The Future of Lebanon

Paul Salem

BLIND INTO BEIRUT

HEZBOLLAH's July 12 raid into Israel, backed by Iran, was intended to entangle Israel in a limited skirmish on its northern border and a drawn-out prisoner exchange at a time when Iran was facing mounting pressure over its nuclear program. Israel, backed by the United States, responded with a large-scale war meant to deliver a knockout blow to Hezbollah and thereby remove the missile threat to northern Israel, weaken Iran in any upcoming showdown, and eliminate what the United States considers a major opponent in the war on terrorism. Washington also hoped to give a boost to the Lebanese government, which it considered a potential democratic success story.

But wars rarely proceed as expected, and no participant in this war got what it had bargained for. Hezbollah ended up in a full-scale war, in which it won some battlefield victories and popularity in the Arab and Muslim world but which devastated its Lebanese Shiite constituency and narrowed its tactical and political options. Israel, despite unleashing massive airpower on Hezbollah strongholds, failed to knock out the organization or even to stop its missile attacks, while the setbacks suffered by Israel's ground invasion had the effect of puncturing the aura of invincibility long projected by the Israel Defense Forces. Tehran reaped some benefit from Hezbollah's increased popularity and perhaps can point to the organization's robust performance as a warning to those considering military action against Iran, but this war wasted much of the deterrent power that it had vested in Hezbollah for its own hour of need. Meanwhile, the United States looked on helplessly as the crisis drove Arab and Muslim public opinion further

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against it and weakened an already fragile Lebanon. As is the case with most proxy wars, the highest price was paid by the host country, Lebanon, which found itself the arena of regional and international war. The terrible toll on civilian life, housing, and infrastructure made this one of the most devastating wars in Lebanon's recent history.

Significantly, the crisis was resolved diplomatically rather than militarily, with the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701—a transformative resolution that provides a meaningful basis for moving forward and a framework for new political and security realities in Lebanon and the region. The deployment of the Lebanese army to southern Lebanon with UN troop support has put an end to four decades of control by nonstate actors. Resolution 1701 is an important step toward a stable and sovereign Lebanon. It deserves sustained support and beckons the international community to make renewed efforts to find multilateral diplomatic solutions to other conflicts in the area.

A PRECARIOUS STALEMATE

LEBANON's decade-and-a-half civil war ended in 1990 after the signing of the Document of National Understanding, known as the Taif agreement, which recalibrated political power among the country's various "confessional" communities. Members of Parliament are elected to seats that must be split evenly between Christians and Muslims. Parliament must elect a Maronite Christian as president and a Shiite Muslim as Speaker, and the president must name a Sunni Muslim to be prime minister. Positions in the Council of Ministers are also divvied up on a confessional basis, as are most high-level posts in the civil and armed services. The Taif agreement also mandated the departure of Syrian troops, which had been in Lebanon since 1976. But the troops stayed, and Damascus essentially controlled Lebanon—dominating government, interfering in elections, naming presidents and prime ministers, making major policy decisions—until 2005.

Hezbollah was founded in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Initially, reflecting the radical ideology of Tehran, it called for the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon. After the war, however, it joined the Lebanese political system, wound down its activities against U.S. and

*Standing tall: Hezbollah member viewing the destruction
in a Shiite suburb of Beirut, July 16, 2006*

Western interests, and concentrated on guerrilla activities against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, while also building up large social welfare programs in Shiite communities.

When Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah claimed a historic victory. At the time, many argued that it was time for Hezbollah to give up its arms and cede its territory to the Lebanese army. But Syria effectively blocked these demands, and Hezbollah came up with new justifications for its guerrilla resistance. (Most important was Shebaa Farms, a contested strip of land on the Lebanese-Syrian border that Syrian troops moved into in the mid-1960s and then was seized by Israel in 1967. Lebanon claims the area as its own, but Israel considers it part of the occupied Syrian Golan.) It is likely that if the Lebanese army had taken back control of the south in 2000, the war of 2006 would not have erupted.

As regional tensions escalated after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Lebanon became more polarized over the presence of Syrian troops. Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and a number of Christian leaders united in an anti-Syrian, pro-Western

coalition. Un Resolution 1559, of September 2004, called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon. Finally, Hariri's assassination, in February 2005, triggered massive demonstrations that led to the departure of Syrian troops in April 2005. The anti-Syrian coalition—known as the March 14 coalition—hoped that the withdrawal would weaken Hezbollah and allow for the removal of the Syrian-backed president, Emile Lahoud. But instead, Hezbollah managed to put itself at the center of Lebanese politics, leading an anti-American coalition against the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition. Meanwhile, as Syria became embattled over the un investigation into the Hariri assassination (early reports implicated top officials in Damascus), Iran moved to take a more direct role in Lebanon, essentially supplanting Syria as Hezbollah's direct supervisor in the Lebanese arena.

On the eve of the recent war, Lebanon was at a political stalemate. The government, led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, was made up largely of members of the March 14 coalition but also included members of Hezbollah and Amal (the Shiite party led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri), who had effective veto power. Key economic and political reforms were frozen, and the state coexisted uneasily alongside the independent power of Hezbollah.

MARKERS IN THE STORM

In the first days of the crisis, the government in Beirut issued a statement critical of Hezbollah for arrogating the power to make war. Conspicuously, other prominent Sunni states in the region—namely Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—issued similar statements. Some in the March 14 coalition suspected Hezbollah, backed by Syria and Iran, of deliberately triggering the war in order to drive the country into crisis, bring down the March 14 government, and then take over. Hezbollah, meanwhile, suspected the March 14 group of encouraging the war in order to knock it out. Tensions were further exacerbated by escalating Sunni-Shiite tensions in the region and by the fact that most of the initial Israeli attacks were focused on Shiite areas.

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Public opinion shifted, however, when it became apparent that Israel was not simply retaliating for the July 12 operation but launching an all-out war on Hezbollah, attacking civilians and civilian infrastructure and raiding areas throughout the country. From then on, even if Hezbollah was viewed as irresponsible for staging the attack, the blame shifted to Israel—and the United States by extension—for prosecuting and prolonging such a wide-scale war. As civilian casualties mounted, early anger at Hezbollah turned to fury at Israel and the United States.

Reeling from the destruction and wary of growing Sunni-Shiite tensions, the Lebanese government shifted its focus to working out a cease-fire. Stunned by the refusal of the United States—supposedly its main ally—to push for a quick halt to the carnage, on July 26 the Lebanese government desperately put forward a seven-point framework for a lasting cease-fire. Resolution 1701 was built around this framework, but it took two and a half weeks for the United States, France, and other members of the international community to settle on the final agreement. The perception that the basic outlines of the war's outcome were set by late July and yet the fighting continued led many in Lebanon to suspect that Washington wanted to prolong the war in order to give Israel time to achieve some sort of Pyrrhic victory—while doubling the human and economic toll of the war.

Despite its belated birth, Resolution 1701 is thorough and robust. It calls for a cessation of hostilities, followed by the deployment of the Lebanese army and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to the border area south of the Litani River. It also increases the size of UNIFIL to 15,000 troops, puts an embargo on arms deliveries to all nonstate actors, and demands both the return of the two Israeli soldiers kidnapped on July 12 and the withdrawal of Israeli troops. It also calls on Lebanon to disarm all nonstate armed groups and on the UN secretary-general to work toward resolving the Shebaa Farms dispute and the issue of Lebanese captives in Israeli jails. As of this writing, the Lebanese army has already deployed to the south, and UNIFIL has grown from around 2,000 troops to almost 10,000. Hezbollah, as part of the Lebanese government, accepted Resolution 1701. In official visits, Secretary-General Kofi Annan also secured public statements of a commitment to abide by the resolution from Syria and Iran.

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HEZBOLLAH'S SCORECARD

As the guns fell silent and the dust began to settle onto a scene of extensive devastation, many Lebanese were initially preoccupied with the debate about who had "won" or "lost" the war. Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, rushed to declare a "divine victory": the war had not ended with triumph for Israel (as all other Arab-Israeli wars have), Hezbollah fighters had routed Israeli armored columns and elite brigades, and Hezbollah had continued to launch missiles and inflict heavy losses on Israeli troops throughout the war. Nasrallah's claims seemed to be confirmed by the televised testimony of confused and demoralized Israeli soldiers returning to Israel from difficult engagements in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's victory was trumpeted throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

But it also became clear that Lebanon, and particularly the Shiite areas in southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, had paid an enormous human and economic price. Some 1,200 civilians (almost a third of them children) died, 4,000 were wounded, and a million were displaced. Some 130,000 housing units, thousands of small businesses, hundreds of roads, 300 factories, 80 bridges, dozens of schools and hospitals, and the country's electricity network were destroyed or damaged. This was the costliest Arab-Israeli war in Lebanon's history—more devastating even than Israel's 1982 invasion. Economic losses were initially estimated at around $7 billion, or 30 percent of GDP. For a country still paying for a decade of laborious reconstruction and with a debt burden equal to 180 percent of GDP, the war dealt a staggering blow.

As an organization, Hezbollah also suffered tactical and political losses. It has given up control of the area south of the Litani River to the Lebanese army and the UN force, and it has agreed to grant the Lebanese military control of Lebanese-Syrian border points—both very significant concessions. Given the devastation of Shiite areas, Hezbollah must also face the fact that it cannot put its constituency through another war anytime soon and will have to concentrate instead on relief and reconstruction for the next 2 to 3 years at least. Between 300 and 600 of its elite fighters were killed, and many of its medium- and long-range missiles destroyed. Hezbollah is also struggling to reframe its raison d'être. The argument it used before the war—that its arms would deter Israel—

proved wrong. The war also undermined the impression that Nasrallah was too intelligent and responsible to expose Lebanon to a ruinous attack. Meanwhile, even in the Shiite community, there has been grumbling about how neither Iran nor Syria came to their aid during the fighting.

RESOLUTION AND RESOLVE

THE FINAL verdict on whether Hezbollah has been strengthened or weakened will hinge on further developments in Lebanon and the region. If Resolution 1701 is thoroughly implemented and the Lebanese government takes its security responsibilities seriously, Hezbollah will grow weaker and the Lebanese state will emerge as stronger. Despite the devastation wrought on the country, Lebanon can use the UN resolution as an opportunity for considerable progress in the immediate future. Its ability to do so will depend on what steps are taken to consolidate national security, economic recovery, and political development.

First of all, the government must be firm about implementing the security provisions of the resolution. The deployment of the Lebanese army to the area south of the Litani River has gone smoothly, and Hezbollah has conceded the area for the foreseeable future, perhaps because it wants to put a buffer zone between itself and Israel. The army has also deployed along the border with Syria. (Damascus has threatened to close its borders with Lebanon if UN troops are deployed there, but the Lebanese government has so far averted a shutdown by asking only for technical and equipment support from the UN along the frontier.) Lebanon's waters are being patrolled by UNIFIL-affiliated international naval vessels, and Lebanon's sea- and airports are under the control of Lebanese security forces, with technical assistance from UNIFIL. Accordingly, the basic provisions of Resolution 1701 are likely to hold for the near future. Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran have all formally accepted the resolution, and the participation of a large number of countries in UNIFIL—including China, France, Germany, Italy, and Turkey—will give pause to anyone who might otherwise threaten the force.

Even as it reiterates the long-standing demand that all nonstate armed actors give up their weapons, Resolution 1701 does not provide a mechanism for disarming Hezbollah—the key internal issue. A number of possible approaches have been proposed, ranging from

straight disarmament to the integration of Hezbollah's forces into the national defense structure as a sort of civil defense league or national guard. If Resolution 1701 is successfully implemented—if the army can secure the south, there are no future Israeli attacks, Shebaa Farms is handed over to UN control, and all captives are returned—the task of persuading Hezbollah to disarm will be easier, since its raison d'être as a militia will be compromised. At that point, however, much will depend on the behavior of its main sponsor, Iran. If Iran is still ascendant and defiant and continues to regard an armed Hezbollah as a necessary tool of its foreign policy, then the chances of integrating, decommissioning, or disarming the militia will remain very slim.

At the economic level, the challenges are also daunting. The government must move quickly in the reconstruction process, renew tourist and investor confidence in the country, and manage the precarious debt situation. Fortunately, since the government is headed by a prime minister who oversaw much of the development effort after the civil war, it is well equipped to do this. Moreover, effective efforts in blighted areas could prove the state's immediate relevance. Although Hezbollah initially promised to pay for all the relief and reconstruction, it has since gone back on that promise, presumably after realizing that the cost of reconstruction far exceeds its capacities. Interestingly, an Iranian delegation that visited the country after the war pledged to channel most of its aid through the Lebanese government rather than through Hezbollah.

Politically, the Lebanese government must move beyond its short-term concern with holding on to power and show that it can bring about political reform. This means a fuller implementation of the Taif agreement, including passing overdue election and administrative decentralization bills. The government must also do more to show its commitment to fighting corruption and improving the civil and armed services; Hezbollah has pointed to the weaknesses of the Lebanese army and state in the past to justify its own existence. More immediately, the state must address the serious divisions that had led to political stalemate before the war—and that will again if nothing changes.

Before the crisis, a national dialogue had made significant progress on issues relating to Shebaa Farms, the Hariri assassination investigation, and the status of Palestinians in Lebanon, but it got bogged down when it came to Hezbollah's arms and the election of a new

president. Now, Hezbollah and Michel Aoun, a prominent Maronite leader with a large following, are calling for the establishment of a national unity government in which they both would have a larger share of power. The current leadership has so far resisted, arguing that such an unwieldy government would be unable to implement the UN resolution. But the government must, in any case, find other ways to meet the opposition partway: for example, by reviving the national dialogue, passing the overdue election law, and being open to a jointly approved candidate for next year's presidential election.

The key players all have important choices to make. Hezbollah must decide whether it actually wishes to integrate into the Lebanese state, and the Shiite community that backs it must choose between two mutually exclusive options: a united and independent Lebanon or a "two-state solution." The government could help bring the Shiite community closer to the former choice by taking seriously the community's complaints about how the post-Taif state has developed. While Syria dominated Lebanon, the main Shiite parties, allied with Damascus, enjoyed considerable power. With the Syrians gone, the Shiites' concerns about the post-Taif state have become more pressing and relevant. At some point soon, a bicameral legislature must be established, with a lower house free of confessional quotas, which would allow the Shiites better representation. It will not do to argue that the Shiites cannot be trusted with power because they are too close to outside actors (as the Maronites argued of the Sunnis in the past). They will reduce their dependence on foreign powers largely to the extent that they feel like they have a secure stake in the government. The horse must be put in front, and the cart will follow. And every group in Lebanon has at some point committed the sin of relying on extensive outside support: the Maronites allied with Israel and the Sunnis with the Palestine Liberation Organization, and everyone used—and was used by—the Syrians.

BEYOND CRISIS

THE WILL of the international community is also crucial. In particular, it must follow through on its pledge to provide a beefed-up UN force and give serious training and technical and materiel support to the

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Lebanese armed forces and security services. Foreign governments and multilateral institutions must also make good on their promise to supply $2 billion for the country's reconstruction and must raise more money in time (as much as $3 billion more might be needed). They should also strongly encourage reinvestment in Lebanon.

Politically, the international community must be careful not to break Lebanon in the process of trying to fix it. Political unity is the key to stability, and pushing the country too far will exacerbate internal divisions and ultimately prove counterproductive. Outside actors can encourage the government in Beirut to undertake overdue political reforms, but they must listen closely to its concerns in the process. At the same time, they must guard against efforts by any of Lebanon's neighbors to undermine Resolution 1701. A despondent Israel, concerned about its army's loss of prestige, should be dissuaded from launching any further attacks simply to reassert its military superiority. A cornered Syrian government, fearful of its loss of influence and the ongoing UN investigation into the Hariri assassination, should be coaxed along the road to peace. And with regard to Iran, Resolution 1701 would be best served by strong multilateral diplomacy to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions. A war with Iran would necessarily include Lebanon.

The final article of Resolution 1701 stresses "the importance of, and the need to achieve, a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East." Indeed, if the international community does not move to consolidate the resolution with further attempts at making peace in the region, it will eventually unravel in the face of escalating regional conflict. Although quick success in the peace process may be implausible, the mere revival of the process of peacemaking would have an important and moderating effect on all players in the region. A stable and peaceful Lebanon could contribute to a stable and peaceful region, but an explosive region would sooner or later come back to destroy Lebanon.

Resolution 1701 does not fully satisfy any of the parties involved, yet it is an important building block toward stabilizing Lebanon, which in turn could open the way for taking further steps toward stability and peace there and in the rest of the region. This latest war was only a symptom of wider and deeper conflicts. But successfully treating the symptom should encourage the region and the international community to begin treating the underlying malady as well.⊛