

afford higher ransoms. Moreover, while AQIM member Mokhtar Belmokhtar's marriage into local families allowed him to be a capable leader in the Sahara, he seems to be increasingly less motivated by Salafi-jihadi ideology and now harbors more conventionally criminal, for-profit aspirations.²⁴ His apparently ideologically rigorous counterpart, Yahya Djouadi, who was ostensibly appointed by AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel to replace the wavering Belmokhtar, is from northern Algeria and is at pains to make alliances in the Sahara. As a result, he has been unable to carry out effective campaigns there.

Yet the increased presence of foreign energy and mining firms throughout the Sahara and Sahel in the coming years means that AQIM will have a richer target set. AQIM, in both the Sahara and in northern Algeria, has targeted foreign companies in addition to representatives of state security services. There are abundant examples of AQIM attacks against foreign firms in northern Algeria, where they have been historically more prevalent. Attacks against Brown and Root-Condor, a KBR subsidiary, in 2006 and subsequent attacks against Canadian engineering, procurement and construction firm SNC-Lavalin in 2008 and again in 2009 have made foreign firms extremely aware of the threat AQIM poses to their operations and personnel.²⁵ Foreigners in general are privileged AQIM targets. While not an exhaustive list, the kidnapping of German tourists in 2003 in Tamanrasset, the murder of French tourists in Aleg in Mauritania in 2006, the kidnapping of Austrian tourists in Tunisia who were transported to Mali in 2008, and the capture of Swiss and French tourists in 2009 are all indicative of this trend. Likewise, foreign diplomats and foreign installations in the Sahara and Sahel have been at the top of AQIM's target list, as exemplified by the capture of two Canadian diplomats in December 2008 and the suicide attack on the French Embassy in August 2009.

Even if firms minimize their expatriate personnel, AQIM has demonstrated that it views nationals working for foreign firms as legitimate targets. In addition, AQIM is likely benefiting from advances in navigation and communication technology. Further enhancement of GPS capabilities in the Sahara and Sahel are likely, and AQIM will use these improvements to facilitate movement around the desert and improve its ability to plan and carry out attacks. Similarly, cell phone penetration will make it easier for AQIM cells to communicate with one another and foster technology transfers such as how to build improvised explosive devices.

Aid that the U.S. and France are providing Sahel and Sahara states to enhance their counterterrorism capabilities is unlikely to allow local governments to keep pace with AQIM's increasing target opportunities and capabilities. France has provided military assistance to President Mohamed Abdel Aziz's government in Mauritania and the United States has given military aid to Mali, but the aid is calibrated to the threat that AQIM poses at the present and not its likely capabilities in the coming years. Algeria has refused U.S. counterterrorism assistance, even though the AQIM threat there is perhaps most acute and is likely to grow most significantly in light of Algeria's aggressive push to expand oil and gas exploration and production in the southwest of the country.

These factors mean that in the coming years, new investments in the Sahara and Sahel will come under increasing danger from criminals and bandits, along with fighters belonging to AQIM. Unfortunately, it does not appear that governments in the region are currently prepared to neutralize this growing threat.

Dr. Geoff D. Porter is the Director of Middle East and Africa at Eurasia Group, the political risk consulting firm. He writes frequently on energy and security issues in North Africa. During the course of his work he has traveled extensively throughout the region.

Hizb Allah's Domestic Containment and Regional Expansion Strategies

By Benedetta Berti

DURING THE PAST few months, Lebanese Hizb Allah has pursued two strategic priorities. Within Lebanon, the organization is focused on preserving the internal balance of power and preventing the international community from increasing its role within the country. At the same time, while concentrating its efforts on protecting its political and military power internally, Hizb Allah is investing significant political capital to improve its regional role and status, both politically and operationally.

This article will first analyze Hizb Allah's domestic strategy, showing how the organization is stifling the actions of the newly elected government while also curtailing the influence of the international community within Lebanon. It will then examine Hizb Allah's regional strategy, which includes becoming increasingly confrontational with "moderate" governments in the region, particularly Egypt.

Hizb Allah's Domestic Strategy

In the aftermath of its electoral defeat in Lebanon's June 2009 parliamentary elections, Hizb Allah has been relying on its popular legitimacy and political power to limit the elected government's freedom of political maneuver. Specifically, the Hizb Allah-led March 8 coalition stalled the formation of the new executive cabinet for months by demanding to be rewarded with at least 11 of the 30 available cabinet seats. If granted, this request would have both conferred the organization veto power over any substantial national reform that could threaten the group, and at the same time it would have weakened the elected majority.¹ In the end, the two camps agreed to form a "unity cabinet" composed of 15 members of the March 14 coalition, 10 members from the Hizb Allah-led opposition, and five independent candidates appointed by President Michel Suleiman.²

²⁴ Geoffrey York, "Diplomat Robert Fowler's Kidnaper has Powerful Terrorist Links," *Globe and Mail*, October 13, 2009.

²⁵ Bertrand Marotte, "SNC-Lavalin Won't Evacuate Workers," *Globe and Mail*, October 22, 2009.

¹ "PM Al-Sanyurah After Cairo Meeting: Third Blocking Experience Failed," Lebanese National News Agency, June 14, 2009.

² "Without National Consensus New Cabinet Will

This agreement is still considered favorable to Hizb Allah, which counts on the “independent” candidates to prevent the elected government from implementing reforms that would hurt the organization’s strategic interests.

At the core of the ongoing crisis lies Hizb Allah’s strategic interest in preserving its freedom of action and preventing the March 14 forces from addressing the issue of Hizb Allah’s military apparatus and their *de facto* control of southern

“Hizb Allah has become increasingly confrontational with the so-called ‘moderate Arab regimes,’ including Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.”

Lebanon. It has been a strategic imperative of the Lebanese-Shi`a organization to rely on all available tools—political and military—to avoid this occurrence. This was exemplified by Hizb Allah’s violent reaction in May 2008 to the attempts by the cabinet of former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to remove Hizb Allah sympathizer Wafic Shkeir from his post as security chief at Hariri International Airport, and to shut down the organization’s communications network.³ Similarly, in

Achieve Nothing,” Agence France-Presse, November 11, 2009.

³ The May 2008 events are the culmination of a political crisis that began in December 2006 between the ruling coalition and the Hizb Allah-led opposition. The predicament was over the failure to create a national unity government between the majority coalition (the March 14 Alliance) and the opposition parties. This lack of agreement led to the resignation of the opposition ministers from Prime Minister Siniora’s cabinet in November 2006 and to a long-standing boycott, causing the *de facto* paralysis of the Lebanese government and deeply impairing its decision-making process. The crisis escalated from peaceful protests to armed confrontation in May 2008, after the March 14 government attempted to remove Hizb Allah sympathizer Wafic Shkeir from his post as security chief at the Hariri International Airport and to shut down the organization’s communications network. Hizb Allah viewed these acts as a war declaration and on May 7, 2008 the organization sent gunmen to seize parts of West Beirut—the Sunni area where most supporters of

the aftermath of the June 2009 elections, Hizb Allah’s parliamentary leader, Mohammed Raad, warned that a political crisis would explode if the government insisted on disarming Hizb Allah.⁴

At the same time, while actively engaging the domestic political system to maintain the current balance of power, Hizb Allah has been increasingly active in attempting to curtail the influence of the international community within Lebanon, directing its efforts against the recently established UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and the locally-deployed forces of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). From the outset, Hizb Allah has been adamantly against the idea of creating an international tribunal to investigate political killings in Lebanon. Even after the actual establishment of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon tasked with investigating the 2005 attack that killed former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, the group has maintained a non-cooperative position. Furthermore, during the past six months, Hizb Allah’s animosity and rhetoric against the tribunal have increased even further.

First, the group reacted angrily to accusations advanced by the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* directly implicating them in the Hariri assassination.⁵ Following the release of the report, Hizb Allah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stated that the article was an “act of Israeli provocation against the Shiites.”⁶ Second, in the aftermath of the elections, Hizb Allah adopted a progressively more hostile tone against the tribunal. On July 28, 2009, the organization threatened the court, stating:

Hizb Allah is a steady mountain and the international tribunal will not shake one hair on its

Rafiq Hariri’s Future Movement are located. The seizure of Beirut led to a series of bloody engagements between the different sectarian groups, leading to the worst episodes of violence since the civil war. See “Hezbollah Militants Take Over West Beirut,” CNN, May 9, 2008.

⁴ David Schenker, “Now Comes the Hard Part,” *Weekly Standard*, June 22, 2009.

⁵ Erich Follath, “New Evidence Points to Hezbollah in Hariri Murder,” *Der Spiegel*, May 23, 2009.

⁶ “Hezbollah Chief Describes Report of Der Spiegel as Israeli Provocation Against Shiites,” Xinhua, May 26, 2009.

head. All those standing behind [these accusations] will regret [it] and let everyone know that what we did on May 7, 2008 [the organization’s armed “takeover” of West Beirut] was just a shaking of a hand. We are powerful to the point where we can turn ten tables and not just one.⁷

Concurrently, Hizb Allah has also increased its opposition against the UNIFIL presence in Lebanon, especially after Hizb Allah sympathizers and UNIFIL troops clashed on July 18, 2009.⁸ On that occasion, UNIFIL troops were prevented from inspecting a village in southern Lebanon where a Hizb Allah weapons depot had just exploded.⁹ During the confrontation with the local Hizb Allah militia, 14 UN peacekeepers were injured.¹⁰ Hizb Allah initially blamed the peacekeepers’ alleged lack of coordination with the Lebanese army for the incident—a claim quickly denied by the international troops.¹¹ Subsequently, Hizb Allah changed its position and directed its accusations against the UNIFIL presence. Lebanese Hizb Allah Member of Parliament Nawaf Mousawi said, “The UN has no sovereignty over south Lebanon because the area is not under international mandate.” Mousawi blamed the international troops for “overstepping their boundaries,” reminding them that UNIFIL’s role should be solely “limited to supporting the Lebanese army when the army requests support, and they cannot move according to the request of the Israeli side.”¹² In this sense, in the past few months Hizb Allah has actively engaged in trying to limit UNIFIL’s freedom of action and its role within southern Lebanon.

⁷ “March 14 Sources to Rai Aam: Nasrallah Put Gun Back on the Table,” *al-Rai al-Aam*, July 28, 2009.

⁸ “South Lebanon Residents Prevent Peacekeepers Searching After Ammunition Explosion,” Xinhua, July 18, 2009.

⁹ Zeina Karam, “UN Says South Lebanon Weapons Cache a Violation,” Associated Press, July 15, 2009.

¹⁰ “14 UN Peacekeepers Injured in Lebanon Protest,” Agence France-Presse, July 18, 2009.

¹¹ “Clashes Between Southerners & UN Forces, A Threat To UNIFIL Role,” *al-Hayat*, July 20, 2009.

¹² “Hezbollah Lawmaker Says South Lebanon not Under International Mandate,” Xinhua, July 21, 2009.

Hizb Allah's Regional Strategy

While the majority of the international media's attention has focused on the domestic aspect of Hizb Allah's political and military strategy, the past few months have also revealed an increased level of international activism for the group, both through direct operational involvement as well as through political and diplomatic interventions.

First, Hizb Allah has become increasingly confrontational with the so-called "moderate Arab regimes," including Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Specifically, Hizb Allah relied on the last Israeli military operation in Gaza in December 2008 to January 2009 to criticize and chastise some of these countries for their lack of support for Hamas. For instance, Hizb Allah's head of international relations, Nawaf Mousawi, repeatedly lamented the "suspicious silence" of Arab leaders, while Secretary General Nasrallah conducted a personal campaign against Egypt. Similarly, the Lebanese-Shi'a organization also used the Gaza war to issue declarations casting doubts on the role of Saudi Arabia and its peace proposal. Hizb Allah Shaykh Qassem strengthened this thesis by stating "we believe that the mentioned initiative [the Saudi initiative] was buried after the Gaza war," adding that "as long as Israel exists, it will pose a threat to the entire region."¹³

In particular, Hizb Allah is engaged in an open confrontation with Egypt. At first, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah harshly criticized Egypt for not opening the Rafah Crossing during the last Gaza war, and called the Egyptian people to protest and rise up against their government: "Let the Egyptian people take to the streets in the millions. Can the Egyptian police kill millions of Egyptians? No, they cannot."¹⁴ The organization's stance, backed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,¹⁵ was rebutted by the Egyptian media, which reacted by accusing the Shi'a group of being an Iranian proxy tasked

with weakening Egypt's position as a broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁶ Within Lebanon, members of the ruling March 14 Coalition, including Christian Lebanese Forces chief Samir Geagea, criticized Hizb Allah for its escalation of words against Egypt and accused the group of attempting to topple the Arab regime.¹⁷

In the months following the end of hostilities in Gaza, tensions between Hizb Allah and Egypt did not deescalate; on the contrary, the crisis only deepened as Egypt uncovered a Hizb Allah network operating clandestinely within

"Although the actual extent of Hizb Allah's operations in Egypt remains unknown, it is clear that the group had an organized logistic, and at least to some extent operational, presence in the country—and that it is now employing these external cells in a way that signals a trend of increased regional activism."

the country. In April 2009, Egypt announced the arrests of approximately 50 Egyptians, Palestinians and Lebanese militants, all accused of having ties with Hamas and Hizb Allah, and of operating on behalf of the latter organization.¹⁸ Egypt's state prosecutor also indicted the individuals for plotting to carry out terrorist operations within Egypt.¹⁹ As the investigations unfolded, Egyptian cabinet minister Mufed Shehab disclosed that the local authorities had seized explosive belts from the cell, and

said that the group had been monitoring tourist resorts in the Sinai, an area with a high concentration of international and Israeli tourists.²⁰ Eventually, 26 individuals, including two Lebanese and five Palestinian nationals, were brought to trial and formally charged with spying for Hizb Allah. They are currently awaiting sentencing by the State Security Emergency Court.²¹ The state prosecutor indicated that 18 of the captured militants were providing Hizb Allah logistics information regarding both tourist resorts in the Sinai, as well as Suez Canal schedules, and that Hizb Allah had transferred more than \$38,000 to the local cell, tasking them to acquire explosives.²²

Hizb Allah first reacted by denying any interest in carrying out operations within Egypt,²³ and accused Cairo of fabricating accusations in retaliation for the organization's criticisms of Egypt's stance on Gaza.²⁴ By April 10, 2009, however, Secretary General Nasrallah admitted that at least one of the arrested militants—Sami Hani Shehab, the alleged ringleader—was a Hizb Allah agent dispatched to Egypt to aid Hamas in smuggling weapons through the Egyptian-Palestinian border. He added: "if aiding the Palestinians is a crime, then I am guilty and proud of it."²⁵ During a later rally in Beirut, Nasrallah also stated:

We have not formed an organization in Egypt and we do not plan to form an organization in Egypt. We did not target Egypt, its security, order, and stability, and we are not concerned with its internal affairs. We work for a very clear cause; namely, supporting our Palestinian brothers.²⁶

13 Husayn Asi, "Shaykh Qassem Affirms Arab Peace Initiative was Buried," al-Manar, January 22, 2009.

14 "Hezbollah Calls for Urgent Steps on Gaza Among Arab Leaders," Xinhua, December 27, 2008; Al-Manar, December 28, 2008.

15 "Lebanon: Hezbollah Leader Criticizes Egyptian Stand on Gaza," al-Manar, January 14, 2009.

16 "Egyptian FM Slams Hezbollah Chief Over Protest Calls," Agence France-Presse, December 29, 2008.

17 "Lebanese Pro-Gov't Leaders Criticize Verbal Attack On Egypt," Xinhua, December 30, 2008.

18 "Egypt Arrests 50 for Alleged Extremist Ties," Associated Press, April 7, 2009.

19 "Egypt Accuses Hezbollah of Plotting Attacks," al-Arabiya, April 7, 2009.

20 Maggie Michael, "Egypt: Hezbollah Cell Plotted Against Israelis," Associated Press, April 12, 2009.

21 Sarah El Deeb, "Egypt Refers 26 Hezbollah Suspects to Trial," Associated Press, July 26, 2009.

22 Ibid.

23 Muhammad Shumaysani, "Egypt and the Aggressive Claims Against Hezbollah," al-Manar, April 9, 2009.

24 Muhammad Abdallah, "The Egyptian Government and the Hostile Accusations Against Hezbollah," al-Manar, April 8, 2009.

25 "Lebanese Hezbollah Chief Denies Plotting Attacks Against Egypt," Xinhua, April 10, 2009.

26 "Lebanese Hezbollah Did Not Target Egyptian Security, Stability," al-Manar, May 2, 2009.

Within Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the few local political forces that stood up to defend Hizb Allah, stating that the government's indictment was a political move to discredit the group.²⁷ The head of the Brotherhood's political bureau, Isam al-Aryan, asserted that the accusations were part of Egypt's plan to pressure Hizb Allah

“Hizb Allah is strengthening the ‘resistance bloc’ while discrediting the ‘moderate’ regimes and alienating them from their populations.”

to change its hostile position toward the Egyptian government.²⁸ Palestinian political forces were divided in reacting to Egypt's accusations. Fatah-aligned forces condemned Hizb Allah's actions, whereas Hamas rebutted the charges and added that the accusations were part of an intimidation campaign against Hamas.²⁹

Although the actual extent of Hizb Allah's operations in Egypt remains unknown, it is clear that the group had an organized logistic, and at least to some extent operational, presence in the country—and that it is now employing the organization's external cells in a way that signals a trend of increased regional activism. In fact, although it is not possible to assess to what extent Hizb Allah already had an organized clandestine presence in the region, the group is now increasingly visible and active, shifting from dormant to operational. In fact, this rise in external operational activities and regional visibility has not been limited to Egypt. According to Kuwait's *al-Watan*, for example, Hizb Allah has also been increasingly active within Kuwait, where the local branch of the organization is currently trying to enhance its political

role and increase its internal strength.³⁰ Even more recently, the UAE-based newspaper *al-Ittihad* claimed that three Hizb Allah militants were killed during a confrontation between the Yemeni government and Houthis rebels in the Saada region, in northern Yemen. If the report is true, it raises questions over the extent of Hizb Allah's presence in that country.³¹

In this sense, both the ongoing political tensions between Egypt and Hizb Allah, and the organization's enhanced regional presence, can be read as part of a larger Iranian plan to expand its regional influence by discrediting and questioning the legitimacy of other prominent regional players, such as Egypt. With that objective, the organization is actively struggling, both politically and operationally, to further redefine the regional alliances. Hizb Allah is strengthening the “resistance bloc” while discrediting the “moderate” regimes and alienating them from their populations.

Secretary General Nasrallah articulated Hizb Allah's regional strategy in detail during the September 18, 2009 al-Quds (Jerusalem) day celebrations. On that occasion, he stressed the fact that the organization sees the region as divided between “allies” and “enemies” of the “resistance,” and emphasized the need to change the status quo. Referring to the moderate Arab regimes, he said that “we have to replace the regimes in the Arab countries with other regimes that are convinced of war in order to send their armies to war.”³² Recognizing that this option may not be realistic in the short-term, he stressed the need to boost popular resistance throughout the region and added that the entire Middle East should follow the steps of Iran and Syria. In that regard, he also added: “I know Iran and I know its wise, courageous, and skilful administrator. I know its leaders and its people and its stand. I tell you that this Iran will never abandon the peoples of this region or the resistance movements in this region.”³³

30 Abdullah al-Najjar, “Hezbollah and the Incursion Into Kuwait,” *al-Watan*, October 9, 2009.

31 “Three Explosives Experts from Hezbollah Killed in Saada,” *al-Ittihad*, October 17, 2009.

32 “Nasrallah Commemorates Al-Quds Day,” speech transcript, September 18, 2009.

33 Ibid.

Nasrallah's message was directed both toward the people living under regimes deemed by the organization as “corrupt” by encouraging them to embrace the “resistance,” as well as toward the Lebanese people by urging them to shift their regional political alliances. In this sense, the secretary general also stated: “Iran wants to include Lebanon in the Syrian-Iranian axis by arming the army.”³⁴

Conclusion

Hizb Allah's internal strategy of containing both its political enemies and the international community has been matched by an increased interest in adopting a more visible regional role and in boosting the “axis of resistance” as a viable regional political project.

At this point, it is still rather difficult—given the paucity of reliable information available—to estimate the extent and impact of Hizb Allah's operational presence outside of Lebanon. Nevertheless, the fact that the group has been remarkably more visible in the region, more active in supporting local “resistance” cells, and more vocal against the “Arab moderate regimes” may signal that the group is permanently seeking a more prominent and powerful regional role. This could represent both a political and a security challenge for the group's enemies in the Arab world, as well as for Israel.

Benedetta Berti is the Bradley Foundation Doctoral fellow at the Fletcher School (Tufts University), and a Neubauer Associate Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (Tel Aviv University). Ms. Berti specializes in international security studies and Middle Eastern politics.

27 Durayd al-Bayk, “Egypt to Prove ‘Hezbollah Plot,’” *Gulf News*, April 9, 2009.

28 Ibid.

29 “ Hamas MP Says Egypt's ‘Campaign’ Against Hezbollah Targets Hamas,” Quds Press, April 15, 2009.

34 “Nasrallah Says Iran Is Willing To Arm The Lebanese Army,” *al-Manar*, May 29, 2009.