

The Hezbollah enigma

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Introduction

The armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006 – henceforth ‘the Second Lebanon War’ – came as a surprise for a large part of the international community and public opinion. It also appears to have taken the warring parties by surprise. While Hezbollah evoked an unexpectedly fierce Israeli reaction by abducting two Israeli soldiers in the border area near Zarit and thus triggered the Second Lebanon War, Israel on its turn, was taken by surprise by the quality and tenacity of Hezbollah’s military defensive and offensive capability. The present contribution investigates to what extent the surprise can be related to the nature, objectives and way of operating of Hezbollah. The primary research questions of this contribution relate to the very nature of Hezbollah and the character and magnitude of the threat it poses to its neighbours. Should Hezbollah be regarded as a Lebanese Shiite political-military movement which in the last instance champions purely Lebanese interests, or is it a movement with a much more far-reaching agenda and close ties abroad? The set-up for answering the above questions is as follows. After a brief description of the origins, nature and objectives of Hezbollah, a number of significant developments and events with regard to the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah will be discussed. Not only the warring parties, but also the role and influence of third parties, such as Syria, Iran and the United Nations, will be dealt with. The reason for this is that the conduct of a religious political-societal movement like Hezbollah in the complex and opaque political-societal environment of Lebanon and the Middle-East can only be analysed by positioning and considering the phenomenon of Hezbollah in the broader context of this environment.

After a discussion pertaining to the major actors directly and indirectly involved in the conflict, the analysis will be concluded with a summary and observation in which the main questions will be addressed. Because of the recent character of the events and developments described, this contribution has made relatively frequent use of sources originating from the media. By making the choice from these sources as broad as possi-

ble, an attempt has been made to obviate the existing quantitative and qualitative unbalance amongst the often partisan sources.

Origin, nature and objectives

The name Hezbollah comes from Hizbu-Allah and is Arabic for the ‘Party of God’. Hezbollah derives its inspiration from the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, and maintains close relations with that country.² Especially after the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) the movement evolved into a major power factor within the Lebanese political arena. The explanation for this can be found in the fact that Hezbollah is essentially different from other political parties and movements in Lebanon. In fact, it is much more than the combination of a political faction with its own militia, so common during the Lebanese civil war. First of all, the political-religious ideology of Hezbollah is grafted on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Inspired by the Iranian Shiite Islamism, Hezbollah strives, in word and deed, for the realisation of two strategic objections: the annihilation, dismantlement or in any other way obliteration of the state of Israel, and the establishment of a Lebanese Islamic Theocracy.³ In combination with the perceived military success of Hezbollah during the Second Lebanon War the first strategic objective has caused the movement to enjoy some popularity among the peoples of the states surrounding Israel. Up to now Hezbollah, nevertheless, has always presented itself as a resistance movement striving to defend and liberate Lebanese territory. This is the reason why in the first instance the internationalist aspects of Hezbollah’s struggle against Israel have been somewhat overlooked. After the Second Lebanon War, little doubt remains that Hezbollah considers the offensive use of violence a legitimate means in its struggle against Israel. After Hezbollah leader Nasrallah announced that a Lebanese Islamic state can only be established with an “overwhelming popular desire”,⁴ the second strategic objective seems to have been postponed for the time being.⁵ Nevertheless, many facets of Hezbollah’s conduct are ultimately in line with the irreconcilable dogmas of the Iranian Shiite fundamentalist Islamism embraced by Hezbollah.

A second reason for Hezbollah’s unique position is the way in which the movement is organised and the mutually carefully orchestrated manner in which the party echelons operate. The political and administrative wings of Hezbollah have a history of continued extremely successful adaptation to the Lebanese internal and external political relations of the day. As a result the movement is represented in the Lebanese parliament. Participation in regular Lebanese politics has not prevented Hezbollah, though, from independently entering into relations with countries such as Syria and Iran and from

exploiting these ties for its struggle against Israel and to shore up its domestic position.⁶

A third reason for Hezbollah's remarkable position in the Lebanese political relations is the social activism of the organisation. For many years, Hezbollah has been actively trying to improve the political-societal position of the underprivileged and impoverished Shiite Lebanese community. To that end, Hezbollah has put in place a close-knit regional organisational structure which, at the local level, effectively manages to transform Hezbollah social engagement into tangible social action and services for the benefit of the poor— including non-Shiites. All this is done with an administrative integrity which as a rule is unheard of in the Middle-East.⁷

A fourth reason for Hezbollah's special position in Lebanon is its military wing, which in the course of the years has grown into a substantial military force and by its very existence has greatly contributed to Hezbollah's prestige and dominant position in Lebanon. A combination of political will and substantial military might have eventually enabled Hezbollah to vest its authority in large parts of southern Lebanon at the expense of the weakened and divided Lebanese state. UN reports clearly reflect Hezbollah's considerable influence in southern Lebanon in the run-up to the Second Lebanon War.⁸ Yet, until the summer of 2006, Hezbollah's increasing power was given little attention in the international media and on the international political agenda. First and foremost, this was due to Hezbollah's political instinct and feeling for publicity, which ensured that the easily digestible positive elements of its political and societal role came prominently in the spotlights, while simultaneously the military build-up steadily went on relatively unnoticed. Additionally, the events in Afghanistan and Iraq, the presence of UNIFIL and a combination of real and perceived positive developments in Lebanon caused the world's attention to be drawn even further away from the troubling situation in south Lebanon.

Hezbollah strives to attain its objectives by means of a rather unusual combination of regular and irregular ways of exerting power and influence. The organisation thus combines the characteristics of a political party with those of a popular movement and, on top of that, fulfils a number of military and political-societal functions that fall within the domain of the Lebanese state. Salamey and Pearson, therefore, tersely characterise Hezbollah as a proletarian party with an Islamic manifesto.⁹ Whether the centre of gravity of Hezbollah's loyalty will in the long run lie with Lebanon or Iran is an open question for the time being. The political crisis of 2008, though, clearly revealed that Hezbollah is willing to use violence against the legitimate Lebanese authorities in certain instances. In order to gain a better insight into the gravity and nature of the existing and potential

threat posed by Hezbollah, the development and dynamics of the mutual interaction between the major regional state actors in and around the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel will be dealt with hereafter.

The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel

From Ta'if to the Israeli withdrawal

The contours for post-civil war Lebanon were laid down in the September 1989 Ta'if agreement. Apart from a framework for political, governmental and juridical reforms along ethnic-religious lines – a political model known as confessionalism¹⁰ – the agreement also provided a plan for the restoration of central state authority over the entire Lebanese territory. Disbanding and disarming all militias operating in the country, internal and foreign, was part and parcel of the plan. In relation to Israel, Lebanon was to respect the Israeli-Arab cease-fire agreement of 23 March 1949. Furthermore, the Ta'if agreement aimed to implement UN Security Council Resolution 425 in order to end the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon. On 4 November 1989 the Lebanese parliament ratified the Ta'if agreement. Concluded by the Lebanese factions under the auspices of Saudi-Arabia and Syria, the agreement provided for an indefinite Syrian military presence in Lebanon, to assist the Lebanese government in bringing back the entire territory under its control. The presence of Syrian troops subsequently prompted Israel into retaining the Security Zone it had established in 1985.¹¹

At first Hezbollah rejected the Ta'if agreement, as it did not end the unequal representation of the Shiite Moslems in the Lebanese parliament. Moreover, a combination of constitution and electoral system barred the Shiites, who constitute around 40 per cent of the Lebanese population, from the office of president and prime minister.¹² After the de facto occupation of Lebanon by Syria in October 1990, Hezbollah, under Syrian pressure, finally agreed to the terms of the Ta'if agreement.¹³

As for the disarmament of the militias, the Ta'if agreement has never been fully implemented. Hezbollah, but also Palestinian factions marginally present in Lebanon, such as Hamas, Fatah, and the PFPL,¹⁴ were not disarmed. With regard to Hezbollah, the argument used by Lebanon for this was that, in the absence of a comprehensive peace between Israel and Lebanon and because of a continued Israeli presence in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah should be considered a legitimate resistance group against Israel and not as a militia. It is generally acknowledged that Hezbollah prior to the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon did indeed play an important role in the struggle

against the Israeli occupier and by doing so considerably strengthened its power base in the period leading up to the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War.

The Israeli withdrawal

With a statement from the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Anan, on 6 June 2000, the international community recognised that Israel had finally complied with the 1978 United Nations Security Council Resolution 425. Hezbollah grasped the occasion of Israel's withdrawal with both hands to project itself as the liberator and protector of Lebanon and to emphasise its leading role in the struggle against the Zionist foe. The Israeli government's decision to withdraw from southern Lebanon, however, was mainly based on political¹⁵ security considerations, in which war fatigue of the Israeli public played a major role.¹⁶ On the basis of a weigh-up in terms of money and victims the Israeli presence could have been continued indefinitely. After all, a substantial part of the effort was made by the pro-Israeli and Israeli-backed SLA.¹⁷ The Hezbollah claim that it liberated southern Lebanon of the Israelis, therefore, is not based on military facts.

What did not change after the completion of the Israeli withdrawal in June 2000 were six factors and circumstances which allowed Hezbollah to prepare itself for a military confrontation with Israel. Albeit in a slightly obscured way due to other major developments in the world, four of these factors and circumstances exposed Hezbollah's ambitions and concomitantly the developing threat against Israel prior to the Second Lebanon War. The last two circumstances mentioned below only became fully apparent from the course of the war and the developments in the ensuing period. In the aforementioned sequence these circumstances are: (1) the Syrian military presence and influence in Lebanon, (2) the conflict between Lebanon, Syria and Israel regarding the precise location of Lebanon's southern border, in particular in the Sheba Farms area, (3) the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), operating under an unchanged mandate, (4) the inability of the Lebanese government to establish its authority over the entire Lebanese territory (5) Hezbollah's preparedness to pursue its far-reaching strategic objectives and (6) the substantial foreign financial and military support to Hezbollah.

The Syrian military presence

The conclusion of the Ta'if agreement formalized the special relation between Lebanon and Syria, but also the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, in an international legal framework. However, within the Lebanese society and politics the presence of Syrian troops and with it the presence and influence of the Syrian secret service it inevitably ensued, remained a very controversial issue. After the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, in which Syria was allegedly involved, Syria withdrew its

troops in April 2005 under vast international pressure. Up to that moment the military build-up and deployment of Hezbollah must have taken place right under the eyes of the Syrian troops and the omnipresent Syrian secret service. Irrespective of the role that Syria has played in the military build-up of Hezbollah, the very presence of its troops until 2004 causes the country to bear partial responsibility for the unchecked build-up of Hezbollah military might.

Border conflicts

Of Israel's five neighbours only Egypt and Jordan have signed a peace agreement with Israel. Though Lebanon has not, it de facto recognises the border established by the United Nations, behind which Israel withdrew in June 2000.¹⁸ On the border between the two countries, however, there is an area of land, measuring some 20 square kilometres, which in the course of the 20th century was claimed by both Lebanon and Syria as belonging to their respective national territories. The subject area is known as Sheba Farms, and has been occupied by Israel as part of the annexed Golan Heights since the six-day war of 1967. An additional problem is that the border between Lebanon and Syria has never been precisely determined. While the Syrian government has repeatedly made contradictory statements regarding Lebanon's sovereignty over the past years, 'Greater Syria' proponents even consider Lebanon as part of Syria. In any case, Syria considers Lebanon as an entity in its direct sphere of influence. Damascus' ambiguous attitude towards Lebanon stems from the fact that both states originate from an area administered by France. Also driven by regional power politics, Syria, as a result, still nurtures a strong relationship with Lebanon. Apart from its much contested influence and involvement in Lebanese domestic affairs, Lebanon provides Syria with an instrument to keep up the pressure on Israel, with the ultimate goal of getting back the Golan Heights. Nevertheless, for a long time Syria considered Sheba Farms to be a part of Syria.¹⁹ Ironically, the current Syrian position is that the area belongs to Lebanon,²⁰ which allows Hezbollah to legitimise its status as a resistance movement against Israel. After the end of the Second Lebanon War the UN started to redefine the border between Lebanon and Syria with regard to the Sheba Farms.²¹

UNIFIL under resolution 425/426

Since 1978 there has been an uninterrupted presence of international troops in Lebanon under the name of UNIFIL. The original mandate of UNIFIL was based on the UN Security Council resolutions 425 and 426 of 20 March 1978. The mandate encompassed three sub-tasks:

1. Confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon;
2. Restore international peace and security;
3. Assist the Government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area.

The extent to which the UN has succeeded in implementing resolutions 425 and 426 - and 1701 after the Second Lebanon War – is a question that is not only relevant with regard to the events of 2006, but also in view of any future development in the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. Two aspects take centre stage in this: the restoration of the Lebanese central authority over the entire Lebanese territory and the disarmament of Hezbollah.

Twenty-two years after the adoption of resolutions 425 and 426 UNIFIL could ultimately confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon. The ensuing acknowledgment of this fact by the international community was expressed in the UN Secretary General's statement of 16 June 2000. For UNIFIL it signified the start of a phase in which the further implementation of the UNSCR 425/426 mandate appeared to have come within reach, a period which abruptly ended with the abduction of two IDF servicemen by Hezbollah on 12 July 2006, and the subsequent outbreak of the Second Lebanon War.

Lebanon and UNIFIL

In his 16 June 2000 report on the completion of the Israeli withdrawal the UN Secretary General underscored the necessity for a coordinated combined deployment of Lebanese and UNIFIL troops in the area vacated by Israel up to the so-called *Blue Line*, the UN-defined border between Israel and Lebanon. In the immediate vicinity of the *Blue Line* the authorities left the control to Hezbollah, many of whose members were usually not wearing uniforms or carrying arms. The Lebanese authorities declared that Lebanese forces could not act as border troops for Israel without a comprehensive peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel, and consequently could not be stationed on the border with Israel. In this period UNIFIL concentrated on monitoring the security situation from the ground and air and establishing liaison with the various parties. Nevertheless, and in spite of repeated exhortations by the UN and Israel, the UN did not manage to convince the Lebanese authorities to take up positions on the *Blue Line* in the run-up to the Second Lebanon War. In this period a great number of incidents took place along the *Blue Line*, with Hezbollah frequently firing at Israeli military and civilian targets. From the Israeli side the violations of resolution 425 mostly consisted of recurrent and sometimes daily incursions into Lebanese air space in order to conduct airborne ground surveillance of Lebanese (and Syrian) territory. Up to the outbreak of

hostilities UNIFIL carried out observer tasks inside the UNIFIL mandate area. Many of the incidental exchanges of fire between the IDF and Hezbollah - in a number of cases supported by other factions - took place in the vicinity of Sheba Farms. These actions link up seamlessly with Hezbollah's point of view that the Lebanese border near Sheba Farms leaves Lebanese territory to Israel. In the period between 2000 and the summer of 2006, the UN repeatedly extended the UNIFIL mandate by six months, meanwhile gradually decreasing the number of troops to approximately 2,000. In the period leading up to the Second Lebanon War the UN restricted itself to condemning the military and security incidents and reiterating its appeals to the Lebanese government to expand its central authority up to the *Blue Line*, in conformity with resolution 425. Also the fact that Hezbollah occasionally had an active hand in making UNIFIL's work impossible, did not prompt a more energetic reaction from the side of the UN.

In retrospect, it is fair to say that the presence of UNIFIL under UNSCR 425/426 mandate did not constitute a serious hindrance to Hezbollah's military deployment in southern Lebanon. In fact, Hezbollah, operating in the shadow of a limited UNIFIL presence, and, paradoxically, outside the view of the international community, may even have been provided with an excellent opportunity to considerably strengthen its administrative and military hold on southern Lebanon. Clearly, UNIFIL between 1978 and the summer of 2006 did not achieve the second and third objectives of its mandate. Besides, the question remains whether the mandate UNSCR 425/426 was sufficiently robust. The extent to which Hezbollah had been able to prepare itself for a substantial military confrontation with Israel, in spite of, or perhaps even thanks to the presence of Syrian and UNIFIL troops in southern Lebanon, became apparent in the course of The Second Lebanon War.

Hezbollah military actions

The Israeli reaction to fight Hezbollah on Lebanese soil after the coordinated attack on an Israeli border patrol and the ensuing abduction of two IDF-servicemen in hindsight appears to have been an unpleasant surprise for Hezbollah.²² Nevertheless, Hezbollah was surprisingly well prepared to fight Israel in a coherent way. In doing so, Hezbollah employed an operational concept that displayed defensive and offensive components, which in their turn involved conventional along with irregular elements. Thus, according to Hofman, the Second Lebanon War can be considered as a *Hybrid War*.²³ Furthermore, the way in which Hezbollah has fought it, arguably reveals Hezbollah's true nature and objectives but also the potential threat the organisation poses to the (wider) region.

Operating from a well organised military command structure, thoroughly embedded in the southern Lebanese civilian infrastructure, Hezbollah put up a surprisingly well

coordinated defence against the Israeli ground troops. Building this intricate military infrastructure must have taken place in the six years between the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 and the summer of 2006, in a number of cases in the immediate proximity of UNIFIL. Also, it is unlikely that the Syrians and the Lebanese government were not aware of this military build-up. Many of the weapons used by Hezbollah in its battle against the IDF ground forces appeared to have come from Syria and Iran. One example is the RPG-29, a Syrian-purchased Russian anti-tank weapon, used with great success by Hezbollah against the Israeli Merkava tanks.²⁴ The Russian Federation denies having supplied such weapons to Hezbollah, but does not exclude the possibility of them having been passed on by Syria.²⁵

Furthermore, in its defence of the southern Lebanese territory, Hezbollah used rather sophisticated weapon systems and communication systems from abroad. Of these, in particular, the deployment of C802 anti-ship missiles - an Iranian-produced variety of the Chinese Silkworm anti-ship missile- was a complete surprise and a clear sign that Hezbollah has become able to successfully deploy a number of advanced sensor, command and weapon systems. Incidentally, this is not to say that Hezbollah can freely dispose of such weapon systems. After all, it is quite possible that Iran used the opportunity of the 2006 conflict to certify a number of weapon systems as combat proven. The fact that only one attack was conducted on an Israeli Navy ship, and the way in which Hezbollah confirmed and used the attack for propaganda purposes, seem to confirm this.²⁶ Irrespective of the question whether Hezbollah carried out the actual ASM attack on the Israeli corvette INS Hanit independently or with the direct assistance of Iranian military advisors, the employment of this advanced coastal defence system strongly indicates that Iran has rendered substantial military assistance to Hezbollah. The same, incidentally, holds for a number of other sophisticated weapon systems employed by Hezbollah during the Second Lebanon War.²⁷ The attack on Hanit not only displays Hezbollah's new military capabilities, but also the organisation's proficiency in presenting a military action almost real time as a success in the media. The Hanit incident also makes clear the extent to which the Israeli intelligence service and the IDF misjudged Hezbollah military capabilities.²⁸

During the conflict Hezbollah employed various types of short and medium-range missiles, most of which were of Syrian descent and constructed on the basis of Syrian, former Soviet Union and North Korean missile technology. According to Rubin, an estimated number of 200 somewhat sophisticated long-range missiles, originating from Iran, were either destroyed on the ground by the Israeli air force on 13 July and in subsequent air raids, or not used at all.²⁹ The missiles were mostly fired from densely populated areas from mobile, sometimes improvised launch pads. The massiveness of

the missile attacks carried out by Hezbollah and the fact that only a fraction of the fired missiles hit an Israeli military target or important infrastructure leads to the conclusion that none of the used missile types had accurate guidance.³⁰ Nevertheless, the massive deployment of these missiles constituted an essential element in Hezbollah's operational concept and strategy. After all, Israel was unable to stop the missile offensive from the air and had to come up with alternatives to stop or decrease the missile attacks in some way or another under great pressure of time. The resulting Israeli ground offensive gave Hezbollah an opportunity to fight the Israeli ground troops on terms favourable to itself, a fight Hezbollah showed itself to be surprisingly well prepared for. The Israeli ground troops sustained considerable losses, and, moreover, failed to stop the missile attacks. These operational successes, in combination with the missile attacks, allowed Hezbollah to claim a great strategic success by merely having resisted the Israeli forces for the duration of the conflict. The estimates of missiles fired against Israel vary somewhat, but come down to approximately 4,000. The damage done by these missiles was relatively minor, but they seriously disrupted life in a considerable part of Israel. On top of that came the fear that Hezbollah might have larger-range missiles capable of reaching Tel Aviv. Currently, destroying the missiles prior to launch is about the only viable defence option against a missile barrage. In this, the IDF probably was only successful with regard to the long-range missiles.³¹ As a weapon of terror Hezbollah's missiles certainly lived up to expectations. Consequently, Hezbollah's missile attacks on Israel can rightly be considered a strategic terror bombardment.

Based on Hezbollah's weapons deployment during the Second Lebanon War it is fair to say that Iran, apart from ideological and political support, also provided Hezbollah with military resources and advice on a large scale, including such capital weapon systems as anti-ship missiles.³² Apart from that, Hezbollah employed large quantities of weapons coming from Syria.³³ It is also clear that Iranian and Syrian military and financial support does not only enable Hezbollah to fight Israel, but also allows it to influence Lebanese domestic developments and politics. Furthermore, it can be concluded that Hezbollah prepared thoroughly for a conflict with Israel and that the military operational concept was sufficiently robust to withstand the Israeli ground operation whilst keeping the pressure on Israel with missile barrages in spite of uncontested Israeli air superiority. Consequently, there is not much point in describing and classifying the 'Hezbollah way of waging war' in terms of regular and irregular operations, terrorism and insurgency. In fact, such classification might even obscure the true nature of this organisation and by the same token its hybrid approach to warfare.

After the Second Lebanon War the efforts of the international community through the UN were directed at preventing a renewed outbreak of the conflict or worse. Two related

aspects were central in this: the strengthening of the Lebanese central authority and the prevention of clandestine weapon deliveries to Lebanon. Whether the central Lebanese government, supported by UNIFIL, will eventually succeed in preventing rearmament of Hezbollah and gaining effective authority over the entire Lebanese territory ultimately depends on the level of mutual loyalty that exists between Hezbollah and the lawful Lebanese authority.

UNIFIL under resolution 1701

The adoption of resolution 1701 on 11 August 2006 brought an end to 32 days of fighting between Hezbollah and Israel. For the formal parties involved in its coming about, Israel and Lebanon, but also for Hezbollah, this resolution apparently constituted an acceptable closure to the war. The central Lebanese government was basically held hostage by the conflict and presumably viewed resolution 1701 as a means to avoid further war damage and, coming from a situation in which Hezbollah had been able to operate freely from Lebanese territory, an opportunity to considerably strengthen its central authority vis à vis this organisation. Confronted with this unexpected reality of the war, Hezbollah initially adopted the stance of defender of Lebanon, only to subsequently have itself represented to an increasing extent by the central government. This was done with the intent to come to a cease-fire and further stabilisation of the situation via the UN Security Council at a moment the perception had taken hold that Hezbollah had been the first Arab force to have withstood the IDF in an open military conflict. As a result Hezbollah achieved an extremely important success that could be exploited to the full in the strategic and propagandistic realm after the cease-fire. For the Israelis the course of the battle and, in particular, its inability to effectively stop the Hezbollah missile barrages and to defeat Hezbollah militarily arguably also was enough motivation to agree with resolution 1701.

Resolution 1701 provided UNIFIL with a considerably strengthened and broadened mandate, including six further sub-tasks:

1. Monitor the cessation of hostilities;
2. Accompany and support the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy throughout the south, including along the Blue Line, as Israel withdraws its armed forces from Lebanon;
3. Coordinate its activities referred to in the preceding paragraph (above) with the Government of Lebanon and the Government of Israel;
4. Extend its assistance to help ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons;

5. Assist the Lebanese armed forces in taking steps towards the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL deployed in this area;
6. Assist the Government of Lebanon, at its request, in securing its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry of Lebanon without its consent of arms or related materiel.

Resolution 1701 consequently tasked UNIFIL to actively prevent the clandestine import of weapons and related materiel in cooperation with the Lebanese authorities. UNIFIL found itself in a supporting role with regard to the Lebanese authorities. As a result, the prevention of clandestine import of weapons remained a responsibility of the same government which in the previous years had been unable to withstand the will and power of Hezbollah both inside and outside the regular political domain, and which, on top of that, had never managed to expand its authority over the entire Lebanese territory in conformity with the resolutions 425 and 426. That Hezbollah accepted resolution 1701 is remarkable, as its implementation would effectively prevent any rearming of Hezbollah not expressly consented to by the regular Lebanese government. As a consequence, Israel will arguably hold the Lebanese government directly accountable for any large-scale Hezbollah attack directed against Israel that might occur in the future.

In the mean time, the broader mandate based on resolutions 425, 426 and 1701 has led to a number of tangible results. Thus, in October 2006 the deployment of Lebanese troops along the Blue Line became a fact and UNIFIL is succeeding in coordinating the activities of the peace force with the Lebanese and Israeli authorities.³⁴ Supporting the Lebanese armed forces in the selective demilitarisation of the area between the Litani River and the *Blue Line* is ‘work in progress’, with UNIFIL up to the present moment stating that there is no indication of the presence of military materiel and personnel other than that of UNIFIL and the Lebanese government forces.³⁵ Even if the Lebanese armed forces, supported by UNIFIL, were to succeed in making the UNIFIL area of operations “free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL deployed in this area”, this will only initially form a certain barrier against the firing of short-range missiles on Israel. Eventually, the Lebanese government will have to restore its authority, and with it the monopoly on the use of armed force, over the entire Lebanese territory. Also, UNIFIL succeeded in rendering support to the Lebanese government at its request, in securing its borders and other entry points soon after the adoption of resolution 1701. The UNIFIL strength was increased from 2,000 to 9,000 personnel, while at short notice a UNIFIL Maritime

Task Force (MTF), with some 2,000 personnel, was established in order to prevent clandestine arms transports by sea. After all, sea transport is the most efficient way of conveying large quantities of goods over long distances. Moreover, smuggling large quantities of arms hidden away in ships is relatively simple. From the start it was clear that the Lebanese Navy and coast guard lacked the required capabilities by far to guard and secure the Lebanese maritime borders. Consequently, it became necessary to establish and deploy a UNIFIL maritime presence. The maritime blockade imposed by Israel on 13 July 2006 in order to prevent a re-supply of Hezbollah from the sea was extended until the arrival of an Italian maritime task group on 8 September 2006. A short time later this Italian maritime task group handed over the guarding of the Lebanese maritime borders to the UNIFIL MTF, which became operational on 15 October 2006.³⁶ To control and coordinate the UNIFIL operation a UNIFIL Headquarters was established in the southern Lebanese coastal town of Naqoura in close cooperation with the Lebanese authorities. In hindsight it can be said that the tasks for which UNIFIL was mandated in resolution 1701 were taken up by all parties involved expeditiously and that UNIFIL is fulfilling all its sub-tasks within the framework of the mandate.

Nevertheless, the extent to which resolution 1701 has prevented clandestine arms shipments and rearmament of Hezbollah from abroad is dependent in the last instance on effectively securing Lebanese maritime, land and air borders. Incidentally, within the Lebanese context the concept of ‘border’, and with it the interpretation of resolution 1701, has an interesting subjective dimension, where it concerns consent/authorisation by the Lebanese government with regard to the import of arms for the Hezbollah “resistance movement”.³⁷ As will be seen below, the ostensible success of resolution 1701 is not quite what meets the eye.

The rearmament of Hezbollah

The missile campaign significantly added to the widespread perception carefully nurtured by Hezbollah, that it had won the conflict with Israel.³⁸ It is therefore likely that Hezbollah will attempt to bring up its war supplies of missiles up to the pre-war levels. Furthermore, there is also the possibility that in the future Hezbollah will begin producing a number of less sophisticated weapons – such as Katyusha missiles – itself. Incidentally, there is a host of unconfirmed information that rearmament has already taken place in the mean time.³⁹

Clandestine arms shipments to Lebanon can only be prevented if the access to the Lebanese territory can be guarded adequately. While a load of 10,000 missiles can easily be shipped by a single medium-sized freighter, it would take an assessed 20-50 flights and 200-500 transport movements to ship the same amount of cargo by road.⁴⁰ The

question, therefore, presents itself whether the bid to seal off the access to Lebanon over land, air and sea, has been successful.

Guarding the Lebanese borders

With the Mediterranean as its westernmost border, Lebanon is enclosed by two neighbours: Israel in the south and Syria in the east and north. After the summer of 2006, UNIFIL deployed over the southern Lebanese territory between the Litani River and the *Blue Line*. The UNIFIL area constitutes a buffer zone between Lebanon, Israel and the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. The size and shape of the area is comparable to the *Security Zone*, established by Israel in the nineteen-nineties and, from an Israeli perspective arguably has a similar function. Although the UNIFIL area will presumably in many cases be the final destination of any Hezbollah arms supplies, any road transports to that end may reach Lebanon undetected by UNIFIL. Beirut can be reached by road fairly easily from Damascus unseen to UNIFIL. Securing the national border with Syria and preventing clandestine arms shipments is a sole responsibility of the Lebanese government, and the UN and the international community have no other means to monitor what is going on than through the Lebanese authorities and the activities of national intelligence agencies. With the government, the armed forces and Hezbollah being the main players in the Lebanese domestic arena, the Lebanese government, ironically enough, is highly dependent on Syria for the effective guarding of its national borders.

Beirut's Rafic Hariri's International airport is the only major airport of the country. Apart from that, there are two military airfields and a number of dirt landing strips. Consequently, Beirut is arguably the preferred venue for the shipment of clandestine arms by air. The political turmoil of May 2008 underscores the importance that Hezbollah, too, attributes to this airport.⁴¹ A brief search on the Internet reveals that there are regular flights between Tehran and Damascus and Tehran and Beirut. Although it is quite possible for Israel and for the UNIFIL MTF to guard Lebanese air space and to establish the identity of air contacts, it is not really feasible to ascertain the nature of the cargo of these flights without a UNIFIL presence at the airport.

Lebanon has four sea ports of some importance, with Beirut as the most important one. The Lebanese coast is fairly low and straight, which facilitates the detection of ship movements from the sea, also when that movement is close to the coast. So, in principle, the maritime borders are relatively easy to close off. UNIFIL, MTF, the maritime component of UNIFIL, operates in an area that is designated as the Area of Maritime Operations (AMO), a trapezoid-shaped area with a depth of some 50 nautical miles hugging the Lebanese coast and confined to the north and south by the parallels that mark the corresponding national borders of Lebanon. The AMO has been divided into an inner

and outer zone. As a rule, the Lebanese Navy patrols the inner zone, whereas UNIFIL units patrol the outer zone. As a matter of fact, the sensors of the UNIFIL ships are perfectly capable of covering the entire area of operations, so that a continued awareness of what is happening in the AMO is ensured. The operational commander of C-UNIFIL TMF task group has rather robust Rules of Engagement (ROE),⁴² which also allow for boarding, i.e. going on board ships to check crew, cargo and the ship's log, papers and documents. C-UNIFIL MTF, however, leaves boarding to the Lebanese authorities. In practice, though, the Lebanese Navy, in its turn, questions a ship detected and classified as suspect by UNIFIL MTF over the radio and usually escorts it to a Lebanese port where it is searched.⁴³ This means that UNIFIL TMF limits itself to monitoring ship movement in the area and identifying suspect ships. At best, the Lebanese authorities carry out the in-port inspections with the sincere intention of intercepting clandestine arms shipments. In the worst case, however, UNIFIL MTF functions as a splendid framework, comforting to outsiders, for the sea-borne rearmament of Hezbollah and other militias.

The crisis of May 2008

How fragile the stability in Lebanon is became apparent when in May 2008 a crisis developed in reaction to a governmental decision. Although opinions differ on the gravity and nature of this crisis, it provided an interesting insight into the actual Lebanese power relations at the time.⁴⁴ The crisis began when, in a speech on 5 May 2008, Walid Jumblat, the leader of the *Progressive Socialist Party*, accused Hezbollah of having installed a camera system and an illegal telecommunication system at Rafiq Hariri international airport. The following day the Council of Ministers opened an inquiry and decided to dismiss with immediate effect the head of security of Beirut airport, Brigadier Wafiq Shqeir (a member of the Shiite Amal) on grounds of alleged pro-Hezbollah sympathies and to bring the telecommunication system under government control.⁴⁵ After Hezbollah's leader, Nasrallah, had called the government action an act of war against Hezbollah, he intimated that Hezbollah would react tough with his announcement that "we will cut off the hand that targets the weapons of the resistance".⁴⁶ Shortly after this, street fights broke out and Hezbollah militias occupied the western part of Beirut, supported by the Amal. After a period of rhetorical to-ing and fro-ing between Prime Minister Siniora and Hezbollah leader Nasrallah, the former, in a televised speech on 10 May 2008, asked the army to restore peace and order. With regard to the measures so objectionable for Hezbollah he remarked that "the two decisions of the government have not yet been decreed, and will be left to the discretion of the army", and subsequently formulated his request to the army as follows: "we request the army to fulfil their role in protecting the Lebanese and to the fullest without delay, which they have not yet done... I ask them to enforce stability in all regions and withdraw all arms from the streets, end the sit-in and restore life to the capital and all of Lebanon".⁴⁷

The army followed up this ‘request’ by ordering the parties to restore the status quo ante – pending the inquiry into any possible Hezbollah activities at or around the airport.⁴⁸ This episode clearly shows that, in case of unwelcome developments and decisions for the organisation, Hezbollah is prepared to take up arms against its compatriots – and government. It also emerged that, although at a crucial moment it chose the side of the Prime Minister and the government, in the last instance the army must be considered an independent power factor, whose loyalty to the government is not self-evident. In the final analysis this realisation is not so surprising, as the Lebanese army, though not composed along sectarian delineations,⁴⁹ is made up of service personnel coming from the same factions that fought each other in changing coalitions during the Lebanese civil war.⁵⁰ Clearly, the Lebanese political practice is more unruly than the terms of the Ta’if agreement, in which it is laid down that the president of the republic is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, which in their turn are accountable to the cabinet and as such to the Prime Minister.

The current state of affairs

The political struggle in Lebanon is being fought at the sharp end and repeatedly erupted in violence also after the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. Nevertheless, the country has gained a certain measure of stability, to a large extent due to the Ta’if agreement, which in fact serves as a national covenant for a Lebanese population divided along sectarian lines. In the context of the fragile Lebanese political system a number of main players can be distinguished: the Lebanese government and the parliament, the Lebanese armed forces and Hezbollah. Furthermore, Syria, Iran and Israel all try to influence the course of events in Lebanon to their advantage. Syria’s influence as protector and partner of Lebanon has been institutionalised in the Ta’if agreement. Iran exerts unofficial influence through the close ties the country maintains with Hezbollah, while Israel’s influence on the course of events is mainly limited to secret service activities and the option of a military intervention. Also after the Second Lebanon War Hezbollah’s military and political power remains unbroken, and up to the present day the Lebanese government is not its own master. As the chance of a voluntary disarmament by Hezbollah is small,⁵¹ Lebanon remains a weak state, whose stability and prosperity lie to a large extent in the hands of the parties mentioned above.

Syria

The Syrian power structures and political relations under president Bashar al-Assad do not differ widely from those under his father Hafez al-Assad. The same seems to hold for the Syrian foreign policy, which is mainly directed at winning back the Golan

Heights annexed by Israel and the dismantlement of Israel on behalf of the Palestinians, next to acquiring maximum influence and power in the region. As for internal relations, maintaining existing power structures and relations, in other words, the survival of the regime, is paramount. Except with the president, power in Syria lies with a powerful and omnipresent secret service – and to a lesser extent – the armed forces. Unlike Iran, Syria is a secular state based on a Syrian version of the socialist Arabic Ba'ath ideology.⁵² The country has a parliament and a multi-party system with political parties which are without exception virtually unconditionally loyal to the president.⁵³ Every form of real opposition against the Syrian government is brutally repressed. Syria strives to reach its objectives by a system of 'Realpolitik'. Thus, the country is consistent, inflexible and without too many scruples where it concerns matters of principle, but flexible and opportunistic when it comes to choosing the means and ways to attain its objectives. It is therefore not surprising that, in attaining its foreign political objectives, Syria is prepared to cooperate with Shiite Islamists of Hezbollah and Iran, a situation for which there are several indications. By the same token, it absolutely cannot be ruled out that in due course Syria will be prepared to conclude a contract with the devil, provided it would expect enough advantage coming from it: an understanding with Israel. Due to its close ties and involvement with Lebanon, but in particular because of its geographical position bordering on Israel and Iraq and thus situated between Lebanon and Iran, Syria is a threat as well as an opportunity for the stabilisation of the region. In any case, its geographical position and its influence in Lebanon, formalised in the Ta'if agreement, puts Syria in the position to make or break Hezbollah's military power.

Iran

Whereas the relation between Syria and Lebanon has been framed in the Ta'if agreement, the Iranian influence is far more opaque. Iran does not have a monolithic political structure, as is often supposed, but possesses a number of democratic structures. Ultimately, however, the political process and societal developments are tightly supervised by the Shiite clergy⁵⁴ On top of that, the Iranian population is rather pro-western.⁵⁵ Iran is in the fast lane towards becoming a regional military super power on the basis of its nuclear and space programmes and its active attempts to expand its influence in the wider region, such as in Iraq and Lebanon, through its religious kindred spirits. President Ahmedinejahd's statements with regard to "wiping Israel off the map" may have been translated incorrectly in the media, but in combination with his remarks on the Holocaust, cannot be discarded as harmless rhetoric.⁵⁶ After all, this is a country, which on the basis of an authoritarian religious ideology and the possession of growing military might, has the capability to conduct a proxy war, against Israel through Hezbollah from the fragile democratic Lebanon. As Iran's thinking and acting is ultimately based on a fundamentalist religious ideology rather than on 'Realpolitik', as is

the case for Syria, the Iranian theocratic regime is arguably a much more dangerous opponent for Israel than the chess players in Damascus.

Israel

Israel has paid dearly for its month-long conflict with Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, as it suffered a serious loss of military prestige when failing to inflict a decisive defeat on an Arab opponent for the first time since 1948. The fact that this time Israel was fighting a well-organised irregular enemy operating from the territory of a sovereign but powerless neighbouring country was of course a factor that to some extent determined the course and the outcome of the conflict. The Israeli political and military decision making with regard to the Second Lebanon War was investigated by the Winograd commission and documented in a report of the same name to the Israeli parliament, which had ordered the inquiry. The report concludes that the political leadership failed to adequately weigh up the Israeli political and military options after the abduction of the two IDF soldiers on 12 July 2006. Subsequently, a choice was made for an ill-devised military option, without taking good store of the actual readiness and plans of the IDF.⁵⁷ In its turn, the military leadership failed to present the political leadership with a clear picture of the actual readiness of the IDF.⁵⁸ As deterrence is predominantly based on perception by the opponent rather than on military facts and figures, Israeli incurred considerable strategic damage.⁵⁹ For Israel, effective deterrence is a matter of life and death, certainly as long as the country has to deal with such implacable opponents as Hezbollah, Iran and Hamas.

There are various not mutually exclusive options for Israel to restore its military deterrence, but they are limited to preventive military action against Hezbollah, Iran or Syria. Such a preventive operation against Hezbollah or Iran must be substantial in size and decisive, or else the remedy may be worse than the disease. The fact that Israel was able to carry out a preventive attack on a suspected Syrian nuclear facility on 6 September 2007 without provoking an immediate Syrian military action⁶⁰ is telling and confirms that ‘Realpolitik’ is indeed the most important motive for Syrian support to Hezbollah.

One option, which on the face of it is quite obvious and has often been discussed in the media, is neutralising Iran’s nuclear military strategic capability by carrying out a surprise attack on Iranian facilities for the production of weapons of mass destruction. Apart from a doubtful chance of success, it is clear that such an undertaking must be successful in one go: failure is no option. Anyway, a successful Israeli attack will not undo the threat of a nuclear Iran, since, as the adage with regard to the atom bomb goes, you cannot uninvent it. Even if an Israeli (or American) military action is successful, Iran will sooner or later be able to produce or acquire atomic weapons if it chooses

to do so. Another option to restore the deterrence is a surprise attack directed at taking out the Hezbollah leadership and preferably its military capability. Both the ‘Iranian’ and ‘Hezbollah’ option will no doubt lead to war. A third military option is to no longer distinguish between Hezbollah and Lebanon and to attack Lebanon in its entirety.⁶¹ The question is, of course, whether Iran and Syria would stand idly by if such a large-scale Israeli military attack were to take place. A fourth military option is the development of innovative counter-missile systems in order to be able to withstand Hezbollah’s missile barrages.⁶²

Apart from military means for the restoration of the military deterrence there may be possibilities for Israel in the realm of diplomacy, directed at gradually diminishing the need for military deterrence. Its purpose would be to isolate Hezbollah, by taking away Iran’s possibilities and Syria’s reasons to threaten and fight Israel through Hezbollah. An Israeli initiative to come to an understanding with Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinians on the basis of the peace proposal brokered by Saudi Arabia in 2002 might be appropriate to that end.⁶³ This peace initiative proposes an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace with Israel in exchange for: (1) an Israeli withdrawal behind the pre-Six-day War (1967) borders; (2) Israeli acceptance of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza strip with East Jerusalem as its capital and (3) finding a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in accordance with UN resolution of 11 December 1948.⁶⁴ The EU and NATO might provide economic and security support for a peace process along these lines.

Hezbollah

For how long Hezbollah is prepared – or able – to operate within the constraints of the current political and societal power structures, without colliding with them, remains an open question. The events of May 2008, though, confirm the suspicion that Hezbollah only accepts the rules of the Lebanese political system as long as it does not go against the interests of the movement too much. Although Hezbollah’s power and influence in Lebanon is disproportionate with the number of seats in parliament the organisation has in its guise as a political party,⁶⁵ the movement finally is only one of the many players in the Lebanese political arena.⁶⁶ The Second Lebanon War caused Lebanon great economic damage and by the same token bolstered the opposition against Hezbollah.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s military might is sufficient to give it two far-reaching options: seizing power, with a civil war as a likely result, or new hostilities against Israel, with the Lebanese government and society becoming involved as reluctant parties, if not hostages. A transformation of Hezbollah into a ‘normal’ Lebanese party would really only be possible if it were prepared to accept the rules of the Lebanese democracy. Given the strategic objectives of the organisation, the ensuing unforgiving stance towards

Israel, and the fundamental friction between the secular Lebanese democracy and the form of government desired by Hezbollah, this does not seem very likely for the time being. Should, however, Hezbollah be prepared to operate peacefully within the context of the Lebanese democratic system, the strong political and societal involvement of this relatively uncorrupted organisation could make a significant positive contribution to the further build-up of Lebanon. However, in the mean time, and in the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah has made it perfectly clear that it is going to re-arm⁶⁸ and is ready to defend itself against Israel.⁶⁹ Hezbollah enjoys the support of Iran, Syria and Hamas, but also of substantial sections of the populations of the neighbouring Arab countries and Pakistan.⁷⁰ Therefore, in its present form the organisation constitutes a threat for Lebanon and the entire region.

Concluding observations

First and foremost, Hezbollah presents itself as a Lebanese resistance movement, indicating at the same time that the struggle will not stop at Lebanon's southern border. Furthermore, a declared enemy of Israel and champion of the Palestinian cause, Hezbollah enjoys support and popularity from far beyond the Lebanese national borders, including that from the supporters of the Palestinian Hamas.⁷¹ So, embedded in a weak and divided Lebanese state, Hezbollah holds a unique front line position against Israel and - should the movement so choose - it has the possibility to form a spearhead for any coalition of forces that aim to dismantle or destroy the state of Israel. This also includes Islamist networks hostile to the secular forces in the Islamic world and beyond.

The fact that Hezbollah finds itself in this unique position is caused by a combination of internal and external factors: Hezbollah's strategic objectives, its military capabilities, the weak state of Lebanon, the military support of Iran and Syria to Hezbollah, the religious fundamental theocratic ideology shared by Hezbollah and Iran, the military strategic capability and potential of Iran, the regional ambitions of Iran as well as Syria and the geographical location of Lebanon with regard to Israel, Syria and Iran. Apart from the latter, these factors also represent the focal areas for parties wishing to influence the developments in and around Lebanon.

The political-societal positioning of Hezbollah makes it possible to obscure rather effectively from public view the inherently totalitarian character and far-reaching ambitions of the organisation. Hezbollah holds a firm grip on Lebanon and must be viewed as an exponent and spearhead of fundamentalist Islamic ideologies and forces. Apart from the way in which it developed, the Second Lebanon War should not have been much

of a surprise itself. Whether the forceful Israeli action, disproportional to many, will be sufficient to deter Hezbollah from seeking a new confrontation with Israel is an open question. Martin van Creveld, however, makes an interesting point when he states that it is precisely the disproportionality of Israel's military action that will deter Hezbollah (and Hamas) from any further military adventures against Israel.

In a strictly military sense Israel has escalation dominance over Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria, but, due to the large distance, not over Iran, its most dangerous enemy in what might now be termed a (temporarily) frozen conflict. In this situation Iran and Syria have considerably more freedom of action than Israel, and in principle can take the fight to the Zionist enemy at a time of their choosing and at any level of violence through Hezbollah. Of course, in such a situation Hezbollah would not be a passive instrument in the hands of Iran and Syria. Nevertheless, Hezbollah will arguably be inclined to accommodate its foreign sponsors because of its financial and military dependence.⁷² On top of that, the strategic objectives of Hezbollah and Iran with regard to Israel and the desired form of government of Lebanon coincide.

In the mean time, a number of missiles in the Hezbollah arsenal have enough range and calibre to deliver a nuclear, chemical or biological charge. Irrespective of the question whether Hezbollah would ultimately be prepared to deploy such weapons, it is a rather disquieting thought that a non-state organisation cherishing such far-reaching strategic objectives and driven by a radical religious ideology might have this kind of weapons at its disposal in the future. This is not only so because of the situation in the Middle East, but ultimately also with a view to the struggle against global Djihadism. Because of the persistent hostile rhetoric of Hezbollah and Iran against Israel and the far-reaching international consequences of weapons of mass destruction deployment it would not be wise to denounce such a development as unlikely.

Hezbollah is a complex and in many respects unique Lebanese movement, whose thinking and acting is related to the Iranian Shiite fundamentalist Islamism. Hezbollah has the military and political power to conduct itself as a 'state within a state', and did exactly that in its confrontation with the Lebanese government in May 2008. It is evident that such an organisation poses a continuous potential threat to the very political system it is part of. Moreover, Hezbollah's military might, in combination with its fundamentalist Islamic ideology not only causes the organisation to be a threat to Lebanon and Israel, but by the same token constitutes a threat with an international dimension. Whether Hezbollah in the end will be able to realise its ambitions, depends to a large extent on the strength of the Lebanese government. Even if Hezbollah were to transform into a normal political party – voluntarily or not -, it would be quite a challenge for the

Lebanese government to recapture the terrain lost to Hezbollah in the political societal arena. Establishing Lebanese governmental authority over the entire Lebanese territory and blocking foreign aid to Hezbollah would therefore be the most important instruments in neutralising Hezbollah's role as a dominant factor in the region. In the last instance, the key to the realisation of UN resolution 1701 lies in Damascus.

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