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Time to Focus on Grievances in Lebanon, Not Hezbollah

By NICHOLAS NOE

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BEIRUT -- One of the more persistent assumptions among policymakers and commentators alike when it comes to Hezbollah is that any moderation or rationality displayed by the Party of God is only temporary cover for a series of longer-term goals that no package of domestic concessions could reasonably hope to satiate.

Realists typically employ this line of thinking to push for a wider strategy of engaging Iran and Syria, together Hezbollah's primary external backers said to be inexorably fuelling its aspirations.

Neoconservatives (whose influence in Middle East policymaking is by no means over) conversely argue that the same assumptions about Hezbollah roughly apply to both Iran and Syria – with the implication being that only more counterpressure and counterforce can save the day for Lebanon, Israel and the West.

One problem for realists is that it remains unclear why, if Iran's behavior and aspirations, in particular, can be contained, the same cannot also hold true for Hezbollah, given that the party, as a non-state actor in a confessionally oriented country, potentially faces an even wider array of constraints than does Tehran.

The central problem for neoconservatives, illustrated most recently in a piece by the ubiquitous Israeli analyst, Martin Kramer, for the Adelson Institute, is that even if one accepts their dubious assumption of an irrational and/or religiously driven actor, this doesn't necessarily preclude the effectiveness of a strategy focusing on some of the core grievances at stake.

Indeed, in the case of Lebanon, even if we assume that Hezbollah wants to lead the "liberation" of Jerusalem, say, or establish an Islamic Caliphate – assumptions that Hezbollah mostly denies and which are diminished, in any case, by divisions within the party – these supposedly "infinite" desires are dialectically related to what the party can do under the prevailing conditions of Lebanon, first, and the region second.

Interestingly, Hezbollah's top leaders and thinkers have long acknowledged this crucial point.

As Deputy Secretary General Sheikh [Naim Qassem](#) explains in his 2005 book, "Hezbollah: The Story from Within," while Hezbollah is dedicated to [potentially violent] resistance on the basis of its religious, ideological and national commitments, such resistance can only be maintained so long as there is "public [support](#) for such resistance."

Hezbollah can wield the balance of power on the ground in Lebanon – as it increasingly has – but if its execution alienates the balance of public support, and especially its vital political



THE NEOCON PROBLEM -- The central problem for neoconservatives is that their assumption of an irrational and/or religious motive driving Hezbollah doesn't necessarily preclude the effectiveness of a strategy focusing on core grievances. The photo shows Lebanese President Michel Suleiman (left) with U.S. President George W. Bush at the White House on Sept. 25. (Sipa Press via Newscom)

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alliance in the country, then the resistance project would be mortally endangered.

"Where military power is only and exclusively employed to combat the enemy," Qassem explains further, "aiming at liberating the land irrespective of geography, and when Lebanon is chained to a set of balances which would render thinking of defeating the 'other' futile or a source of unity for belligerent foes, and where the military supremacy of one sect over others leads to internal strife in which all are losers, then would a serious resistance mission gain natural legitimacy. Any other form of military mission would be quickly exposed and lose its objectives."

Thanks, in part, to clumsy and ill-conceived U.S., Israeli and March 14 policies over the past three and a half years, even Hezbollah's brief use of arms internally last May did not have the effect of definitively "exposing" Hezbollah and thereby wedging it from its political alliances or its broad base of public support.

A different set of policies by states invested in Lebanon's future, however, could do just that.

The first step would be to recognize that many of Hezbollah's stated grievances are shared by a broad cross spectrum of Lebanese – specifically, an end to occupied territory and persistent violations of sovereignty as well as the creation of a strong, state-led defense – and that, according to pro-opposition polling, most of those same people do not share the party's other, more radical goals.

By focusing on the supply side, i.e. those Lebanese who provide Hezbollah's indispensable margin to maneuver, rather than on Hezbollah's demands, one can sidestep entirely what Kramer considers the trap of thinking that Hezbollah "only pretend[s] to be faithful to Iran's ayatollahs, [that] all their talk about 'onwards to Jerusalem' is rhetoric for domestic consumption... [and what they] really want is to earn the Shiites their rightful place in Lebanon, and improve the lot of their aggrieved sect."

After all, in this frame of thinking, Hezbollah's sincerity is not really the issue.

Shut off the spigot of broad public support and tolerance for Hezbollah – a relatively low cost proposition relative to the other conflicts in the region – and the party would in fact find itself facing the greatest challenge of its relatively short lifespan: a truly sovereign state where its countrymen's interests and dignity are reasonably protected by that same state.

Of course, a range of other reforms, especially a widening of access to political power, would also be necessary to transform such a maxim into reality.

But especially if the incoming Barack Obama administration in the United States is willing to take the lead and [invest](#) in the basic proposition that Hezbollah is in fact domestically containable, one of the more debilitating illusions of U.S. and Western policymaking could finally be broken, leaving the way open for a peace building process that would ultimately benefit all the actors involved in the current conflict.

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