

By Andras Beszterczey, UK Defence Forum Researcher

Hizballah is often heralded by allies and enemies alike as the textbook example of how an Islamist organisation can be assimilated, albeit painfully, into a democratic system. However, it is not clear whether the Party of God's 'Lebanonisation', coined by the veteran Lebanon commentator Augustus Richard Norton, was conducted willingly. The question is of the utmost importance as the nation awaits the findings of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), investigating the 14 February 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which is likely to implicate members of Hizballah and reveal its true commitment to the democratic system.

The decision to participate in the 1992 elections, Lebanon's first since the civil war began in 1975, was a painful one for Hizballah. Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, the Secretary-General from 1989, warned that if the Party of God agreed to discard its ultimate objectives of creating an Islamic Republic for the sake of domestic political growth, it would only be a matter of time till the resistance against Israel was likewise abandoned. He was so adamant in his stance that Tufayli subsequently left, or was perhaps expelled – outsiders will never know, and ultimately he proved to be correct.

The fundamental misconception surrounding Hizballah is also the resistance's greatest hour – the Israeli withdrawal in May 2000. Hizballah did not beat Israel in the manner that international opinion believes. The Israeli Prime Minister in 2000, Ehud Barak, had, since the height of his military career in the early 1980s pushed for a full withdrawal from Lebanon and simply implemented a policy that he had desired to see for nearly two decades once gaining the premiership in July 1999. The lack of Israeli response to continued guerrilla activities along the Israeli-Lebanese border – Hizballah made an estimated eleven attempts to abduct Israeli soldiers between May 2000 and July 2006 – was first and foremost due to Israel's preoccupation with the Second Intifada. Nasrallah gravely miscalculated in July 2006 that Israel was still paralysed. The July War that Hizballah provoked with its abduction of two Israeli soldiers was so destructive that the Party could never again bring a conflict of such devastation upon Lebanon, knowing well what Israel's response would be lest Hizballah attack, and still survive as a political party.

Since the July War the resistance has been inactive with the only operation potentially attributed to their fighters being the engagement on the border on 3 August 2010 between the Lebanese Army and the IDF. Accusations arose that the Lebanese soldiers were linked to Hizballah who ordered them to initiate a small engagement along the border to reactivate the fear of the Israeli enemy, yet the fire-fight is but a shadow of Hizballah's former guerrilla activities. As a result the 'first-leg' of the Party's legitimacy, the resistance, disappeared because the need for Hizballah to maintain its domestic image bore greater weight than the need to fight Israel.

A second misconception surrounding the evolution of Hizballah is its relationship with Syria. Before the Cedar Revolution, the demonstrations calling for Syria's withdrawal after the

assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Syria controlled all matters of importance relating to Lebanon's foreign and defence policy. Its presence in Lebanon dates back to 1976 when it intervened, with the international community's blessing, in the civil war to stem the tide of the local radical Palestinian presence. The negative aspect of Syria's domination was that the secular pan-Arabist regime of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and his son and heir, Bashar, dictated both the scope and magnitude of Hizballah's social welfare schemes to avert the Party from gaining a preponderance of power. Released of Syrian control, Hizballah was henceforth able to dictate its own policies. This became apparent with the May-June 2005 elections as Amal and other rival forces, previously dependent on Syrian patronage, subordinated themselves to Hizballah's leadership creating a Shia hegemon. With the subsequent growth of Hizballah's actions, exemplified by its use of its weapons for domestic political objectives in May 2008, the Syrian factor waned.

Nevertheless, Syria maintains significant influence over Hizballah that has only recently begun to be appreciated. The most visible aspect is the use of Syria as a transit for Hizballah's arsenal, specifically the missiles it used during the July War to bring life in northern Israel to a halt. Secondly, Syria still maintains significant intelligence and security apparatus within Lebanon. On 31 August fighting broke out in Beirut between Hizballah and al-Ahbash, a Sunni faction. The argument was supposedly over a parking space; however, rumours are rife that the clash was instigated by Bashar al-Assad to remind the Party of Syria's preeminent position in Lebanon.

Hizballah has been reigned in once out of domestic political considerations and Syria may well be the answer to controlling the Party again. Others have likewise come to this conclusion. Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Rafiq Hariri's son, stated last month that Syria was not responsible for the assassination of his father, a volte-face of perplexing proportion considering that the anti-Syrian issue was the only uniting rallying cry of the various Maronite and Sunni groups involved in the Cedar Revolution. Yet Syria's influence in Lebanon has historically aimed at maintaining the status quo and Hariri seems to have come to the conclusion that an alliance with his father's killers is the lesser of two evils compared to the growing strength of Hizballah and its potentially antagonistic reaction to the STL.

Further UK Defence Forum research on Hezbollah can be accessed [here](#) .