Review article
Talking to Hezbollah

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Beginning in 2006, following the war of that year between Hezbollah and Israel, I began to meet regularly with the Lebanese party in my capacity as a senior United Nations official then based in New York. The talks revolved around the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1701, which brought a halt to the conflict, and especially the consequences of the cessation of hostilities and the repatriation of prisoners, the wounded and the bodies of the fallen. Two years later, I was appointed UN Special Representative in Lebanon itself and my encounters with the group intensified.

Reporting several times a year to the Security Council in New York, my position enabled me to cross the Blue Line (the de facto border between Lebanon and Israel) regularly into Israel itself, meeting with officials in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and the Defence Ministry (Kirya) in Tel Aviv. In this respect, it was striking that while Israel has steadfastly opposed UN political contact with Hamas, it has actively used and supported UN contact with Hezbollah. Indeed, each side was eager to learn my assessment of the other. Often my most important Hezbollah interlocutor, Haji Wafiq Safa, would interrupt me impatiently to establish if a view I expressed reflected my own opinions or those of the Israelis. There were practical issues to be arranged, such as the resolution of the fate of two kidnapped Israeli soldiers that had sparked the 2006 war in the first place, the release of Hezbollah prisoners held by Israeli and measures to ease tensions along the Blue Line itself. But over and above these practical matters, it became increasingly clear to me that my meetings between the two parties were important in building rudimentary confidence that contributed enormously to the maintenance of the status quo. I took great satisfaction in the remark, on one occasion, of the then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, that for the first time in a quarter
of a century there were no rocket attacks from Lebanon. Indeed, more than eight years after the 2006 war, it is remarkable that the Blue Line between the two countries is more stable than at any time since the 1970s.

One of the most critical, and troubling, questions that it was important to reach a clear understanding on was the possible possession by Hezbollah of ground-to-air missiles. For the Israelis, this was a red line threatening their monopoly of air supremacy over Lebanon and inviting immediate retaliation and destruction. I had little doubt that Hezbollah would have trained on such weapons in Iran and Syria, but they have not been introduced into Lebanon itself. De facto, Hezbollah accepted their introduction would prompt immediate attack by Israel and a full-scale war. In the words of my Hezbollah interlocutor: ‘we know they would be a game changer’.

Hezbollah’s concept of deterrence was once graphically described by its leader Hassan Nasrallah in a mischievous manner, in a speech in which he predicted that a new war would start with ‘an Israeli attack on Rafic Hariri airport in Beirut. We would respond with a missile attack on Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. Then the Israelis would attack our two power stations. We would respond with attacks on Israeli power stations and knowing that your infrastructure is far more diverse and widespread we would have more targets!’

The two studies under review, by Matthew Levitt and Lina Khatib et al., present very different pictures of Hezbollah, pictures which are not necessarily conflicting and indeed, in many ways, are complementary. Levitt, a former senior official handling counterterrorism in the US Treasury, focuses on the group’s long record of terrorism dating back more than 30 years to the early 1980s and its violent attacks on US marines and French forces then based in Lebanon. Over the years, there followed attacks in almost every continent from Argentina via the Caucasus to Thailand, with Israeli premises and Jewish communities as the main targets. By contrast, Lina Khatib and her colleagues Dina Mattar and Atef Alshaer, look at Hezbollah’s phenomenal development as a political party with enormous influence within Lebanon and the wider Arab world. In some ways, the two books represent the two faces of Hezbollah; at one and the same time a domestic political party that commands the loyalty of most Lebanese Shia, with organizational and media skills that would be the envy of western political parties, as well as an organization that has not stopped using violence against innocent civilians ruthlessly throughout the world.

Levitt’s book makes a major contribution to the literature and we should be grateful to him for his forensic skill in mapping over 426 pages Hezbollah’s 30-year embrace of violence. Over that period, of course, as Lina Khatib and her co-authors demonstrate, Hezbollah has grown in stature as a political party, and not only in Lebanon. After the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah’s fame seemed to know no bounds in the Arab world, with pictures of Hassan Nasrallah appearing in every Arab bazaar from Cairo to Baghdad. In a region almost devoid of political parties in the modern sense, Hezbollah stands out with recognizable political structures, meetings and organization, youth and other sectoral groupings.
Throughout its history, Hezbollah’s use of the media—in print, radio, television and the internet—has been critical. As Naim Qassem, Nasrallah’s number two, stated: ‘the camera is an essential element in all resistance operations’ (Khatib et al., p. 53). In one of the most striking examples of its realization, Nasrallah, in the midst of the 2006 war, urged television viewers to watch as Hezbollah launched a Chinese-made C-802 missile against an Israeli warship in the bay of Beirut. And just as Israel spends much time in monitoring Lebanese and wider Arab media, so Hezbollah has its own Hebrew monitoring unit, an asset that they boast about with pride.

Khatib and her colleagues portray a party that has deliberately sought to keep Lebanon a weak and divided country, despite the efforts of the West and Gulf Arab states to strengthen the Lebanese state. The Hezbollah narrative of ‘resistance’ has become dominant, even if the object of that ‘resistance’ has changed over time from straightforward ‘Zionists’ to what the party today calls the ‘US, Zionist, takfiri conspiracy’. Over time too, Hezbollah’s use of terrorism outside Lebanon has diminished, although the attack on Israeli tourists in the Bulgarian resort of Burgas on 18 July 2012, which killed five Israelis and their Bulgarian bus driver, was almost certainly its work; and perhaps crude retaliation for the killing of the Hezbollah military leader Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus, in February 2008, probably by the Israeli Mossad.

But if terrorist incidents attributable to Hezbollah outside Lebanon have declined, this should not in any way be taken as a disavowal of violence, quite the contrary. First in Iraq after the 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein and then in Syria, following the 2011 revolt against their long-time ally, President Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah has proffered substantial military advice and assistance to its allies. In Syria, in the course of the past few years this has grown to the deployment of substantial Hezbollah units fighting a vicious war, not against the ‘Zionist state’, as in the past, but against Sunni Arabs. The long-term sectarian and political consequences of this throughout the Middle East remain to be seen.

Within Lebanon itself, Hezbollah is by far the strongest political party, commanding the support of the majority of Shia Muslims. Its sole competitor among Lebanese Shia is the Amal (Hope) movement of Nabih Berri, the Speaker of Parliament, and one of the wiliest politicians in the Middle East. Berri is now in his mid-seventies and after his time it is difficult to see Amal as little more than a front for Hezbollah in the long run. But Hezbollah’s political support is not confined to the Shia. A significant faction of Lebanon’s Christians, led by General Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)—probably as much as 40 per cent of the total Christian population, perhaps higher—support Aoun’s political alliance with Hezbollah, such is their distaste and fear of Sunni Islamism. During the last elections in June 2009, Hezbollah went out of its way to support the FPM, often making sure they won seats in areas they themselves might have contested.

When I pushed General Aoun, in frequent meetings, as to why his Christian party had thrown in their lot with the pro-Iranian party, his retort was: look what happened to Iraq’s Christians following the 2003 invasion; their numbers have
diminished by as much as two-thirds since the eviction of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Indeed, fear of Sunni fundamentalists, exacerbated by the spectacular rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, will almost certainly force many more Christians to look in the direction of Hezbollah for protection. Many have already done so; others, of course, have voted with their feet, immigrating to countries as distant as those of Latin America and Australia.

To an extent not widely recognized, the allegiances of Lebanese Christians have changed markedly. In the past, many looked towards Israel for protection following its 1982 invasion of Lebanon and subsequent 20-year-long occupation of southern Lebanon. Those days are long past. Already before the Arab Spring, many Lebanese Christians saw their future with General Aoun. The rise of ISIS in the Levant will leave far more thinking that their future lies under Hezbollah protection. But in the wake of the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Syria and Iraq, change is likely also in the attitudes of Israel and Hezbollah towards each other. In 2006, they fought a bitter six-week war, the most serious Israel has faced since the war of 1973 with Egypt. Indeed, the war in 2006 established Hezbollah as the only serious Arab resistance force to Israel in the region. Since then, a crude deterrence has prevailed. One striking consequence has been Hezbollah’s silence when Israel fought two bitter wars with Hamas in Gaza in 2008 and 2014, without Hezbollah raising a finger. The ‘peace’ between Israel and Hezbollah, of course, is underwritten by a delicate deterrence brokered by the presence of the United Nations. While Israel sees Hezbollah as a resolute and ruthlessly determined enemy, it also views it as a rational actor, as the more than eight-year-long truce between the two parties underlines. As one Israeli interlocutor intervened when I complained about the tardiness of Hezbollah’s responses: ‘you are not dealing with Hamas’; with the understanding that Hezbollah would do a deal.

At a time of extraordinary change in the Middle East and the destruction at the hands of ISIS of long-established states such as Iraq and Syria, Israel knows full well it may yet face graver threats than that posed by Hezbollah.

These two studies add immensely to our knowledge of Hezbollah and its extraordinary rise over the past three decades to become one of the major political and military actors in the Middle East. Its rise, as Levitt’s powerful study shows, owes much to the development of a ruthless military wing that fought the US and France in the 1980s and Israel over the decades. But as Lina Khatib and her colleagues detail, that rise was also due to a use of the media as a political tool unparalleled in the Arab world. That, in turn, has led Hezbollah not only to dominate Shia politics in Lebanon, but also to play significant roles in Syria and Iraq.