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Hizbullah's Promise

JOSEPH ALAGHA

In the aftermath of August 2006, belief that war had simply "erupted" because of a few captured soldiers was shaken. Israel's insistence that its actions were legitimate "defensive" responses to Hizbullah's kidnapping of two soldiers lost its credibility triggering suspicion that it served as a pretext for launching a long-planned war intended to undermine Hizbullah's influence as both a militant and democratic political player. Notwithstanding, Israel seriously misjudged its own capacity and Hizbullah's strength. Likewise, Hizbullah committed a strategic mistake in miscalculating the intensity of Israeli response, apparently assuming that holding Israeli soldiers would ultimately lead to a swap operation with Lebanese prisoners. Acknowledging misjudgement, Nasrallah later stated that the soldiers would not have been kidnapped if the devastating outcome were foreseen.

Although the origins of war should not be reduced to the prisoner question, their importance in processes of legitimization highlights the symbolic significance of prisoners for both parties. By attempting to take or liberate prisoners, both aimed not only to display military power, but also to demonstrate commitment to their populations. Understandably then, the destruction of Lebanon resulted in a victory for Hizbullah. Indeed, though some Lebanese question the wisdom of Hiz-

After the 34-day war in Lebanon, both Israel and Hizbullah claimed victory. With over one million displaced, 1,300 casualties, many more injured, and imperceptible changes in the status quo, such victory cries seem out of place. Looking beyond strictly military parameters, however, Alagha argues that the war resulted in greater political prominence of Hizbullah, enhanced prestige of its leaders, and even increased national integration.

bullah's action, nevertheless Hizbullah emerged from this crisis much more popular than before.

Promises and deliveries

While Hizbullah's kidnapping of Israeli soldiers should in part be seen as a gesture of support to the Intifada after the June Israeli incursion into Gaza, it was also prominently related to some morally charged statements Nasrallah had made six years earlier. He had made a public "faithful promise": "We are people who don't leave their prisoners behind." Pragmatically, then, the kidnapping aimed at liberating Lebanese prisoners of war in Israeli jails. Moreover, by acting on the prisoner question, Hizbullah reinforced its status as a militant Islamic resistance movement, one which seemed to be shaken by its participation in the democratic political process.

ing public affairs. Indeed, Hizbullah honoured its words and delivered on its promises of handing out cash donations to all of those whose homes have been partially or completely destroyed.

Attempting to defuse the crisis, the Lebanese cabinet—including its two Hizbullah ministers—unanimously endorsed PM Sanyura's seven points, one of which mentions that the state enjoys absolute monopoly over the use of force; a proposition that Hizbullah had persistently resisted. Moreover, after its rejection of the UN draft resolution because it fell short of demanding an Israeli withdrawal, and in an attempt to influence the wording of the new resolution to Lebanon's advantage, the cabinet unanimously approved deploying Lebanese soldiers to the border region with Israel. This seemed to constitute a genuine policy shift rather than a rhetorical move since Hizbullah's earlier discourse had vetoed sending the army to the south. The cabinet also approved the 2006 UNSC Resolution 1701, which calls, among other things, for the cessation of hostilities and Hizbullah's disarmament, by a political process, rather than by military force, as Kofi Annan clarified. In these decisions, Hizbullah's two ministers voted "yes". Nasrallah asserted that accepting the deployment of the army to the south (a repeated Israeli demand) would "serve national interest since the strength of Lebanon is in its resistance and national unity." This policy targeting more national integration and Lebanonization, aims at portraying Hizbullah as a progressive social movement and mainstream political party.

Prospects

Most likely Hizbullah not only survived this war, but also enhanced its domestic, regional, and international fame. Domestically, it showered its supporters with "Iranian" petrodollars and honoured its promise of immediately rebuilding the war damages. Also, Hizbullah achieved the respect of many Lebanese by agreeing to deploy the army to the south and accepting 1701, which would pave the way for discussing not only disarmament, but eventually dismantling its military wing once Israel relinquishes the Sheba Farms. Regionally and internationally, Hizbullah boosted its pan-Arab and pan-Islamic credentials by scoring a victory against Israel, a victory unattained by any Arab army. Israel aiming to eradicate Hizbullah's military wing, succeeded only in cutting its tail. Hizbullah emerged victorious by shedding off its skin, but keeping its body intact. Its capacity for mobilization coupled with its theory of martyrdom and religious ideology, on the one hand, and its integration into the Lebanese public sphere, on the other, serve as guarantees to its survival throughout the wind of change.

Image
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PHOTO BY ERIC GAILLARD / © REUTERS, 2006

Lebanese residents stand in the rubble of their homes in southern Beirut, 16 August 2006.

Undoubtedly, the Israeli response was devastating. Israel imposed a triple blockade on Lebanon virtually isolating the country from the outside world. Large parts of Lebanon's infrastructure were destroyed and its economy came to an almost standstill. The war resulted in more than one million displaced, 1300 dead, and 3000 wounded. By attacking Christian areas Israel plausibly aimed at sowing a wedge between the Lebanese and Hizbullah, in order for Hizbullah to be blamed for the misfortunes that befell Lebanon. Israel repeatedly stated that its war targeted Hizbullah and *not* the Lebanese population.

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