Hizbollah for the first time was very much like stepping into a completely different

realm of Lebanese politics. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to meet many of Lebanon's political leaders in Beirut, where political discussion is often heated. Beirut is but a part of Lebanon, however; sitting down with Hizbollah is a lot like taking a journey outside the capital into the lands annexed in 1920.

Two major issues stand out. First, Hizbollah is unlikely to disarm in the near future. Israel is not going away any time soon, and Hizbollah is adamant that an Israeli pullout from Shebaa is not enough. Israel still flies fighter sorties over Lebanon, and therefore, still threatens Lebanon's security. While Naboulsi emphasized national unity, and coming together to fight the external threat, his words were interlaced with bitterness toward those segments of Lebanese society that have kept Shiites third-class citizens. Very much like the Nation of Islam in the United States, Hizbollah believes in taking matters into its own hands, and negotiating from a position of strength in a domestic political system that they believe is corrupt and neglects them. They know that Christian and Sunni political circles, and their American and French allies, want them to give up their arms. Given its struggle to organize Shiites over the last two decades, Hizbollah would be unlikely to disarm without constitutional changes that would give them a greater role in government. If the international community forces the Lebanese army to disarm Hizbollah by force, it will likely set off a sectarian fire that will be difficult to put out.

Photo: Nicholas Blanford

Hizbollah receives remains of its fighters in a prisoner swap with Israel in January 2004 near the Lebanese town of Ras Naqoura.

Second, Hizbollah very much sees itself as the nation's chief defender by virtue of its resistance activities. It is not afraid to draw clear lines about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior for Lebanese, or the government, concerning foreign involvement in domestic affairs. The party's rhetoric, combined with Naboulsi's words and the party's actions in the council of ministers, indicate that further internationalization of the probe into Hariri's death is likely to provoke Hizbollah's withdrawal from government, possibly throwing Lebanon once again into political crisis.

How far would Hizbollah go to maintain this line? Concurrent with Hizbollah's inclusion in government and the investigation into Hariri's death has been a string of 15 bombings targeting Lebanese politicians and journalists. So far, Syria has been blamed for the attacks, as part of some kind of revenge campaign against its Lebanese opponents.

Countering this theory is the fact that not all of the bombings have targeted voices against Syria. The attempted car bombing of long-time Syria ally and former Lebanese interior minister Elias Murr, Hizbollah as well as the assassination of Communist Party Chief George Hawi, another known friend of Damascus, have provoked questions. Added to this list was Hezbollah Shura Council member Sheikh Muhammed Yazbek on December 11, the day before the second Mehlis report was issued and noted anti-Syrian publisher Gebran Tueni was assassinated with a car bomb.

Also surprising is that the main suspects in custody in connection with Hariri's assassination are Lebanon's top security chiefs. Lebanon's Interior Minister has announced few solid leads, and has instead called the bomber "a phantom" with extraordinary abilities to elude detection. ❑

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