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N119A

22 December 1997

MEMORANDUM

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SUBJECT: [] Hizballah Reactions to Khatami's Election

1. [] Publicly Hizballah officials welcomed the election in late May of Iranian President Khatami, []

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- Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah had been counting on a Nateq-Nuri victory in the Iranian presidential election in hopes of increasing his autonomy in southern Lebanon. He even described Nateq-Nuri's election as a foregone conclusion during a television interview last spring.

2. [] The Hizballah leadership, shocked by the Khatami victory, scrambled to ensure that his election would not diminish Iran's support for Hizballah. Hizballah officials were concerned that a relatively moderate Iranian president might reduce its funding or military support.

- Shortly after the election, Nasrallah and several other ranking Hizballah officials traveled to Tehran to congratulate Khatami and to secure the continued support of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei.

3. [] Some Lebanese have speculated that Nasrallah's endorsement of Nateq-Nuri will jeopardize his position in Hizballah's upcoming internal election.

- [] a Shia Lebanese Government official predicted that Nasrallah would be replaced by his more moderate deputy, Naim Qassim, for publicly backing Nateq-Nuri.

This memo was prepared by [] Office of Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Analysis, for Martin Indyk, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

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- However, Nasrallah--who lacks any credible rivals and was groomed by Tehran for his job--is well positioned to lead the organization for another two years.
- 4. President Khatami probably joins other Iranian leaders who maintain that support to Hizballah is an essential aspect of Tehran's effort to promote itself as leader of the Muslim world and champion of the oppressed.
- Khatami and other Iranian leaders promised Nasrallah during a trip to Tehran in October that Iran has not changed its position regarding Hizballah or its military operations against Israel.
- Even if Khatami wanted to change Tehran's policy toward Hizballah, he probably does not have the authority to make such a change without the approval of Khamenei, who has long been one of the group's foremost supporters.

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