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Now is decision time, Sayyed Nasrallah

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Commentary by

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When Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000, Hizbullah rightly claimed a historic victory. Your party, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, for the first time did what no Arab army or guerrilla force had: it imposed on Israel a humiliating withdrawal from occupied territories without negotiations. Hizbullah was respected all over, and in Lebanon all communities were united in praising the sacrifice paid with the souls of hundreds of fighters and civilians in southern Lebanon. Even Western nations had no sympathy for the Israeli occupiers and their brutal policies. The battle for the liberation of the South, carried out mainly by Shiite Hizbullah fighters under the banner of the Lebanese resistance, was legitimate. That was the consensus in Lebanon and abroad.

During the past six years, however, the mood has been shifting, both inside Lebanon and outside. There is growing belligerence toward your party. It all started shortly after the Israeli withdrawal with the surprise decision by the Lebanese and Syrian governments to say that the Shebaa Farms were Lebanese. Hizbullah, armed with "legitimacy," kept the border with Israel hot and retained its weapons, undermining the 1989 Taif peace accord that had disarmed Lebanese armed groups and helped end the civil war.

The Shebaa Farms front was a poisoned gift from the Syrian regime to Lebanon, Sayyed Nasrallah. Hizbullah nevertheless accepted it. And, so, the killing in the South continued because Damascus wanted to maintain leverage over Israel in any future negotiations over the Golan Heights.

The fact is that the Shebaa Farms were under Syrian sovereignty when they were occupied by Israel during the June 1967 war. The 14 farms were and still are Israeli-occupied Syrian territory, at least in the view of the United Nations, which no one can suspect of being pro-Israeli. Since 1978, the world body has been supporting Lebanon through an interim force in southern Lebanon, which has lost more than 250 of its personnel while protecting inhabitants of the area.

As of May 2000, Sayyed Nasrallah, Hizbullah accepted to play a role similar to that played by the Palestine Liberation Organization from the 1960s until it was evicted from Lebanon in 1982. Over the years, PLO attacks against Israel from Lebanon led to the loss of many lives and to massive destruction of property and infrastructure. Tens of thousands of refugees flooded to the southern suburbs of Beirut. They and their descendants are your constituency. Do you want to repeat that experience and add more desperation to their current misery?

Hizbullah, during the past six years, has launched numerous attacks against Israeli border positions, mainly in and around the Shebaa Farms. The bloodiest clash occurred in November 2005, when three Hizbullah fighters were killed near the border village of Ghajar. Why were these men, or others, sacrificed, Sayyed Nasrallah? They had no chance against the entrenched Israelis, who also benefit from international legitimacy because they are deployed behind the UN's so-called Blue Line. Sadly, today it is Hizbullah that is being described by the UN as an aggressor in southern Lebanon and the one starting senseless fights.

Meanwhile, your party has amassed a military arsenal in the South, enabling it to massively shell towns and villages deep into northern Israel. Why this military build-up? Only to liberate the Shebaa Farms? Or to respond to a possible American strike against Iranian nuclear installations? Or to help the Syrians pressure the Israelis to return the Golan Heights? Or to ease international pressure on Syrian President Bashar Assad because of his suspected responsibility for the murder of former Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri?

Southern Lebanon and all its communities, including your Shiite followers, have paid a bitter price over the past four decades for being cannon fodder for the PLO, Syria and Iran. All the Lebanese have sacrificed much, especially you, Sayyed Nasrallah, when one of your sons died resisting the Israelis. In May 2000 the killing should have stopped and the diplomatic battle should have begun to return the Shebaa Farms - if only the Syrian regime would decide to officially notify the UN that they are Lebanese. Damascus has refused to do so, despite all appeals. Why don't you publicly ask Assad to send that needed letter to the UN?

Meanwhile, Hizbullah argues that it needs arms to repel "Israeli aggression." What aggression, Sayyed Nasrallah? The Israelis, since May 2000, have been more than happy to be out of Lebanon. The occupation of the South traumatized them. They just want to be left alone behind the Blue Line. Israel's regular violations of Lebanese airspace and its military maneuvers along the border are merely meant to send a message to your fighters: Leave us in peace or the Lebanese will again pay a bloody price, like in the bad old days of the PLO.

Fortunately, until now Hizbullah has not fully imitated the suicidal policies of the PLO. It tends to avoid dragging the Israeli military machine into the kind of massive retaliation we all remember too well. But what will you do, Sayyed Nasrallah, if Tehran asks for a special favor after - God forbid - an American strike against Iranian nuclear installations? How will you react if Damascus sends a request for a favor when the UN blames the Syrian leadership for Hariri's murder, and scrambles to impose sanctions? Will Hizbullah listen to the Iranian and Syrian rulers and unleash a barrage of rockets against Israel? Will you provoke large-scale tragedy in southern Lebanon?

Your party is at a crossroads, and the time has come for you to make historic decisions before it is too late. It is time to show that Hizbullah is loyal to Lebanon and not to any other country. It is time to tell Iran that solidarity has its limits. It is also time to wish the doomed Syrian regime good luck, and time for your fighters to integrate in the Lebanese Army with dignity. Perhaps, Sayyed Nasrallah, you have reservations about sending your fighters into an army partly under the control of President Emile Lahoud, who is controlled from afar by his vengeful counterpart in Damascus. The solution is to support the Lebanese government, of which Hizbullah is part, to unseat Lahoud, one of whose closest aides is still in jail for his alleged involvement in Hariri's assassination.

Sayyed Nasrallah, allow Hizbullah to regain its eroded credibility by giving a decisive impetus to the stalled national dialogue when it reconvenes. Participate in formulating a national defense strategy, including de-mining the South where everyday people die or are maimed. Help implement an international diplomatic offensive to liberate all Lebanese prisoners in Israel and Syria, and urge Syria to provide the necessary documents so the Shebaa Farms can be recognized as Lebanese. Be part of a humanitarian solution to the misery of the Palestinians in the refugee camps. And become actively involved in the drive for the economic recovery of Lebanon, especially the underdeveloped and impoverished South.

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