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*Hezbollah and the Lebanese System: Between the Siniora
Government (2005) and the Hezbollah Government (2011)*

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Abstract:

Between 2005 and 2011, Hezbollah evolved as a hybrid terrorist organization, strengthening its military and political capabilities and winning Lebanese hearts and minds. Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in which Hezbollah was ultimately implicated by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Hezbollah exploited tensions between pro- and anti-Syrian factions in the Lebanese government to increase its political clout. Although decimated by the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah used Iranian funding to repair civilian infrastructure – and replenish its arsenal. This it used to both violently gain ground on the Lebanese street and to maintain its "deterrence" against Israel. As a consequence of these efforts, Hezbollah has become an essential component of every Lebanese government since 2008, and continues to threaten Israel from the north.

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General Background

On June 30th, the Prosecutor for the Tribunal of Inquiry into the Murder of Rafiq Al-Hariri presented the Lebanese Prosecutor General with indictments against four Hezbollah activists. The four are leaders of the Movement’s Special Forces, the most senior of whom is Mustafa Badr a-Din, brother-in-law, cousin and deputy to Imad Mughniyah, who until February 2008

headed Hezbollah's Jihad Council.¹ At the end of July 2011, Interpol issued an international order of extradition for all four indicted men, who were wanted to stand trial before the Tribunal at the Hague.² The indictments and the international order of extradition are an additional, significant component of the monumental struggle being waged in Lebanon between supporters and opponents of the Tribunal's continued activity. This struggle has been epitomized by political violence; the elimination of people involved in the investigations; a campaign to delegitimize the Tribunal and its work; and the overthrow of the government.

By 2011, Hezbollah had emerged from the ongoing struggle between supporters and opponents of the Tribunal with the upper hand. It unseated Hariri's coalition, obtained a majority in parliament, and headed a new coalition, which succeeded in establishing the government that Hezbollah sponsored. The subsequent events of the Arab Spring have already caused, and continue to cause, tectonic changes within Arab countries and in Middle East regional power relations. It is therefore not yet possible to predict the future of Lebanon's Hezbollah government, or even how the coalition it leads will fare in future elections. However, it is clear that in the years since the assassination of Hariri and the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah has succeeded in securing its preeminent position in the Lebanese political arena and restoring its military structure, to the point where it has become the strongest political and military power in Lebanon.

Hezbollah is a hybrid terrorist organization, and as such strives to create synergy among its component parts, while changing the focus of its efforts among them in response to its assessment of circumstances at any given moment. During the period discussed in this article

(2005-2011), Hezbollah focused on building up its military capability, which it used to achieve its political aims – by initiating political crises, wielding political violence (e.g., assassinating opponents), and deploying or threatening to deploy its military forces to “adjust” internal Lebanese affairs to its needs.

Hezbollah’s Actions in the Political Arena: From the Siniora Government (2005) to the “Hezbollah Government” (2011), in Light of the Struggle against the Special Tribunal for Lebanon

The struggle surrounding the establishment, under international auspices, of a Special Tribunal to investigate the murder of Rafiq Al-Hariri (in 2005), was played out both within the Lebanese political arena and outside it, in the international arena. Following Hariri’s murder, tens of thousands of Lebanese took to the streets in protest, demanding that Syria (at whom the finger of blame was pointed) withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Their actions were crowned with success. Several weeks after the murder, Syrian troops left Lebanon.³ At the same time, Lebanese efforts were begun to establish an international tribunal to investigate the murder. These efforts increased the tension between the two main political factions in Lebanon: the “March 8 Alliance” headed by Hezbollah and supported by Syria and Iran, and the “March 14 Alliance” headed by Saad Hariri and supported by Saudi Arabia and the West. As the Tribunal’s investigation progressed, the tension between the two factions rose. The investigation revealed the involvement in Hariri’s assassination of senior members of Hezbollah, against whom indictments had already been issued (in June 2011). According to recently-published reports, additional indictments are expected against senior Syrian and Lebanese officials.⁴

Since the establishment, after the murder (in December 2005), of the first Siniora government, in which two ministers from Hezbollah served, Hezbollah has waged a campaign to undermine the efforts of the Tribunal. In a move coordinated with Amal, Hezbollah suspended the participation of its and Amal's ministers in government sessions during the course of a year. In November 2006, the five Amal and Hezbollah ministers resigned from the government. Hezbollah then embarked on a campaign to delegitimize the Siniora government, with the aim of overthrowing it and establishing a national unity government.⁵ In May 2008, Hezbollah's opposition to the government's activities took a violent turn, with the Movement forcibly taking control of large sections of Beirut. The use of violence left tens of Lebanese dead and hundreds wounded; it only ceased after the intercession of Arab states and the signing of The Doha Agreement in May 2008.⁶ The Agreement benefitted Hezbollah, and paved the way for the establishment of a national unity government headed by Siniora (2008-2009). Born as it was amidst inter-ethnic violence, the government had difficulty functioning. Siniora failed in his attempts to promote the main goals that he had set for himself as early as 2005: to disarm Hezbollah and promote the investigative efforts of the Tribunal. His second government served in effect as an interim government, until the parliamentary elections of July 2009.

The 2009 elections also culminated in victory for the anti-Syrian coalition headed by Saad Hariri. The March 8 Alliance headed by Hezbollah – whose victory in the elections had been predicted by forecasts – found it hard to accept this outcome, and caused difficulties during negotiations to form a national unity government. Agreement was reached in November 2009, and the national unity government of Saad Hariri was on its way.⁷ The main stumbling block to the functioning of this government was the Tribunal's continued activity. In May 2009, *Der*

Spiegel broke the news, culled from a source close to the Tribunal, that investigations conducted by a team of Lebanese Police led by Captain Wissam Eid had revealed that Hezbollah was directly involved in Rafiq Hariri's murder. The team's findings were based on an analysis of communications networks and mobile phones that apparently served the perpetrators of the attack and the organization that supported them – which, according to the investigation findings, appeared to be Hezbollah. Wissam Eid paid with his life for this revelation.⁸

Hezbollah embarked on a massive public relations campaign, which in essence aimed to delegitimize the Tribunal, claiming that it was an Israeli and American conspiracy meant to undercut Hezbollah's achievements. According to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, the investigation was unfair and biased. As the deadline for presentation of the indictments neared, Hezbollah redoubled its efforts to scuttle the move. Nasrallah regaled the press with his interpretation of who was responsible for Hariri's murder: He blamed Israel for being behind the murder, and demanded that the matter be investigated.⁹ In November 2009, Hezbollah joined Saad Hariri's national unity government with the aim of foiling the Tribunal's efforts by using its right to veto and threatening to generate a political crisis – or, worse, to topple the government. And in fact, in January 2011, following the failure of efforts to mediate between Hariri and Hezbollah, the Hariri government was overthrown through the coordinated efforts of ministers from the opposition. In that very month, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman appointed Hezbollah candidate Najib Mikati to form a new government.¹⁰

In July 2011, the Mikati government was presented to the Lebanese Parliament, thanks to the support of the March 8 Alliance headed by Hezbollah. The Hariri camp and its allies, who were

now a minority in parliament, decided not to join the new government – which came to be known as the “Hezbollah Government”.¹¹ One of the first matters the government was forced to address was Lebanon’s fulfillment of its international commitments, including assisting the Tribunal by both extraditing the suspects to the court and continuing financial and verbal support of the Tribunal’s work. The tack taken by the Mikati government was vague enough to prevent inter-ethnic strife, on one hand, without vigorously assisting in the arrest and extradition of the suspects, on the other – despite the claim by Mikati himself that real efforts were being made to assist the Tribunal.¹²

In contrast, Nasrallah was clear and incisive in his response to the court’s demand to extradite senior leaders of Hezbollah. He clarified that Hezbollah had no intention of extraditing anyone, “Not in another 30 days and not in another 30 years and not even in another 300 years”, and threatened to respond with force to any attempt to arrest the four indicted men.¹³ It is too soon to predict the chances of success or failure of Nasrallah’s policy *vis a vis* the Tribunal and the new Lebanese government, as these also depend in large measure on processes external to Lebanon – specifically, events in Syria, and the situation of Iran regionally and internationally.

**The Rehabilitation and Strengthening of Hezbollah, a Hybrid Terrorist Organization:
From the Second Lebanon War (2006) to the Establishment of the Hezbollah Government
(2011)**

In the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah sustained a significant blow to all aspects of its power structure: armaments, personnel and infrastructure. It is reasonable to assume that were it not for the immediate, comprehensive aid proffered by Iran and Syria in rebuilding and expanding Hezbollah's capabilities as quickly as possible, it would have taken the Movement several more years to rebuild.

Information gleaned since 2009 from sources as various and varied as Hezbollah itself, Israel, and foreign sources indicates that Hezbollah has reconstituted its military might and improved the quality and range of its weaponry, relative to what they were previously.¹⁴ For example, information has been published to the effect that Syria has transferred to Hezbollah SCUD ground missiles with a range that covers most of Israel's territory. In May 2011, outgoing US Defense Minister Robert Gates stated that missiles in the possession of Hezbollah also threaten the ships of the American fleet sailing the waters of the Mediterranean.¹⁵ Hezbollah has thus become the strongest player in the Lebanese system. The Movement took and continues to take advantage of this fact to preserve its military might, on one hand, and to use it when needed, on the other – for example, to deter rival political elements from interfering with its interests, or to win political gains, as was the case in May 2008.

The first stage in the rehabilitation of Hezbollah began immediately after the end of the Second Lebanon War, with the launching of an aggressive public relations campaign by Nasrallah geared to establishing the myth of Hezbollah's "divine victory" over Israel.¹⁶ Internal debate and the establishment in Israel of commissions of inquiry into the outcome of the war only helped Hezbollah flaunt the magnitude of its victory. Its message was simple: Hezbollah had faced the

Israeli war machine for 34 days, at whose end it had “had the last word” by continuing its extensive rocket fire at Israel.

Reconstruction of civilian infrastructure: Concurrent with its media campaign, Hezbollah began quickly rebuilding civilian infrastructure in South Lebanon and Beirut, in an effort to prevent erosion of its social and ethnic base and a concomitant loss of support on the Shiite street. Sizable sums of money were invested by the Movement, and primarily by Iran, in compensating civilians and rebuilding damaged buildings. Repairs were also made to damaged road infrastructure, bridges, and institutions in areas where the Shiite population is concentrated. Hezbollah made sure to highlight in all available media outlets its rapid aid to injured citizens.¹⁷ Evidence of the success of Hezbollah’s civilian reconstruction efforts is provided by the outcome of the 2009 elections to the Lebanese Parliament, in which the Movement firmly established itself as leader of the opposition. This fact indicates that the Movement’s power base among its voting public was not eroded as a result of the war.¹⁸

The military component: Hezbollah has begun the long-term process of learning and implementing lessons even as it rebuilds its fighting force and assimilates advanced weaponry. Investigations into the war have revealed, in part, impaired functioning of some of the Movement’s commanders and of the system of security meant to protect its strategic outposts. A few days after the fighting ended, Hezbollah removed from their posts senior commanders, such as the commander of the Baalbek region, who had failed in their duty.¹⁹ In addition, Hezbollah has expanded “eliminations” with the aim of reducing intelligence leaks. Such action is a response to the lesson of the eradication of most of the Movement’s cache of strategic long-range

missiles on the very first day of the Second Lebanon War. The increase in “eliminations” within the Movement and in the concentric circles around it has borne fruit. In the years since the war, tens of people suspected of spying for Israel have been arrested.²⁰ In June 2011, Nasrallah claimed that, through the CIA, the US had also deployed agents in Hezbollah’s immediate vicinity – even, according to him, from within the US Embassy in Lebanon.²¹

Rebuilding the Movement’s combat forces: The outcome of the war required Hezbollah to rebuild its combat forces. New activists were recruited to the Movement’s ranks and were trained for various tasks, including the use of new weaponry, at training camps in Lebanon and Iran. These activists were then arrayed in South Lebanon, Beirut and the Bekaa Valley, in accordance with Hezbollah’s new deployment strategy, which was affected by the outcome of the Second Lebanon War and the presence in South Lebanon of the Lebanese Army and the multinational force.²² Using various sources, it is possible to assess and analyze the partial picture of Hezbollah’s presence in South Lebanon and to conclude that the Movement numbers more than 10,000 members, including members of its militia, in Lebanon.²³ The circle of supporters of the Movement and its activities is, of course, even larger.

Since the war, Hezbollah has rebuilt its military infrastructure (command posts, bases, launching sites, intelligence outposts, communications outposts) and logistical infrastructure (storage sites and tunnels under inhabited areas) in Lebanon in accordance with its operative strategy. New weaponry, rockets and long-range missiles have been installed at secret sites and covert caches in South Lebanon, Beirut and the Bekaa Valley. In March 2011, based on Israeli sources, the Washington Post published a map and aerial photographs of Hezbollah’s ground infrastructure in

South Lebanon. This information indicates that the Movement has built some 1,000 infrastructure sites, including 550 command bunkers, storage sites, etc., throughout South Lebanon. Detailed aerial photographs of the Shiite village Al-Hiam, which is proximate to the border with Israel, indicate the nature of Hezbollah's actual deployment "on the ground": Bunkers, command posts and bases have been dug underground, in the heart of the civilian population, close to clinics, schools, mosques and community centers.²⁴ It should be noted that Hezbollah has also conducted extensive (in the Movement's terms) exercises in Lebanon, to test various combat deployments.²⁵

Assimilation of armaments: It appears that Hezbollah's most significant gain in strength since the Second Lebanon War is in weaponry. Throughout this period, the thwarting of efforts to smuggle arms, the exposure of this phenomenon by Israeli sources, work accidents, reports of the UN and in the media, and statements by senior Hezbollah and Israeli officials have indicated the extent to which Hezbollah has armed itself and the type of weapons that it now has in its possession. Specifically, Hezbollah has assimilated an unprecedented amount of weaponry from Iranian and Syrian sources. For example, the Movement has received strategic SCUD-type ground missiles from Syria, which cover most of Israel's territory, as well as long-range Iranian ground missiles.²⁶ Hezbollah has also assimilated advanced anti-tank weapons, ground-to-air missiles and ground-to-sea missiles.²⁷ The *quantity* of the (several tens of thousands of) missiles and rockets now in Hezbollah's possession, the *sustainability* of the system (the way in which the weapons are hidden, stored, deployed), and the *use* that can be made of them by trained personnel, assisted by Iranian Al Kuds forces, now make Hezbollah the strongest and most significant fighting force in Lebanon, and a genuine threat to the citizens of Israel.²⁸ The sense of

power this lends Hezbollah led Nasrallah to declare in February 2011 that, in the event of an assault by Israel, Hezbollah would wipe out senior Israeli leaders and conquer the Galilee.²⁹

In summary: Under the leadership of Nasrallah, Hezbollah has come a long way since the Second Lebanon War. Hezbollah's being a hybrid terrorist organization that functions synergistically on three different planes – military, civilian and political – to achieve political aims was also evident during the period reviewed herein (2005-2011). The Movement's policy of organizing to recoup its operating systems and strengthen civilian support while stemming any attempt to erode its achievements or interfere with its interests has borne fruit. Operationally, with generous, copious help from Syria and Iran, Hezbollah has reconstructed more sophisticated and advanced systems than the ones it had on the eve of the Second Lebanon War. Moreover, since that time, Hezbollah has continued honing its strategy *vis à vis* Israel and training its forces to be capable of conquering the Galilee. This has given its leaders enough confidence to declare that the balance of deterrence with Israel has been restored – if not more so. In the civilian arena, Hezbollah has prevented the withdrawal of public support by combining propaganda campaigns (e.g., the “divine victory” campaign) with the accelerated rehabilitation of civilian infrastructure, using its own resources augmented by Iranian aid. Hezbollah's canny use of these two types of effort have bolstered its political success, which it has in turn exploited by combining an aggressive policy of political violence with statesmanship. Since the murder of Rafiq Al-Hariri in 2005, Hezbollah has become the opposition leader; since January 2011, it has in effect become the *de facto* leader of Lebanon's governing coalition. Najib Mikati, who was Hezbollah's candidate for prime minister of Lebanon, indeed heads Lebanon's government,

which draws its support from the Hezbollah-led coalition that acts to preserve the Movement's interests both within Lebanon and internationally – including in the context of the Tribunal.

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