MERIA

HIZBALLAH RISING: THE POLITICAL BATTLE FOR THE LOYALTY OF THE SHI'A OF LEBANON

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The 2004 municipal elections in Lebanon highlighted the competition between Amal and Hizballah for the political loyalty of the Shi'a of Lebanon. The decision by Syria to allow both parties to compete against each other on separate electoral tickets, presented an opportunity to test the parties' relative popularity. Hizballah emerged the much stronger party, and while it is likely that a joint ticket between Amal and Hizballah will be put in place for the 2005 parliamentary elections, the local government elections illustrate the potential political power of Hizballah. Although both parties compete for the same communal vote, Hizballah's unity and probity contrast markedly with the Amal Movement, whose reputation amongst the Shi'a community is at its lowest level in years. The growing political popularity of Hizballah poses problems for the United States in its approach to the "War on Terror."

While the future political direction taken by the Shi'a majority in Iraq is of immense interest to U.S. policy makers, a longer-running political contest is still being played out in another part of the Arab world for the political loyalty of the same community. Since the re-emergence of elections following the end of the civil war in Lebanon, where the Shi'a represent the largest of the communal groups,[1] both Amal and Hizballah have been forced to run on joint electoral tickets for the national elections. Running on joint lists thus allowed the two Shi'a political parties represented in parliament to avoid a direct electoral showdown. In the local government elections held in May and June 2004, however, candidates ran on separate electoral tickets, giving a better indication of each party's popularity. On the face of it, the results indicate that Hizballah has moved well ahead of Amal as the preferred political representative of the Shi'a community. However, as is the case with anything related to Lebanese politics, the results not only reflect the local political popularity of the two parties, but were also heavily influenced by the broader strategic desires of the dominant foreign force in Lebanon: Syria.

The contest between Hizballah and Amal for the position of pre-eminent representative of the Shi'a community has, at times, been a heated one. Although Amal had its genesis in the Movement of the Dispossessed (*Harakat al-Mahrumin*), founded by the charismatic scholar (*'alim*) Musa as-Sadr, it turned briefly to the secular leadership of Husayn Husayni in 1979, and since 1980, Nabih Berri. Hizballah, on the other hand, has retained the leadership of the party in the hands of the scholars, in line with its ideological linkage with, and jurisprudential loyalty to, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. Indeed, many of Hizballah's early founders came from the ranks of disaffected Amal members who were disillusioned with the party's embrace of the secular political system. Both Islamic Amal members and members of the *Da'wa* who had joined Amal were prominent in the establishment of Hizballah. Like all groups vying for the political loyalty of the same constituency, however, the two groups

developed into fierce rivals, and conflict between the two groups has generally existed right below the surface. Between 1985 and 1988, at the height of the intra-communal dispute, Hizballah and Amal militia members fought a series of bloody engagements in the south of the country. More recently though, any violence between the two parties has been small scale and very localized, and is normally centered over local electoral disputes.

Because of the complex nature of Lebanese politics, and the use by Syria of the Lebanese political process in pursuit of its own foreign political objectives, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions from events such as elections. In the case of the 2004 municipal elections, however, it is clear that Hizballah emerged as a much stronger party than its rival Amal. In the south of the country, Hizballah emerged victorious in over 60 percent of municipalities (compared with 55 percent in 1998), while Amal captured only 30 percent of municipalities (down from 45 percent in 1998). Hizballah also did very well in southern Beirut and the Biqa', particularly in Ba'albak, where it had taken its support for granted in 1998 and been dealt a heavy blow, winning only a few of the municipalities. With the benefit of a well-organized campaign in the region, Hizballah gained control in 27 of the 30 municipalities that it contested in the Biqa'.[2]

Hizballah's relative success can be put down to a number of factors, some of which emanate from purely domestic politics, and others that are of longer-term strategic importance. As far as Syria was concerned, the dynamics of this municipal election were different from others, in that Damascus was happy for a more realistic reflection of local political attitudes towards Hizballah and Amal to be displayed. Whereas it has been Syria's wish for the two parties to maintain a balance during national elections in order to ensure that no one communal group becomes dominant enough to challenge Syrian primacy, in the case of the Shi'a parties there was a relatively low-key approach taken to these local elections. As a consequence, Hizballah was able to display its strength in the heartlands of the Lebanese Shi'a: the Biqa', the southern suburbs (*dahiyya*) of Beirut, and South Lebanon. That is not to say that there was no action on the part of the Syrians to influence the outcomes. In the Biqa' for example, Hizballah formed an electoral alliance with the pro-Syrian Ba'th party, which made it difficult for Amal to form an effective, politically popular counter-alliance.

Syria's decision to ultimately allow both parties to contest the elections without being forced into an electoral alliance with each other was motivated in part by external considerations. No doubt realizing the level of popular support that Hizballah possessed, Syria realized that the elections would provide the United States, in particular, with a public example of how genuinely popular the party was politically. Following the late 2001 proscription of Hizballah as a terrorist organization by the United States, the Syrian government wished to signal to Washington the reality of the situation on the ground in Lebanon. By association, Syria, as the hegemon within Lebanon, was also signaling to the United States its own continuing relevance within the region. This was particularly important following the passing of the Syria Accountability Act and the Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act in October 2003 by the U.S. House of Representatives. The Syria Accountability Act, for example, stated that "...the Government of Syria should immediately and unconditionally halt support for terrorism, permanently and openly declare its total renunciation of all forms of terrorism, and close all terrorist offices and facilities in Syria, including the offices of … Hizballah."[3] By illustrating to the world the political popularity of Hizballah within Lebanon, Syria hoped to dilute the impact of the bill and show the United States that Hizballah was a legitimate political reality within Lebanon. Such was the intent of the statement by Syrian president Bashar Assad when he claimed that the elections "defined the true political sizes" in Lebanon.[4]

Of course, more than just Syrian political considerations account for Hizballah's success. The party is genuinely popular, both as a consequence of its resistance activities that prompted the 2000 withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) from the country's south, as well as its ability to achieve the return of prisoners from Israeli jails in return for the remains of IDF soldiers. There were concerns in some quarters that Hizballah's popularity was rooted too deeply in support for its resistance against the Israelis occupying South Lebanon. For Hizballah, the withdrawal of the Israelis in 2000 provided a great fillip to the organization, and gave it the ability to announce both its Lebanese nationalist credentials, as well as its wider authority as the only Arab group to defeat Israel militarily. In the immediate aftermath of the perceived victory, it has also given the party's machinery the ability to cement its southern support. The party was instrumental in repairing village housing and some infrastructure damaged during years of resistance, while at the same time the creation of the dispute surrounding the ownership of the Sheba'a farms area allowed Hizballah to maintain its armed militias and to undertake military operations against Israel. The refusal of the Lebanese government to use its military to control the border region also allows Hizballah a free hand. Without the resistance, Hizballah fears becoming a sectarian form of the emasculated Amal. With its military wing however, the party has a regional relevance that its opposition is denied.

While the party is currently in a strong position within the Shi'a community politically, this has not always been the case, and the party is pragmatic enough to realize this fact. Hizballah has undergone its share of political setbacks, but appears to have grown stronger from these experiences. In the late 1990s for example, the party experienced its first major split when a former Secretary-General of the party, Shaykh Subhi Tufayli, was defeated in the contest for the position by the more moderate Shaykh 'Abbas al-Mussawi and formed a breakaway group known as the "Revolution of the Hungry" (*Thawrat al-Jiya'*). Tufayli's support base was largely limited to the villages of Brital and Tarayya, but it did show that the party was vulnerable to the same type of leadership splits that affect other, secular political parties. Of more concern, however, were the results of the 1998 municipal elections. Amal made significant gains in the traditionally strong Hizballah areas of Ba'albak, prompting one observer at the time to state, "Many Shi'ites…view Hizballah as too radical. Amal's largely secular leadership also appeals more to many individual members of the community."[5]

While its success against the IDF gained it great kudos, the military wing of Hizballah these days must be managed far more judiciously by Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah than in the pre-2000 period. While Israel remains an unpopular neighbor amongst the Lebanese (particularly amongst those from the south), the United Nations' rejection of Lebanon's (Syrian-inspired) claims to the Sheba'a Farms has presented the Islamic Resistance with a conundrum. With no unfulfilled UN Resolution behind its military operations, Hizballah's military actions in the south are carried out without the full support of the local population, especially given the Israeli reactions which follow. The more that Hizballah carries out military action in the Sheba'a farms for its own and others' strategic purposes, the more it risks alienating the Lebanese polity, the majority of whom lack any affinity with the Sheba'a farms issue.

Hizballah appears to understand the limitations of relying too heavily on its military component, however, and the party planned for the period following the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon. It has always been active within the Lebanese Shi'a community as a significant provider of social services, and has been careful in maintaining a reputation for probity that eludes Amal. Of particular note is its ability to mobilize its supporters to achieve both its

strategic and local political purposes. This is one aspect that will be of the utmost importance to the party in the long term as it continues to establish itself as a major player in the Lebanese political scene. In May 2004, the party was able to stage a mass rally of over 250,000 people in Beirut to protest at U.S. military incursions into the Iraqi holy sites at Karbala and Najaf, indicating its mass appeal.[6] Illustrative of the ability of the party to mobilize its support base at the local level was the fact that voter turnout was particularly good in the regions where Hizballah was strong. In Ba'albak, for example, over 70 percent of registered voters participated, while the figure for Nabatiyyah in the South was approximately 65 percent of voters. This compares with a figure of just over 20 percent for Beirut, and 30 percent for Sunni-dominated Tripoli.

While there is little doubt that Hizballah has become a well-organized, unified and multi-faceted organization, its rival for the loyalty of the Shi'a community has suffered in comparison. The municipal election results capped several bad years for Amal since their performance in the 1998 municipal elections. Amal's standing as a representative political party has fallen significantly since that time, particularly at the local level. Originally founded as a party designed to represent the interests of the economically and politically disenfranchised Shi'a population, its establishment heralded the emergence of a sectarian-led attempt to alter the political status quo that had for centuries deprived the community of a political voice. The early years of the party were full of promise, but more recently the very same party has lost much of its moral authority as its closeness with the government has led to charges of corruption against it. Amal is battling to stay level with Hizballah, whose members are meticulous about maintaining a public reputation for financial probity and an active opposition stance within government.

One of the consequences of this fall in popularity of the Amal movement is the emergence of internal disputes within the party. This was illustrated in March 2003, when Nabih Berri expelled six members from the party, including three members of parliament, two of whom were ministers.[7] Part of the reason for this was the desire of the Speaker and President of Amal to reshape the Cabinet and remove people he considered political rivals. There was also general reference to the notion of "accountability," which the party had adopted in 2002 in response to increasing allegations of corruption. In the case of Ali Abdallah this appeared to be particularly prescient, as he was charged with embezzlement of public funds in September 2003 relating to the misuse of government agricultural funds, and was held in remand for six months from December 2003. While some commentators have argued that Syria's position towards Amal during the election represents an altering of the power relationship, there are indications that Syria has taken steps to assure Amal that it still factors in Syria's political plans in Lebanon. To that end, Assem Qanso, the Shi'a head of the Ba'th Party, proclaimed during a visit to Nabih Berri that "Hizbullah and Amal…represented by our dear friend Berri, are our left eye and our right eye," while calling Berri a student of the school of Hafiz al-Assad.[8]

It would be premature to read too much into the results of the municipal elections regarding the future of the Lebanese Shi'a. This type of election is, after all, decided on very local issues and is not necessarily replicated in national voting patterns. Consequently, one should not predict the demise of Amal simply as a consequence of this election result. They did, after all, retain their support in their southern base of Tyre and gained more places in some of the municipalities of the *dahiyya* of Beirut than they had in 1998, even though Hizballah was strongest overall. That having been said, the results cannot be ignored and certainly illustrate the degree to which Amal has become removed from its popular base and is reliant on Syrian sponsorship to retain its

influence. In light of the anti-Syrian feeling unleashed by the recent assassination of Rafiq Hariri, this sponsorship could become counter-productive. The results also showed the ability of the rival parties to mobilize their supporters and political allies. In not imposing an electoral alliance between the two major Shi'a parties, Syria allowed a more transparent view of the Shi'a population's political loyalties to be determined.

The future for Amal appears uncertain. The party is dominated by Nabih Berri, who has proven to be a staunch supporter of Syria. Although a dominant force, the recent expulsion from the party of several high-powered members attests to the fact that Berri, not for the first time, faces challenges to his authority from within the party. At the same time, the willingness of Amal's Central Council to unanimously confirm his decision to expel members attests to the fact that Berri is still very much in control of the party. While national parliamentary elections are due to be held in 2005, the nature of the Lebanese political system and Syria's place in it should guarantee parity between Amal and Hizballah. Syria has always been careful to maintain a degree of balance between the two parties, and while it was willing to send a message by allowing Hizballah to flex its muscles during the local government elections, its desire for balance will likely see it force the two parties into running joint electoral tickets again in 2005. Similarly, having seen Hizballah's political strength demonstrated, Syria is likely to continue backing Berri, both because he has been a loyal ally and because they fear tilting the Shi'a political balance towards Hizballah.

For Hizballah, on the other hand, the municipal elections confirmed the efficacy of its strategic political direction in Lebanon. Its success in all three regions where the Shi'a dominate has shifted the political balance in favor of the party. Its long-term commitment to occupying the moral high ground in Lebanese politics by eschewing government positions and providing social services to the community in place of the government is undoubtedly paying dividends. While Hizballah is also dependent on both Syria and Iran to varying degrees, the party has earned a reputation for integrity that eludes Amal. That having been said, neither party attracts many active supporters outside the Shi'a community, limiting either's claims to be truly national parties.

Hizballah has a long-term political strategy regarding its role within Lebanon. While it long ago acquiesced to the realities of multi-confessional Lebanon by rejecting its revolutionary strategy for the achievement of an Islamic state, it has never rejected the desire to see Lebanon ruled in accordance with Islamic precepts as its ultimate objective.[9] While this continues to mean that it is viewed with suspicion by many Lebanese, the party has saved its fiery rhetoric for external issues, such as United States intervention in Iraq and the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. Domestically, it has taken a strategic decision to act as the responsible political opposition, while pushing for electoral reforms that would ensure the Shi'a's numerical power is translated into political power. Both Amal and Hizballah have as one of their major aims to cease the sectarian basis of parliamentary representation that guarantees a political over-representation of the non-Shi'a population.[10] The parties have also sought to change the electoral law to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, which would similarly strengthen the hand of the Shi'a, given that this demographic is dominated by the Shi'a.

Hizballah understands that its political strategy within Lebanon must take into account three groups. First and foremost, it needs to gain the loyalty of a majority of the Shi'a community, as it is this group that will provide it with victory at the ballot box, and ensure its longevity as a political movement. Secondly, it needs to be accepted as a legitimate and responsible political party by the broader Lebanese polity. While the ultimate aims of Hizballah

in terms of the Islamization of society mean that it will not be politically supported by many, if any, of the non-Shi'a Lebanese (particularly the Christian and Druze minorities), it aspires to be regarded as a responsible political player so that it can eventually achieve major leadership positions within the Lebanese political system that will allow it to achieve its goal. This is evident in Hizballah's successful attempts to position itself as the party representing the economically disadvantaged, regardless of communal identity. To that end it has an active involvement in the Lebanese trade union movement, while Hassan Nasrallah's held a meeting with then-Prime Minister Hariri in June 2004 to discuss the socio-economic impact of Lebanon's $34 billion debt (representing 185 per cent of Lebanon's GDP).[11] In addition to the balancing act it must undergo to navigate the difficult shoals of Lebanese domestic politics, it must also deal with Syria. As a party that portrays itself as a champion of Lebanese nationalism, exemplified by its militia's victory over the IDF, it must play a game of *realpolitik* with Syria. Support for Hizballah by Syria is dependent on Damascus's own interests. For that reason, Hizballah maintains good relations with Syria (a move at odds with its nationalist credentials) while building itself up politically for the day when Hizballah's resistance is of no use for the advancement of Syria's regional interests. While these three lines of strategy are difficult to achieve simultaneously, the 2004 local government success over Amal illustrates that the strategy is paying dividends within the community.

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NOTES

1. The last census taken in Lebanon was in 1932. At the time, the Shi'a represented 16 percent of the population. It is estimated that they account for anywhere up to 45 percent of the present population.
2. *The Daily Star* (Beirut), May 11, 2004.
3. Syrian Accountability Act, Section 3. http://www.theorator.com/bills108/s982.html.
4. "The New Weights," *Dar al-Hayat*, June 11, 2004. http://www.daralhayat.net/actions/print2.php.
5. Eyal Zisser "Hizballah: New Course or Continued Warfare," *MERIA* Journal, Vol. 4, No. 3 (September 2000).
6. *The Economist*, May 27, 2004. Some reports quoted the crowd as large as 500,000. http://www.economist.com/World/africa/PrinterFriendly.cfm?Story_ID=2709426.
7. These were the Energy and Water Minister Muhammad Abd al-Hamid Baydun, Agriculture Minister Ali Abdullah and the Western Biqa' MP (and former minister) Mahmud Abu Hamdan.
8. "Visit to home signals boost for Berri," *The Daily Star*, May 20, 2004.
9. Interview with Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, *Al-Ahd* (Beirut), April 10, 1994.
10. Author's interview with Dr. Ali Mosmar, Chairman of Amal Movement's Foreign Affairs Office, Beirut, June 3, 2002 and with Shaykh Hassan Ezzedine, Director Hizballah Media Relations Department, Beirut, May 30, 2002.
11. "What Happened?" *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), No. 693 (June 3-9, 2004).