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Hezbollah's seizure of power in Lebanon dooms peace talks and puts Israel at risk
By Lawrence J. Haas

WASHINGTON -- Prospects for peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority have not been rising. The central issues of Jerusalem, Israeli settlements and Palestinian refugees seem no closer to resolution, and turmoil in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and elsewhere in the region further complicates efforts to reach long-term solutions to vexing challenges.

Now, Hezbollah's de facto takeover of Lebanon's government puts a final nail in the coffin of Israeli-Palestinian peace, giving the terrorist group and its backers in Tehran and Damascus still more leverage to doom any serious peace initiative.

In recent weeks, the terrorist group took down Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government by withdrawing its and its allies' participation over Hariri's refusal to denounce a United Nations-backed tribunal that is expected to implicate Hezbollah in the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father, Rafik. The group then engineered the parliament's selection of Hezbollah's candidate, Najib Miqati, as the next prime minister.

All of that elevates Hezbollah from its previous role as a "state within a state" in Lebanon's south to the nation's most powerful political force; boosts Hezbollah's military threat to Israel; better positions the Hezbollah-Iran-Syria axis to derail Israeli-Palestinian peace; and reduces the regional influence of the United States, which has long sought Israeli-Palestinian peace, backed Hariri's government and opposed Hezbollah's political advances.

Hezbollah seeks neither land nor other concessions from Israel.

It wants to destroy the Jewish state. Predicting success, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, once said, "The Jews love life, so that is what we shall take away from them. We are going to win because they love life and we love death."

Also vowing to destroy Israel is Hezbollah's most important backer in Tehran. Hezbollah was formed in 1982 under the tutelage of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Tehran has long showered the group with money, weapons and other assistance. With Hezbollah now essentially running Lebanon's government, Iran could well create a satellite state for itself just north of Israel.

The last thing Hezbollah, Iran or their close ally, Syria, want is Israeli-Palestinian peace, for peace will strengthen Israel by removing the threat of violence from the West Bank and, in an ideal world, from Gaza, which, for now, is run not by the Palestinian Authority but by the terrorist group Hamas.

Hezbollah, Hamas and other regional groups have often derailed peace efforts by inciting violence at any moment when peace negotiations appeared to be gaining momentum. One would

set off a bomb in Israel, launch a rocket into Israel, or, as Hezbollah did in 2006, cross the border to kidnap and kill Israeli soldiers.

With more control over Lebanon's government, Hezbollah will face fewer restraints when it wants to play that game.

Not only has Hezbollah rearmed, with Iran and Syria's assistance, since its monthlong war in 2006 with Israel, amassing an estimated 40,000 rockets. It now has longer-range rockets, some with the range to reach Tel Aviv, boosting its leverage over Israel by making the stakes of any future confrontation that much higher.

Moreover, it learned the lesson of 2006 by not stockpiling its rockets within easy Israeli range in the south but, instead, burying them in northern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, complicating future Israeli efforts to defang the group.

Finally, Hezbollah's takeover of Lebanon's government throws the whole architecture of post-2006 peace into doubt. Currently, Lebanon's army is working with U.N. forces to patrol the border with Israel and maintain a cold peace.

Whether it continues to do so for a government in Hezbollah's hands is an open question.

So, Hezbollah's takeover of Lebanon's government will give it and its Israel-hating allies in Tehran and Damascus that much more leverage not only to derail Israeli-Palestinian peace but also to incite another round of war.

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