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Understanding the Iran-Hezbollah Connection

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The ratification of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, has brought the most recent conflict between Israel and Hezbollah to a [tenuous ceasefire](#). In the uneasy aftermath, small but significant changes in the balance of power in the Middle East have arisen.

The success of the Shiite Hezbollah faction in resisting the Israeli military has stoked pan-Arab solidarity, increased the regional popularity of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and heightened fears of renewed civil war in Lebanon. Moreover, it has affected the regional Shiite-Sunni dynamic and intensified the international focus on Iran - a Shiite, non-Arab country that has teamed with Syria to provide backing for Hezbollah. Raising the stakes is [Iran's uranium enrichment program](#), which faces the strong but increasingly fractious opposition of a U.S.-led alliance of international powers in the U.N. Security Council.

To evaluate Iran's role in the most recent Israel-Hezbollah fighting and in the dynamic political scene left in its wake, the Institute's [Muslim World Initiative](#) convened a [panel](#) featuring several distinguished Iran experts. **Vali Nasr**, adjunct senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, addressed the effects of the war on sectarian political dynamics in the region; **Hadi Semati**, public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, elucidated the internal political scene in Iran; **Kenneth Pollack**, director of research and senior fellow at The Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy, discussed the U.S. policy stance toward the region; and **Ray Takeyh**, senior fellow for Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, commented on his colleagues' presentations and offered his outlook on the prospects for the region. Moderating the event was [Daniel Brumberg](#), special advisor to the Institute's Muslim World Initiative and author of *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (2001).

The Israel-Hezbollah Conflict and the Shiite-Sunni Divide



The impact of the [Lebanon crisis](#) on regional dynamics in the Middle East was the focus of Vali Nasr's remarks. Nasr observed that the ongoing war in Iraq has "produced the contours and attitudes of alliances" that have emerged among sectarian groups and militant Islamist networks throughout the region. Most obvious, and most critical, are new rifts between Sunni and Shiite forces. These rifts may have been widened by the fighting in Lebanon.

Shiites, who comprise the largest segment of the population in both Iraq and Lebanon, have been afforded several new opportunities for power and influence in recent years. The departure of Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000 and of

Hezbollah supporters, holding posters of leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, chant slogans during an anti-Israeli demonstration in Tehran, Iran on July 18. (Photo: AP/Wide World)

Syrian forces in 2003 vaulted Hezbollah to the forefront of the Lebanese political scene.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, also in 2003, a number of [political parties](#), established clerics, and militant upstarts began to vie for the sympathies of Iraq's Shiite majority. In broad terms, two competing camps emerged. The first camp, following the teachings of Iraq's preeminent cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, advocates a "one man, one vote" model, which would presumably lead to the Shiites assumption of power. The second camp argues that Shiite political forces

should focus their attention on what Nasr calls the dominant issue in regional politics--the Arab-Israeli conflict--in order to galvanize Muslim public opinion and obtain moral leadership of the Muslim community through solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Hezbollah found itself in the role of vanguard of this second camp, Nasr said, when its kidnapping of two Israeli Defense Force soldiers triggered Israeli strikes deep into Lebanese territory. Sunni forces, aware that their status as "Arab defenders" was in danger of being usurped by a Shiite militia, were initially critical of Hezbollah's actions. In what Nasr called an "unprecedented" occurrence, Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian heads of state joined Salafi and Wahhabi notables in criticizing Hezbollah. These actors usually have little negative to say, at least publicly, about an Arab force fighting Israel. As the civilian death toll in Lebanon mounted, however, their criticisms became more muted. Nasr argued that with a ceasefire now in place, and Hezbollah proclaiming victory against Israel, Hezbollah (and their equally vocal Iranian benefactors) have "successfully hijacked the Israeli-Palestinian issue."

That Sunnis have lost ground to Shiites on this issue may result in more sectarian tension throughout the region, Nasr said--particularly in Iraq, where Sunnis are already weakened and sectarian rifts are already deep and bloody. There is now more pressure on moderate Shiite leaders--in particular Sistani, who remains the dominant source of emulation for Shiites throughout the region--to offer an alternative to the politics of defiance embodied by Hezbollah and Iran.

A retooling of U.S. strategy could affect Iran's policy positions, Nasr suggested. In particular, increased engagement with Iran, in any form, could change the way that Iran deals with Hezbollah. While its role in fomenting the recent conflict is unclear, Nasr pointed to the Iranian weaponry used in the conflict as an indicator of Iran's continuing interest in Hezbollah as a proxy militia with which it can exert pressure on Israel. Increased interaction with the United States, given its strong alliance with Israel, could make it politically costly for Iran to use its influence over Hezbollah in such a way. In turn, Nasr stated, "If Iran no longer had an interest in a hot war with Israel ... [it] could change Hezbollah's strategic calculations."

Nasr closed with the troubling argument that Lebanon is in danger of descending into another major civil conflict. Referring to the terms of Resolution 1701, which calls unequivocally for Hezbollah's disarmament, he remarked, "Holding Hezbollah accountable means a civil war." Hezbollah is a political force in Lebanon as well as a militia; it has representation in the parliament and even in the cabinet. Forcing the issue of disarmament, or pursuing other potentially confrontational policies in the current volatile political climate, could pit a major institutionalized representative of Lebanon's Shiites against the rest of [Lebanon's confessional groups](#). A renewed conflict in Lebanon, in turn, can only exacerbate the conflict in Iraq. With one conflict enveloping and influencing another, Nasr saw few reasons for an optimistic outlook on the Middle Eastern political scene.

Building on Nasr's grim assessment of the escalating [regional sectarianism](#), Ray Takeyh emphasized the dangers that could accompany an increase in sectarian polarization. With conflicts already underway in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, widening tensions between Sunnis and Shiites could exacerbate unrest in countries that contain sizable Shiite minorities. Marginalized Shiite communities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait could erupt, provoking a "series of civil wars," with dire regional consequences.

Furthermore, Takeyh argued, [intensified religious elements](#) complicate the mix of troubles plaguing the region. The increasing prominence of Islamist political parties, which find widespread support for their anti-American and anti-Israel stances, limits the diplomatic options available to the West. Takeyh noted that it would be seen as "apostasy" for Hamas to negotiate a peace agreement with Israel. As today's dilemmas become more "colored by a religious overtone," Takeyh observed, "they become more difficult to resolve."

Yet, according to Takeyh, it is not a foregone conclusion that Iran will have made dramatic political gains when the dust settles. The purpose set forth during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was for Iran to become an "Islamic power" leading a "revolution without borders." Intensified factionalism would instead render Iran a "sectarian power" taking part in a "revolution with uncertain borders." In the least, this prospect would compel Iran to "reorient" its foreign policy objectives. Agreeing with Nasr, Takeyh asserted that Iran's role as an emerging regional leader should not be overstated. As a vocal proponent of the anti-American, anti-Israeli, and pan-Islamic rhetoric so ubiquitous in the current political discourse of the Middle East, Iran holds potentially powerful cards - but cards that can easily be misplayed.

Internal Iranian Debate on International Affairs

Hadi Semati offered his perspective on Iranian politics and the influence of events in Lebanon on the Iranian internal political debate. Semati described two broad narratives that dominated the Iranian political scene at the outset of the Lebanon crisis. A more hawkish narrative, amplified in the hard-line conservative press, portrayed Hezbollah's fight in the context of a broader conflict with the United States and its Israeli ally. This narrative advocated a "stay-the-course" mentality and dovetailed with continued pursuit of Iran's nuclear agenda in defiance of the wishes of the U.N. Security Council. According to the reformist and mainstream conservative perspective, by contrast, Hezbollah had overreached. The militia had put Iran in a difficult position by inviting a drawn-out battle, just as the issue of Iran's nuclear program was coming to a head.

Initially, Semati said, this latter narrative prevailed in Iran's mainstream media, with criticism of Hezbollah featuring in the headlines of all but the most conservative media outlets. As the destruction escalated in Lebanon, however, the media had to adapt. The hard-line narrative was served well by the symbolic packaging of images, which became increasingly incendiary as the conflict wore on, and the public's initial ambivalence gave way to broad mainstream support for Hezbollah. According to Semati, solidarity with the Shiite group became an "emotional, ideological, cultural issue."

The upcoming months, Semati predicted, will see those moderates who favor a broad rapprochement with the United States and the UN in a very difficult position. Iranian domestic policy, in the eyes of the public, "has become entangled with U.S. foreign policy." Even reformists have become highly critical of the Bush administration, for a foreign policy that in their view is undermining democracy in Iran and in the region at large. These reformists are finding it increasingly difficult to compete with the hard-line narrative in a political climate dominated by a spirit of defiance of the United States and by Shiite solidarity.

It is too early to say if or how Iran will benefit strategically in the long-term from the recent conflict in Lebanon. That said, Semati views the short-term situation as a "win-win" for Iran and Hezbollah. Militarily, he argues, there is "no doubt" that Hezbollah will rearm; politically they have already gained. Tehran has a stronger ally in Lebanon than ever, even if Hezbollah is pushed to assume a more overtly political stance and finesse its military wing. Moreover, Iran has scored a notable public relations victory in the region, as the patron of the force that waged what is widely viewed as a successful campaign against Israel.

While its patronage of Hezbollah has had a coattail effect for the current leadership, Semati agreed with the other panelists that Iran's role in Hezbollah's recent operations should not be overstated. Noting Hezbollah's rapidly growing independence from Iran in recent years, he doubted that Iran was "operationally involved" with planning or execution in the conflict. "Iran has influence," Semati stated, "but

they don't have a veto."

Responding to Semati's interpretation of Iranian political discourse, Takeyh remarked that international affairs issues are "elite debates" in which the public has little say, even suggesting that public opinion is irrelevant outside of domestic matters. Among the elites, Takeyh noted an emerging consensus on the critical issues of Iran's nuclear ambitions, its approach to dealing with the United States, and the wars in Lebanon and Iraq. Even without the fiery Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rallying support, the Iranian political scene, which is known for its tense fissures, would remain largely united.

U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iran

The perception among the Arab public of a Hezbollah victory in the recent conflict complicates the [United States' policy options in dealing with Iran](#). Speaking on this issue, Kenneth Pollack warned of an emerging consensus in some Washington foreign policy circles that Iran is a country of "diabolical geniuses... instigating and engineering all of [the] problems" in the Middle East. This mindset, he said, is inaccurate and counterproductive; Iran's political successes have been matched by its failures. Although Iran maintains strong support of Hezbollah, Pollack agreed with Semati's comment that Hezbollah has increasingly begun to make decisions on its own. While Iran is a benefactor of Hezbollah, giving it weapons, money, training, and advice, and while the two parties consult on strategic matters, they are separate entities with interests that do not always coincide.

Pollack identified two primary concerns regarding the effect of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict on the Iranian nuclear enrichment standoff. First, the harmony of the coalition behind UN Security Council Resolution 1696, ordering Iran to suspend all nuclear enrichment-related activities by August 31, may have been compromised. Members of the coalition may question the United States' commitment to diplomacy, if the United States' cautious endorsement of Israel's military actions in Lebanon is perceived as a reversion to the pre-Iraq War "go-it-alone" attitude. According to Pollack, "a critical ingredient in forging that coalition was the U.S. administration convincing allies in Europe as well as the Russians, Chinese, and other key actors that the [United States] was following a very practical approach; that it had given up the cowboy diplomacy, that we were willing to take 'yes' for an answer from the Iranians, and, at the end of the day, that this was not just another charade to lay the groundwork for a war... as the rest of the world certainly believes in regard to the Iraq War." (In fact, the *New York Times* reported on July 26th that Russia would not be willing to impose sanctions on Iran, dimming prospects of a unified containment strategy.)

The second concern arising in the wake of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict is whether Iran's radical hardliners are emboldened by Hezbollah's apparent success. Hezbollah's backers in Iran could ride the surge of popularity accrued by Hezbollah and quiet its detractors. Pollack predicted that this scenario would encourage Iran to issue a response to the UNSC resolution that was likely to be "more 'no' than 'yes';" his prediction came true as the August 31 deadline passed, with Iran flatly rejecting the terms of the resolution.

Pollack offered several policy options that the United States could pursue to advance its regional interests, in Iran and in the Middle East at large:

1. **Lead the reconstruction of Lebanon.** Engaging actively in this pursuit would demonstrate to the international community that the United States is serious enough about its diplomatic efforts in the Middle East to back them with humanitarian operations.
2. **Split Syria from Iran.** "Syria is both a literal and figurative bridge between Iran and Hezbollah," Pollack said; a U.S. diplomatic effort could steer Syria away from relations with both, and forestall efforts to rearm Hezbollah's military wing. Furthermore, as moderator Daniel Brumberg suggested, engaging Syria may present an opportunity to jump-start peace talks between Israel and Syria.
3. **Offer additional concessions to Iran.** The Bush administration, said Pollack, can afford to entice Iran by making greater compromises, such as granting security guarantees, easing sanctions (if Iran

meets American demands on terrorism and uranium enrichment), or formulating a new security framework for the Gulf.

Responding to Pollack's remarks, Takeyh agreed that Iran is not the bogeyman that some fear, although he disagreed somewhat with Pollack's comments on the Iran-Hezbollah relationship. While concurring that Hezbollah may have conceived and executed its recent operations without consulting Iran, it "seems inconceivable" that Hezbollah would have kidnapped Israeli soldiers and undertaken its major offensives without the consent of its longtime patron.

In considering their policies toward Iran, Takeyh suggested that members of the international community should ask themselves: "Do we want a third crisis in the Middle East?" Divisions among the international community in policy attitudes toward Iran - combined with the weakness of Iran's traditional foes, such as Iraq, and the overextension of the U.S. military in the region - leave Iran unchecked by the political considerations that have limited its foreign policy pursuits in recent years. The situation would be further complicated, Takeyh said, should Lebanon slide into civil war. Thus far, the result has been a realignment of regional power dynamics, a more divisively sectarian Middle East characterized by an increased religious element (which, Takeyh noted darkly, could "mess up our lifetime"), and an ever more influential Iran. Whether or not Iran acquires nuclear weapons, said Takeyh, it is becoming increasingly difficult to contain.

Iran's connection to Hezbollah thus gives it added leverage in an increasingly turbulent Middle East. Whatever the nature of their relationship, both parties will remain on the U.S. policy radar for the foreseeable future.

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