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Hezbollah's Competing Legitimacies

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One of the stranger comments during the Lebanon war was Condoleezza Rice's assertion that these were the "birthpangs of the new Middle East". Given that democratisation is the cornerstone of the US' rhetoric on the "new Middle East", Rice contributed to a perception in the Arab world that democratisation is a violent and bloody process.

However, it is difficult to see how the war helped democratisation in Lebanon, which had progressed before: The Lebanese had been regaining their sovereignty after Syrian troop withdrawal and an overall weakening of Syria's influence. Meanwhile last year's Parliamentary elections were held in a largely democratic manner although under a flawed election system.

So where does the recent fighting leave Lebanon's democracy? More than ever the answer appears to depend on Hezbollah. The militant group relies on two sources of legitimacy. Firstly, there is the formal-electoral legitimacy from last years' Parliamentary election where all lists and candidates sponsored by Hezbollah won in their regions. Secondly, there is Hezbollah's legitimacy as an armed group, credited by most Lebanese with forcing Israel to pull out of Southern Lebanon in 2000, giving the group national recognition beyond its Shiite constituency. Hezbollah also plays a vital role in providing social services to the Shiite community. While it was hoped that Hezbollah's participation in government could strengthen the civic aspects of the group at the expense of its armed wing, Hezbollah's Cabinet Minister remained aloof. It appears that the group feels more at ease with its image of an armed group, rather than engaging in democratic policy-making following its premiere as a partner in the national government.

The kidnapping of Israeli soldiers on 12 July may thus also have been an attempt to reinvigorate Hezbollah's appeal in a way that parliamentary and government work would not. The timing, during

Israel's attack on Gaza, also suggests that the group tried to capitalise on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For the moment, the recent war will likely strengthen the military leanings of the group. Hezbollah understands this perceived victory together with Israel's grossly disproportionate response to the kidnapping as a vindication of the need to remain an effective deterrent force. The popularity of Sheikh Nasrallah across the Muslim will make it even more attractive for Hezbollah to style itself as the spearhead of Muslim resistance against Israel and the West, at the expense of engaging in the democratic life of Lebanon, especially since Hezbollah will always face significant limitations within Lebanon's domestic politics: While in many Arab states Muslim or Islamist parties can hope to win majorities in genuinely democratic elections, Hezbollah is unlikely to attract votes beyond its limited Shiite powerbase as last years' elections showed, where it won few Christian votes despite some Christian candidates on its lists.

Hezbollah's fame may be momentous however. In the long run some serious questions about its legitimacy as an armed group and as a party are bound to resurface: Firstly, had Israel's onslaught not provided fresh oxygen to Hezbollah's resistance myth, the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers could have turned into a political fiasco, greatly increasing pressure to disarm. After all, the open issues between Israel and Lebanon are limited, far from justifying the existence of a guerrilla army. The Hezbollah prisoners in Israeli arrest and the Shebaa farms, occupied by Israel, considered by the UN to be part of Syria, claimed by Lebanon are matters which diplomacy can solve. Secondly, Hezbollah cannot credibly intervene on the Palestinians' behalf. As a Shiite group it holds limited sway in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, which are rather under the influence of Palestinian groups and Syria. Thirdly, Hezbollah's claim that it respects Lebanese state interests is spurious when it conducts its own military actions and foreign policy without the involvement of the elected government. The more democratic Lebanon becomes, the less acceptable will this double act be. Fourthly, Hezbollah's democratic legitimacy is weakened by the fact that it receives significant support from abroad. At some point the group would have to show what it can do for its electorate without receiving Iranian oil money. Fifthly, political reform in Lebanon may not benefit Hezbollah. The group would have legitimate claims to address the under-representation of Shiites in the current confessional system, but it has been far less vocal in raising this point than its right to maintain armed. The question of representation is indeed more delicate for the fragile internal Lebanese politics, than the question of arms. However, according to the 1989 post-civil war Ta'ef agreements and the Lebanese constitution, confessional representation should be greatly reduced altogether to the benefit of a more civic notion of citizenship. Under the current election law one cannot stand for office simply as a Lebanese citizen without confessional affiliation. If indeed Lebanon would become a more civic state, a group intensively based on one confession like Hezbollah is unlikely to benefit.

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