



The Nasrallah roadmap

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"Terrorist organisations like Hizbullah ... cannot be deterred," [wrote](#) prominent Likudnik and former Israeli foreign minister Moshe Arens in a recent piece for Haaretz. "There is only one option here: these organisations must be defeated."

Unfortunately, Arens's logic now appears to be the dominant one when it comes to Hizbullah - certainly among US and Israeli policymakers but also, increasingly, among EU member states and various pro-western Arab regimes. Perhaps as a result, most political elements in Lebanon, including those ostensibly trying to cut a deal for a new president, seem resigned to merely pushing paper and holding consultations; waiting for the "next round" of a full-scale conflict that will presumably "reshuffle" all the regional cards, one way or another.

Given the combined tragedy/debacle of the Iraq war, however, and in the light of Israel's own failure to "crush Hizbullah" during 33 days of open war, it is worth asking if there are really no peaceful alternatives for dealing with the threat that Hizbullah is said to represent.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most compelling answer to this question has been provided over the years by the leader of Hizbullah himself, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.

In February 2000, when a comprehensive peace agreement between Syria and Israel (which would have also effectively bound Lebanon and Hizbullah) appeared to be near, Nasrallah placidly told the Egyptian al-Ahram daily: "We actually estimate that a peaceful resolution is a victory for the resistance and its logic.

"The experience we went through," he added, "could be a good example for the Palestinian people especially when they compare the results of the final status talks with those achieved by Lebanon and Syria thanks to their steadfast attitude, over many years, until they achieved their national objectives."

Of course, several weeks later, the Syrian track [fell apart](#) in bitter acrimony - largely as a result of US president Bill Clinton's deceitful negotiations with the dying Syrian president, Hafez Assad, as well as an Israeli refusal to return the Golan Heights all the way to the waterline of Lake Tiberius.

Accordingly, in May 2000, the IDF ignominiously withdrew from Lebanon after 22 years of brutal occupation - minus a peace agreement with Syria - and Hizbullah was hailed as the first Arab "army" to have pushed Israel out of occupied land by force of arms.

The withdrawal presented Nasrallah with a new matrix of threats and challenges, however, primarily centered on the question of why Hizbullah should retain its arms given the apparent absence of occupation.

In an effort to convince as many Lebanese as possible that an armed Hizbullah was still in the broader national interest, Nasrallah focused on the four "bleeding wounds" left by Israel (which remain to this day): the handing over of maps of Israeli landmines in south Lebanon (and now the targeting coordinates for the cluster bombs fired indiscriminately by Israel last year); the return of all Lebanese prisoners who remain in jail (there are three named as such as well as more than a dozen prisoners of dual nationality); an end to Israeli over-flights of Lebanon that are both illegal and arguably unnecessary in any case; and, finally, Israel's relinquishing of the water-rich Shebaa Farms area (in addition to several other disputed parcels of land), which, according to [recent reports](#), the United Nations may soon

declare as Lebanese.

"These fools do not learn from their past mistakes," Nasrallah remarked in January 2004 during a "welcome home" ceremony for dozens of Lebanese and Arab detainees released by Israel as part of yet another German-brokered swap. "When they withdrew from Lebanon, they continued to occupy the Shebaa Farms and kept our brothers in custody. Had they released them when they left Lebanon, there would not now be a 'prisoner issue' between Lebanon and the enemy. They opened the door for us."

In 2005, however, that door began to close swiftly following the [assassination](#) of Rafik Hariri. The subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops and the ascendancy of a pro-western government in Beirut forced Nasrallah to broaden Hizbullah's participation, and appeal, in the Lebanese body politic.

The reason, Nasrallah made clear with ever-greater emphasis, was simple. Hizbullah stands on two legs: resistance and public support for the resistance. Without both legs, Hizbullah and its core constituency of Lebanese Shia would find it next to impossible to function in Lebanon's unique (some say grossly inequitable) system of confessional checks and balances.

Thus, in rapid succession it seemed, Hizbullah broke its long-standing self-prohibition against joining the government (to do so it also broke with tradition and sought a Lebanese, and not Iranian, fatwa). It brokered electoral alliances with its major pro-western opponents. It "allowed" its affiliated labour minister to meet Bush administration officials in Washington, in the apparent hope of working out a *modus vivendi*.

And, of even greater significance, in February 2006, the Party of God signed an agreement with the most popular Christian leader, General Michel Aoun, which, for the first time, placed a theoretical horizon on Hizbullah's arms.

Amid hints from Israel and Washington that the four "bleeding wounds" might soon be removed as a way of gradually disarming Hizbullah through internal pressure rather than through direct force, Nasrallah's rhetorical emphasis again shifted to the longstanding - but for the most part secondary - Hizbullah theme of Lebanon's national defence.

His argument coalesced around three core threats said to be reinforced by Israel's historically pernicious relationship with Lebanon as well as by its tendency to ignore international law - two points greatly reinforced by Israel's violent and ill-considered reaction to the July 12, 2006 border incident which turned into "open war."

First: the issue of water. As Nasrallah constantly reminds his audiences, Lebanon is a water-rich country compared to Israel (which has a poor track record of fair water use, especially in the occupied territories). Some 20% of the River Jordan's headwaters - Israel's main freshwater source - stem from south Lebanon's Wazzani and Hasbani rivers alone.

In 2002, Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon went so far as to declare, unambiguously, that a [small pipe](#) installed on the Wazzani for Lebanese use had become a *casus belli* for Israel. Coming from Sharon, who led Israel's bloody invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the remark provided a vivid reminder to all Lebanese of just how vulnerable Lebanon remained, even after the occupation, when it came to its apparently bellicose southern neighbour.

Another threat: who will hold Israel to account, Nasrallah asks, if al-Qaida or some other non-Lebanese or religious fanatics fire rockets or conduct operations across the border with Israel? Since 2005, there have indeed been several rockets launched at Israel which were clearly not tied to Hizbullah, but which could provide a *casus belli* for Israel, if it so desires.

Remember [Shlomo Argov](#), Nasrallah tells his audience. Americans and Europeans may not remember him, but most Lebanese do. In June 1982 the assassination attempt on the Israeli ambassador to London provided premier Menachem Begin with his *casus belli* to [occupy Lebanon](#) all the way to Beirut - even though the attack was perpetrated by a bitter rival of Yasser Arafat and the PLO (then ensconced in Lebanon), and despite the fact that the PLO had gone to pains to keep the border region quiet for several months.

Finally, Nasrallah asks, what about the Palestinians? Not only the 400,000 Palestinian refugees still living in misery, for the most part, in Lebanon. But what of the Palestinians both inside Israel proper and those in the occupied territories?

Although for a foreign audience, the "transfer debate" within Israel may not register, for Nasrallah (an avid reader of the Hebrew language media and the history of Zionism), the issue comes across loud and clear: a Palestinian-Israeli peace

deal will prove impossible to reach, and at some point Israel will be forced to confront its demographic and security "time-bomb" by expelling Palestinians. At that point, Lebanon - not Jordan or Egypt with their peace agreements, or Syria with its strong deterrent capabilities - will be the final stop.

For many Lebanese, his reasoning is powerful: all the more so given [comments](#) by top Israeli leaders over the years in support of some kind of a transfer or outright expulsion policy. Indeed, according to some [recent polling](#), roughly 40% of Israelis want the government to force Arab citizens to leave the country, and close to 60% support policies to more benignly "encourage" them to emigrate.

"I do not agree that we are a state within a state," Nasrallah said earlier this year. "However, if I agree with you on this, the solution will be easy like the solution to the resistance issue ... go and establish a strong and powerful state capable of protecting Lebanon, the land of Lebanon, and the water of Lebanon."

Unfortunately, as the three-month clash between the Lebanese army and Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp proved, Lebanon still does not have a credible, state-led defence or deterrent strategy to answer the threats identified by Nasrallah - certainly not one to replace the "balance of fear" which he argues is still the only way to protect Lebanon. In fact, two years after the exit of Syria and the ascendancy of a pro-US government, the US still refuses to provide the real weaponry of anti-terrorism or national defence to the Lebanese army, the result of longstanding, and in light of the changed circumstances in the region, outmoded Israeli objections.

Although properly equipping the Lebanese army and removing the four "bleeding wounds" immediately would, of course, greatly reinforce the Lebanese state, to begin to effectively undermine Hizbullah's "second leg" rationale for bearing arms - to hasten, in other words, the consummation of the Aoun-Nasrallah agreement - the US and its allies would also have to start substantively addressing the core threats identified by Nasrallah.

This - in the absence of a Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement - would mean creating strong institutional and international frameworks for conflict mitigation, rather than merely "beefed-up," buffer forces as is the case now with [Unifil](#).

One immediate act in this regard would be to reestablish the [Monitoring Group](#), set up in the wake of the April 1996 Israeli-Hizbullah conflict and designed to prevent small incidents from blowing up into a war. Before the Israeli withdrawal in May 2000, the Monitoring Group operated as an innovative and largely effective conflict resolution body. After the pullout it was disbanded though - leaving no formal mechanism for any kind of transparent, balanced mediation, despite the continued presence of Unifil troops.

Also left by the wayside, perhaps even more dangerously, have been international efforts in the region to reduce the threat of violence over water. As but one example, even though an ad hoc arrangement led by the US in 2002 helped to avoid war over the Wazzani, nothing institutional or permanent came of the effort, despite the fact that stop-gap mediation successfully prevented violence at the time.

Little, too, has been said by the US or its allies on the issue of population transfers from either the occupied territories or Israel proper. Washington could do far more to make it clear that extremist solutions put forward by some elements of the Israeli government and body politic are not only unacceptable as a matter of principle, but also would meet with harsh, targeted sanctions by the US.

Although President Bush, for example, recently signed an executive order broadly sanctioning anyone who threatens the "stability" of the current pro-western Lebanese government, administration officials regularly meet with Israelis, such as cabinet minister [Avidor Lieberman](#), who endorse transfer policies that undermine the prospects of a Lebanese consensus and which give fodder to Hizbullah.

Of course, even if the US and its allies mustered the will and foresight to take these and other conflict mitigation steps, the more powerful dynamics of any Arab-Israeli and/or US-Iranian conflict would probably overwhelm the entire enterprise - just as peace on either of these fronts would also probably overwhelm Hizbullah's domestic rationale and ability to keep its arms.

The point, though, is to not hold reasonable solutions hostage to the pacing of the big issues, and not to leave small, but sound institutional mechanisms for resolving conflict to rot on the vine. Although the path sketched out over the years by Nasrallah will undoubtedly be long, and faces many hurdles, it does still have a chance of succeeding, if pursued vigorously and intelligently by some of the very states now directly involved on the frontlines of Lebanon's future.

If it is not taken, however, only Arens's logic of war will likely prevail, and the costs of that will surely be terrible for all sides concerned.