

# HEZBOLLAH STICKS TO ITS GUNS IN LEBANON

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By Rania Abouzeid

ALONG the shabby streets of the overcrowded and impoverished Hezbollah stronghold of Haret Hreik, in south Beirut, there is unflinching support for the right of the militant Lebanese Shia group to bear arms and for its allegiance to Syria.

"So what if Hezbollah is with the Syrian regime? We are Arabs, not American-lovers like the Lebanese who are calling for Hezbollah's disarmament," said Ibrahim Khatib, a 23-year-old biology student, as he waited for a taxi.

"They're inviting foreign interference in our affairs. We don't need others to make decisions for us," he said, as a vegetable vendor steered his cart through the crawling traffic, past portraits of Iranian ayatollahs staring down from dilapidated buildings.

Hezbollah's ties to Tehran and its refusal to break with Damascus have eroded the strong support it enjoyed in Lebanon for driving Israel's much-vaunted army out of the country's south in 2000, ending its 22-year occupation.

The powerful Shi'ite organisation, which has a vast social network and sizeable parliamentary bloc, has become alienated from the swath of public opinion that holds Syria responsible for the February 14 assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri and a string of killings in Lebanon since then.

The isolation comes amid increasing Western pressure for Hezbollah to lay down its arms, a UN demand enshrined in the 17-month-old Resolution 1559. This calls for the disarmament of all militias in

Lebanon -- a reference to Hezbollah and the Palestinian guerilla factions operating in the country.

Although Hezbollah and its Shi'ite allies in the Amal Movement condemned Hariri's slaying, they have rejected the claims of Syrian involvement and dismiss as biased and politically motivated the UN investigation into the killing that has allegedly implicated senior Syrian security officials and their Lebanese allies.

Hezbollah denounced the massive anti-Syrian protests following Hariri's killing -- which, along with Western pressure, helped to end Damascus's 29-year control over its smaller neighbour last April -- and organised huge rallies of its own.

The growing divide was sharply manifested in the paralysing political crisis triggered in December by calls from the majority anti-Syrian Government to expand the UN inquiry to include the killing of other anti-Syrian figures over the past year and to seek an international court to try suspects in Hariri's slaying.

Wary of Western involvement in the campaign, the demand prompted Hezbollah and Amal's five ministers to suspend their participation in the Government for almost two months.

Although largely precipitated by differences over international involvement in local affairs, the stand-off soon morphed into national issues, and the ministers refused to return until the Government provided assurances it officially viewed Hezbollah as a resistance group and not a militia, thereby placing it outside the scope of Resolution 1559. The impasse ended on Thursday, when Prime Minister Fouad Siniora told the Beirut parliament: "We have never called, and will never call, the resistance by any name other than the resistance." He did not use the word militia.

However, the significance of the semantics in terms of practical political cover for Hezbollah remains to be seen.

"A militia is a militia and we know one when we see it," a European diplomat in Beirut said on condition of anonymity. "I don't think anything fundamental has changed," he said of Mr Siniora's statement. "We want to see all UN resolutions upheld."

One of Hezbollah's key claims to keep its arms is that it must liberate the Shebaa Farms district, a sparsely populated area formerly occupied by Israel that runs 25km along the border where Lebanon, Syria and Israel meet.

The other is what Hezbollah says is Israel's continued aggression against Lebanon.

The Shebaa Farms area is considered Syrian by the UN, although Damascus and many in Beirut have long insisted the territory is Lebanese.

The Syrian Government, however, has never officially acknowledged the area is Lebanese. Many anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians have demanded the demarcation of the borders between the two countries, a position Hezbollah has rejected.

At any rate, the group has said it will not disarm even if the farmlands are liberated.

"Even if Israel withdraws," Hezbollah MP Mohammed Raad told reporters last week, "the resistance is an element of strength in Lebanon's hand. Why give it up, and to whom?"

But the group's reasons for remaining armed are wearing thin with a number of Lebanese, and have strained or ruptured ties with some of Hezbollah's closest allies, including anti-Syrian Druze leader Walid Jumblatt.

"Enough is enough. They say they want to resist, but until when?" Mr Jumblatt said in an interview over the weekend. "They want an open-ended conflict with Israel at the expense of Lebanon. Why are other fronts like the Israeli-occupied Syrian area of Golan peaceful?"

According to Adnan Iskander, a retired professor of political science at the American University of Beirut, Hezbollah is now at a crossroads.

"The main decision they have to make is are they part of a new unified Lebanon or are their arms wanted to help Syria and Iran?" he said.

"You can't have one group carrying arms and the rest unarmed and afraid, especially because of the group's strong ties to Syria and Iran."

Back in the Hezbollah stronghold of Haret Hreik, some residents said the debate over where the movement's allegiances lie was jarring.

"This is the biggest insult," 56-year-old Miriam Fadlallah said from behind her shop counter. "Who are these people to question our nationalism?" she said, as a customer nodded. "It was our blood that was spilt liberating the south, not theirs. Did our young men die for the sake of Iran and Syria, or Lebanon?"