

PolicyWatch #1679

## U.S. Policy on Hizballah: The Question of Engagement

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Four years ago this week, Israel launched a military campaign in Lebanon in retaliation for a brazen Hizballah attack on its soldiers. The goal, according to an Israeli official, was "to put Hizballah out of business." But neither war nor subsequent U.S. diplomatic efforts aimed at weakening the group have succeeded, and some in the Obama administration now appear to view direct engagement as an option worth exploring. Reaching out to Hizballah, however, at a time when it is politically and military emboldened, would be an exercise in futility that could prove counterproductive.

### Current Efforts

Since the end of the 2006 war, the United States has sought to counter Hizballah by advancing three main policy goals: arms transfer termination, disarmament, and full Lebanese government control over its territory (i.e., an end to Hizballah's "state within a state"). Washington's approach to achieving these goals has remained largely consistent through both the Bush and Obama administrations.

First, the United States has maintained its support for the March 14 political coalition, which has opposed Hizballah's status as an armed militia. Second, Washington has spent considerable sums to strengthen the Lebanese government's capacity, committing more than \$600 million in security assistance and an additional \$500 million for civilian assistance programs since 2006. Third, the United States has strengthened efforts to stigmatize the group and constrain its financial activities by expanding the list of Hizballah associates designated under Executive Order 13224. Finally, Washington has sought to minimize popular support for Hizballah by pressing, to varying degrees, for the resolution of outstanding grievances, including Israeli overflights and control over Ghajar and Shebaa Farms.

These efforts appeared to bear fruit in June 2009, when Hizballah's political alliance failed to capture a majority of seats during parliamentary elections. Yet the group's electoral defeat did not translate into diminishing political power. To the contrary, after attaining an effective blocking minority in the cabinet, Hizballah has consolidated its influence and strengthened its legitimacy as an armed resistance movement. March 14 has all but fractured, and Hizballah now stands as the region's most powerful substate actor -- with a larger and more sophisticated military arsenal and greater political influence than at any time since its inception.

### Limits of Engagement

Recognizing the limits of current U.S. policy, advocates of engagement contend that now is the time to pursue an alternative approach. In May, Deputy National Security Advisor John Brennan suggested that outreach to certain elements of Hizballah could lead to the group's ideological moderation. According to media reports, a recently leaked U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) "red team" assessment sets forth a similar line of thinking. Although neither Brennan's comments (which have since been walked back) nor the CENTCOM paper appear to reflect a formal reconsideration of U.S. policy, they indicate that interest in this option is growing.

Such arguments, however, rely on two fundamentally misguided premises. First, Hizballah's willingness to participate in the political process is often cited as evidence of a move away from its violent underpinnings. In fact, the group remains as committed as ever to its role as an armed resistance movement. In its updated manifesto, released in 2009 and seen by some observers as a sign of moderation, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah reaffirmed his rejection of Israel ("we categorically reject any compromise with Israel or recognizing its legitimacy") and proclaimed the resistance to be a continuing "national necessity."

Terrorism, violence, and intimidation remain key strategic assets for Hizballah, not just against Israel, but against the state of Lebanon itself. The group's May 2008 takeover of Beirut shattered the myth that it would never use arms against the Lebanese people. Moreover, if the Special Tribunal on Lebanon's reported suspicions of Hizballah involvement in the murder of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri are validated, it would make clear that Hizballah has no qualms in turning its well-honed skills of lethal assassination against its domestic political opponents. The organization also seeks to co-opt the Lebanese Armed Forces into serving as an arm of the resistance and seems determined to use any means necessary to expand its control over the state.

The second mistaken premise is that Hizballah has moved away from its historic animosity toward the United States. Although the group has been careful in recent years to avoid any direct provocation, it remains committed to challenging the United States and its interests in the region. Its 2009 manifesto reemphasized the movement's anti-American foundations first outlined in 1985, expanding the rationale for resistance as a response to U.S. "terror" and plans for "dominating the nations [of the Arab and Islamic world] politically, economically, culturally and through all aspects."

There is little evidence that Nasrallah or anyone around him seeks to alter Hizballah's strategic orientation or loosen its close alliance with Iran and Syria. U.S. engagement would only validate the organization's increasing capabilities and boost its domestic and international legitimacy. It would also further weaken what is left of the democratically elected pro-Western government in Beirut. More broadly, such a fundamental shift in policy would signal Washington's diminishing resolve to confront terrorism and undermine its long-held stance against rewarding terrorist groups for their actions.

### **A More Robust Approach**

Rather than pursuing engagement, U.S. officials should instead look to intensify efforts aimed at constraining Hizballah's activities and limiting its destabilizing influence. Although increased pressure on Hizballah could provoke a violent backlash, the organization will only increase in strength and move closer toward its long-term aims unless concerted action is taken against it. A more robust approach would involve the following measures:

*Increasing pressure on Syria and Iran.* To raise the costs of support for Hizballah, the United States should mount a campaign to impose UN sanctions on Syria for clear violations of Security Council Resolution 1701, which prohibits arms transfers to Hizballah. Likewise, it should press for sanctions against Iran for violating Resolution 1747's prohibition on arms transfers. (Three violations have been referred to a UN sanctions committee, but with no follow-up action.) Such a campaign would also help legitimize potential airstrikes against Syrian facilities along the Lebanon border should transfers of Scud missiles or other sophisticated weapons continue.

*Conditioning Hizballah's role in government.* U.S. officials should begin discussions with allies in Lebanon and the region regarding conditions for Hizballah's continuing participation in a national unity government, similar to the Quartet principles imposed on Hamas. Such conditions could include a renunciation of violence, concrete steps toward disarmament, and recognition of the Lebanese government's authority. Although initiating such discussions may not have any immediate impact, it could help reset expectations regarding Hizballah's future role in government and lead to reconsideration of the issue at the next politically opportune moment (e.g., if the special tribunal issues indictments against Hizballah operatives).

*Empowering independent Shiites.* Weakening Hizballah will require breaking the monopoly that both it and its allies have over the Shiite community in Lebanon. The Obama administration should build on its predecessor's efforts to reach out to independent Shiite activists and strengthen their ability to forge an alternative political movement. For example, Washington could facilitate access to funding and encourage stronger links between moderate Shiites in Lebanon, Iraq, and other communities across the region.

*Enhancing coordination with allies.* With tensions between Israel and Hizballah rising, the United States should initiate consultations with Israel -- and, separately, with Arab allies that share its concerns, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia -- to lay the groundwork for a common diplomatic approach in the event that conflict breaks out. Washington should make clear that it will stand by Israel if the latter is forced to act against Hizballah's military capabilities, but will also seek to limit actions that could undermine the government or pro-Western forces in Lebanon.

## **Conclusion**

While testifying before Congress last month, Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman emphasized that the United States "will not deal with or have any contact with" Hizballah. Given the futility of such outreach, this is a sound position to maintain. Engagement could merit consideration at some point in the future, when the group has been weakened and appears willing to accept a meaningful accommodation. But, until then, a more comprehensive and vigorous approach to counter Hizballah's expanding influence would better serve Washington's interests.

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