

Hizballah, the Israel Defense Forces and Beyond

On September 14, the Henry R. Luce Hall auditorium filled with members of the Yale community and the general public to hear a panel discussion, “Hizballah, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Beyond: Perspectives on the Current Crisis in the Middle East.”

The panelists included Yale Professors Abbas Amanat, Michael Gasper, Charles Hill, Ellen Lust-Okar, Bruce Russett, and Shaul Mishal, the Coca-Cola World Fund at Yale Visiting Professor. Professor Keith Darden acted as moderator. The panel discussion presented the background to the current crisis, the interrelationships of the major players, and various possible outcomes post-ceasefire.

Professor Gasper presented some background on Hizballah, explaining that some experts date its emergence to the struggle to eject Israel from Lebanon after its 1982 occupation of the country, while others say it dates back to anticolonial struggles in the region in the 1950s and '60s. He said the allocation of power on a six to five ratio of Christians to Muslims was based on the 1932 census. Yet as the Muslim population outstripped the Christians, no adjustment in the power balance was made, leading to more disenfranchisement and greater poverty among the Shia.

Gasper said that gradually the Lebanese Shia, who had identified earlier on with leftist parties, moved toward more fundamentalist Islamic parties. He added that Hizballah was formed from several smaller groupings in Lebanon.

Professor Amanat began by saying that none of the players could legitimately declare victory in the five-week war. “The ‘victory’ of the IDF was tainted because it did not destroy Hizballah. “Perhaps,” he continued, “it was a victory for Hizballah or the backers of Hizballah. But there is plenty of blame to go around, to Hizballah for being, at least in part, responsible for the destruction of a great part of Lebanon. This was an unprovoked war. It was a foolish decision for the Israeli armed forces to take such an excessive action that would further blemish their image in the region and perhaps in the rest of the world. I don’t know whether they care about that or not, but that’s the reality.”

Amanat added that a great deal of the blame goes to Iran for backing Hizballah “almost unconditionally, and finally, of course, to the United States and Great Britain, who decided— foolishly, in my opinion— to allow this conflict to go on and result in the massive misfortune for the people of Lebanon without trying to exert influence upon the Israelis to limit their actions in Lebanon.”

He said the war was a loss for Iran because Hizballah was a security asset for Iran, and much of that asset has been squandered through expenditure of so much of its military hardware at a cost of \$2 billion to \$6 billion. He said a debate will unfold in Iran as to whether Hizballah’s actions were in Iran’s interest. “For Hizballah to be able to act as a deterrent again will require a great deal of time and money,” Amanat concluded.

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Professor Hill spoke of the “monumental significance for the Lebanese state” of the recent war, but said it’s significant also for the United Nations, NATO, and Iran. “There were discussions of Hizballah being a state within a state, but this summer it was said Hizballah was a state within a non-state, that Lebanon was not a state itself.” He traced that to the early 1970s, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) moved into Beirut after its failed coup attempt against the government of Jordan. Civil war resulted, and Syrian troops moved into Lebanon as a stabilizing force “but it was, in fact, an occupation,” he said.

Professor Hill said this summer's war was the third Hizballah war; the first being in 1982, which resulted in the PLO leaving Lebanon and moving to Tunis, Tunisia. The second war occurred in the 1990s, with Iran's involvement, and resulted in a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000— which was taken as a great Hizballah victory.

After the third war, Professor Hill said the question is whether there would be an attempt to achieve an Islamic republic in Lebanon, “because that is the aim of Iran and of Hizballah as its surrogate.”

Professor Ellen Lust-Okar shared insights from a public opinion poll conducted in Lebanon after the fighting stopped. Asked what the recent conflict was about, 37 percent (of the admittedly small sample of 400) said it was an attempt by Syria and Iran to drag Lebanon into their conflicts within the international community. An equal percentage thought it was an attempt by Israel to force Lebanon to execute UN resolution 1559. Only five percent thought it was retaliation by Israel against Hizballah, and only two percent thought it was retaliation by Hizballah against Israeli aggression. It was often seen as a proxy war between the U.S. and Iran, and most considered Hizballah to be the victor.

She said the poll showed that Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrullah rose in popularity in the region after the war, and so did Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora.

“The losers,” Lust-Okar said, “are clear— they are the ones who had to come out and support the U.S. stance and blame Hizballah, despite widespread public opinion in the Arab world in support of Nasrullah and in support of Hizballah. I think the winners are Syria, which was able to strengthen its regime and its relations with Lebanon, and Iran. And another loser we can talk about is the United States. Within the region it's seen its friends— Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan— lose ground. Its enemies— Syria and Iran— have gained ground.”

Israeli visiting professor Shaul Mishal got a laugh when he introduced his talk this way: “I always come here before, during, or after a war. Maybe it's better not to come.”

He spoke about what he called two critical Israeli weaknesses: its strategic miscalculation and its strategic misperception of Hizballah. He described three strategic dimensions of the IDF: Israel's ability to handle the conflict in its “inner circle” with the Palestinians; the “further circle” that focuses on Iran; and the “nearer circle”— how to maintain Israeli defensive capability vis-a-vis the Arab world, which Mishal called, “the problematic one.” He said most of Israel's energy in the past decade was directed toward the first two circles. He said regarding the Arab world, Israel's strategy has been focused more on containment than deterrence.

He said Israel is confused about what Hizballah is: It is not a state actor, but it has many state features, including sophisticated weaponry. If it is a non-state actor, the approach is deterrence; if it is a state actor, military leaders in Israel believe the approach should be one of containment.

Mishal concluded by saying that the role of the U.S. is critical. “The more the U.S. pursues an aggressive deterrent strategy, the more difficult it will be for Israel to reassess its national strategy and military buildup.”

Professor Bruce Russett put the situation in the Middle East in the context of the war in Iraq. After the Bush administration's initial reasons for going to war— the alleged Al Qaeda/Saddam connection, and Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction— were exposed as false, the rationale became the need to bring democracy and thus, peace to Iraq and the Middle East. Unfortunately, he said, neither democracy, peace nor security has resulted. “Democracy alone can't make a peace, especially between Arabs and Israelis. They have too long and deep a history of violence, little to no commercial exchange, and no effective international governmental organizations that include both sides.”

“Generally,” he continued, “the war in Iraq has been a setback to any project of democratization in the Islamic world and to U.S. influence there.”

He said the United Nations “has bitten off too much and I fear they didn’t know what they were biting” in agreeing to provide a peacekeeping force on the Lebanon-Israeli border. “The UN force originally was to be about 15,000 troops– which already was recognized as too small to disarm Hizballah. In fact, the force will be about half that, supplemented by Lebanese security forces that are too few, under-equipped, with many Hizballah sympathizers and no willingness to use force. The UN forces also clearly will not try to forcibly disarm Hizballah. The deal was that the UN will not try to disarm Hizballah; Hizballah will hide its weapons and would not publicly deny they’d made such a deal. I call that, ‘Don’t look, don’t tell,’” Russett said, evoking chuckles from the audience.

Moderator Keith Darden thanked the panelists for “doing their duty– to tell us something we haven’t read in the newspaper and give us a new perspective and a more fine-grained analysis of what’s going on.”