Hizbullah in Lebanon

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The Lebanese political party Hizbullah has been in the news a great deal over the past several years, even meriting mention in at least one State of the Union address. The group was accused of single-handedly instigating the July 2006 war with Israel and subsequently of attempting to topple the Lebanese government. For those with longer memories, Hizbullah is generally associated with the 1983 bombings of the US embassy, Marine barracks and French MNF headquarters in Beirut, and with the 1985 hijacking of a TWA flight to Beirut. They are also cited by the US State Department in connection with the kidnappings of Westerners in Lebanon and the hostage crisis that led to the Iran-Contra affair. Despite the uncertainty of these allegations (Blanford 2003; Harik 2004: 65), they are the purported reason for the party’s listing on the US State Department’s list of terrorist organizations, and for the recent characterization of Hizbullah as the ‘A-list’ of terrorism.1

However, as A.R. Norton (1999, 2000) and others have argued, ‘Hizbullah may not simply be dismissed as an extremist or terrorist group’ (Norton 1999: 2), because such a dismissal removes Hizbullah from its political, historical and social context.2 Since its origins as a resistance militia in the 1980s, Hizbullah has developed into a legitimate Lebanese political party and an umbrella organization for myriad social welfare institutions. Today the party is an inextricable part of the political, economic and social fabric of life for many Lebanese. This chapter provides a contextually grounded history of Hizbullah, including its ideological and social background, and also traces the ways in which the party has transformed over time to become an integral part of the Lebanese polity. It begins by laying out the political and economic conditions that led to Hizbullah’s establishment, then follows the trajectory of development for each of the party’s three major wings: military, political and social welfare. Finally, the chapter touches upon Hizbullah’s constituency and the various complex reasons why different people support the party in Lebanon today.

Lebanon

Shi‘a Muslims have resided in areas that are today part of Lebanon since the ninth century, primarily in the south, in a region called Jabal Amil, and in the Beqaa Valley, with another small community north of Beirut near Jbeil.3 In 1920 the French mandate established the existing
borders of the Lebanese nation-state by combining the Christian-majority Ottoman province of Mount Lebanon with surrounding areas, including the Beqaa Valley and the south. According to the 1932 census, the last census ever taken in Lebanon, Shi’a Muslims were 17 percent of the population, making them the third largest minority in a nation with no clear majority and 16 recognized religious groups. A decade later, an unwritten National Pact was established among the major communities in Lebanon, especially the Sunni Muslims and Maronite Christians. Among other things, the Pact laid the groundwork for a confessional political system, distributing government positions according to the 1932 census’ proportions. As such, Shi’a Muslims received ten seats in the 55-member Parliament. Additionally, the Pact stipulated that the cabinet would be divided equally between Christians and Muslims, with equal numbers of Maronite and Sunni members, a move that ensured Shi’a under-representation. Finally, with independence in 1943, it was understood that the President would always be Maronite, the Prime Minister always Sunni and the relatively powerless speaker of Parliament, Shi’a.

The confessional nature of this system was structurally stagnant. Throughout later decades, it would fail to take into consideration population changes, exacerbating Shi’a under-representation. Furthermore, the institutionalization of sectarianism in Lebanon was accompanied by a more subtle process by which the category of sect became increasingly necessary to the groups themselves. A sectarian political leadership supported the establishment of sectarian social institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals) rather than common ones, so that sect became a means of accessing resources (Joseph 1975). Here, under-representation contributed directly to poverty as government funds were routed into other communities. Aggravating this was the fact that Shi’a seats in Parliament were usually filled by feudal landowners and other elites – men detached from the realities of life in rural Shi’a regions of the country.

Post-independence economic and structural development in Lebanon was concentrated mainly in Beirut. The Maronites and urban Sunni were tied into a network of Western capital inaccessible to the relatively isolated Shi’a, who were by far the most rural of Lebanon’s communities. Living conditions in Shi’a villages did not approach the standards of the rest of the nation. For example, at independence the Southern Lebanon district – consisting of 300 mostly Shi’a villages – contained no hospitals and no irrigation schemes. Poverty and illiteracy were the norm among the Shi’a peasantry (Ajami 1986; Cobban 1985; Picard 1997; Norton 1987).

After a brief civil war in 1958, the new President Shihab began a program of nationwide development and modernization – known as Shihabism – seeking to raise the standards of the rural infrastructure to those of Beirut. At that time, transportation routes were built tying villages into the road network and schools were established in rural areas. The new government also began hiring more Shi’a Muslims in military and civil service positions, and introduced export-based agro-capitalism which replaced earlier economic bases with cash crops like tobacco. These new policies and infrastructures prompted a mass migration of rural Shi’a Muslims to Beirut. Many of these migrants settled in a ring of suburbs around the capital, commonly known as the ‘misery belt’ (Khuri 1975). This was the origin of the growth of the southern suburb of Beirut, al-dahiya al-jumuhiya.

By this time Beirut had become the undisputed center of the financial network linking the industrial world with the oil-producing nations of the Gulf, but the rapid urbanization that came with incorporation into the capitalist world economy further exacerbated economic, social and regional disparities within Lebanon (Rubini 1993). Much of the new urban population consisted of young Shi’a men seeking their fortunes in Beirut. Upon arrival in the city, these young men often found themselves trapped in wage-labor at a level substantially below that of their education. Some worked in factories, although many remained unemployed or ill-employed as peddlers, because the service sector was saturated by the mid-1960s (Halawi
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1992). In addition to producing a discontented youth, the new accessibility of Beirut blatantly exposed the uneven distribution of resources across sectarian groups and created new arenas for inter-sectarian competition.

Unequal modernization and an ever-growing sense of disenfranchisement were factors that would contribute to the eventual political mobilization of the Shi’as. In addition, Beirut was a space of contact for Shi’a Muslims from different regions of Lebanon. Equally important, the road networks facilitated constant movement between village and city. Migrants returned to their villages to marry, visit family and vote. Rather than an urbanized population, what emerged was a connected population.11

The initial mobilization of the Shi’a was not along sectarian lines. As the state became tangible in the city, political parties on both ends of the spectrum competed for Shi’a loyalties. In the 1960s and early 1970s Shi’a Muslims made up much of the rank-and-file membership of the Lebanese Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. They also participated in the early days of the Palestinian liberation movement in Lebanon, though that connection did not last long. This environment—combining political awareness and discontent with the desire for modernization—provided the ground for a Shi’a sectarian mobilization.

The man most often credited by scholars with challenging the leftist parties for the loyalty of Shi’a youth and successfully uniting many Lebanese Shi’a Muslims into a separate non-sectarian political movement of their own is Sayyid Musa al-Sadr (Ajami 1986; Halawi 1992; Norton 1987). He was an Iranian Shi’a cleric with Lebanese family ties who came to Lebanon in 1959 to replace the late clerical leader in the southern Lebanese city of Tyre. A charismatic orator, al-Sadr challenged the leftist parties for the loyalty of Shi’a youth, offering in their stead an infusion of religion into the political world. Halawi puts it thus: “[Sayyid Musa] was ready to defend the faith […] to revitalize Islam and counterpose it to radical ideologies as an appropriate vehicle for change” (Halawi 1992: 114). He was instrumental in establishing the Supreme Islamic Shi’a Council—a body created to articulate Shi’a needs to the state—at the Supreme Islamic Shi’a Council, a body created to articulate Shi’a needs to the state— in 1969. In 1970 he led the first general Shi’a strike in Lebanon, calling on the government to assist those displaced by Israeli attacks in the south.12 Four years later al-Sadr established Haqat al-Mahruqin—the Movement of the Deprived, a political movement dedicated to attaining rights for the deprived, which essentially meant the Shi’a. When war began the next year, a militia branch was founded: Amal.13 However, at this point the movement was still small and many Shi’a youth fought with secular party militias during the first few years of civil war (1975–76).14

Yet despite academic focus on al-Sadr’s role, and despite an almost universal acknowledgment of his importance to Shi’a mobilization, one cannot overlook another crucial stream of Shi’a political, social and religious activism that had begun to take shape in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s. While al-Sadr’s roots were in Iran, many other activist Shi’a religious leaders came from Iraq, and especially the religious schools (hawza) of Najaf. Among them were Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, the most popular Shi’a religious leader or marja’ in Lebanon today, and Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, who is the current Secretary-General of Hizbullah. Najaf was the center of Hizb al-Da’wa al-Islamiyya (literally, the Party of the Islamic Call), which had a branch in Lebanon at this time. Hizb al-Da’wa is an Iraqi Shi’a Islamist party established in the late 1950s.

At the beginning of the civil war in 1976, the eastern suburb of Beirut—Nab’a—where many Shi’a Muslims lived and where Fadlallah worked, fell to the Phalangists (a Maronite Christian militia) and the Shi’a population fled to al-Dahiya. With them went Fadlallah, who, in keeping with the ideals of Najaf, began teaching and establishing social institutions in the area. He emerged in the early 1980s as one of the key figures in the community. In contrast to Musa al-Sadr’s work to establish Shi’a political institutions in relation to the Lebanese state,
Fadlallah worked at the grassroots level, believing that cultural and educational work was the necessary first step to mobilizing and developing the community. The basic place where these two paths differed was in their approach to politics: one worked from outside the system and the other from within.

Despite these differences, they agreed on the importance of sect-based mobilization in combating Shi’a marginalization. In addition, both drew upon themes from Shi’a Islamic history, especially the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, in their organizational work. Unlike in Sunni Islam, Shi’a Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad bequeathed leadership of the Muslim community to his son-in-law Imam Ali, and to his descendants, called the Imams. The third Imam, Imam Husayn, Muhammad’s grandson, was martyred by the Caliph’s troops at Karbala in 680 CE, and he is believed to have gone knowingly to his death in order to take a stance against oppression. Husayn is frequently drawn upon to provide a model for forms of Shi’a political resistance in different contexts, as an ideal example of the redemption of the oppressed. His martyrdom is commemorated annually during the first ten days of Muharram, known among Arab Shi’a as Ashura (from the root for ten). At different moments in Lebanon, these commemorations and the imagery and meaning carried within their narratives have taken on political significance.

The emergence of Hizbullah as a resistance militia

Between 1978 and 1982 a number of events propelled the nascent Shi’a mobilization forward and further divorced it from the leftist parties. First, when the Lebanese civil war began in 1975, the ‘Movement of the Deprived’ (along with most Lebanese political groups and movements) formed its militia branch, Amal, which today is another Shi’a political party in Lebanon, alternately Hizbullah’s main political competitor or strongest ally. Second, in 1978, while on a visit to Libya, al-Sadr mysteriously disappeared, catapulting him directly into a Shi’a millennial narrative about the return of the Hidden Twelfth Imam, and initiating a surge in his popularity. Suddenly, al-Sadr’s face was on posters all over the south, the Beqaa and parts of Beirut. That same year, Israel invaded south Lebanon, displacing 250,000 people. The initial consequence of these two events was Amal’s revitalization, as it grew and entered the fray of war (Norton 1987). Another consequence was Shi’a perceptions that the Lebanese left had failed, both in securing greater rights for the poor and in protecting the south.

The next key event in this chain was the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, with its global reverberations. Those reverberations were particularly loud in Lebanon. By embracing revolution directly and calling on the notion of velayat-e faqih,16 Khomeini’s path differed from those of both Musa al-Sadr and Hizb al-Da’wa, setting a new sort of example for the mobilizing Shi’a Muslims. It also provided an alternative counter-narrative to the West from that espoused by the political left, at precisely the moment when the Lebanese left lost the faith of many of its Shi’a constituents. Not only did the Islamism that emerged from Iran speak to historical redemption and the rise of the oppressed, but it did so successfully.

Finally, the last ingredient in this cauldron of events was the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, during which another 450,000 people were displaced. This time Israeli troops marched north and laid West Beirut under siege. Tens of thousands of Lebanese were killed and injured during the invasion and siege, many of them Shi’a Muslims. It was during this time that the Sabra and Shatila massacres took place. Between 16 and 18 September 1982, under the protection of the Israeli military and then Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, a Lebanese Phalangist militia unit entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, and raped, killed and maimed thousands of civilian refugees.19 Approximately one-quarter of those
refugees were Shi'a Lebanese who had fled the violence in the south. The second Israeli invasion was perhaps the most essential catalyst in the eventual formation – from many of the existing strands of Shi'a mobilization – of Hizbullah.

Following the events of 1982, many prominent members of Amal left the party.\textsuperscript{20} Many of them, along with Nasrallah, went on to form the leadership of Hizbullah. In addition, the Iranian revolution had contributed to the waning of support for Hizb al-`Da'wa and its methods, and many of its members and Fadlallah's followers also went on to become Hizbullah members.\textsuperscript{21} At this point, a number of small, armed groups of young men had begun to fight the Israeli troops that were occupying their villages in the south and the Beqaa. Iranian revolutionary guards had arrived in the Beqaa to train some of these fighters. Over time, these groups, which included many of Fadlallah's followers, former Amal members, Islamic Amal (a splinter group), the Lebanese Union of Muslim Students, Hizb al-`Da'wa and a group called 'The Committee Supporting the Islamic Revolution' which had existed since 1979, among others, began to coordinate with one another and to coalesce around an Islamic ideology.\textsuperscript{22} In 1984 Iran facilitated a meeting that led to the formation of an organization bringing all these groups together, and this was the origin of Hizbullah and its armed wing, al-naqawa ma al-islamiyya, the Islamic Resistance – though they did not formally announce their existence until the following year, in an 'Open Letter' or manifesto, released in 1985.

That same year, Israel withdrew from most of Lebanon, but continued to occupy around 10 percent of the south until 2000, using both Israeli soldiers and a proxy Lebanese militia of collaborators called the Southern Lebanese Army (SLA). Following escalating tensions between Hizbullah and Amal – including all-out warfare in 1988–89 – Hizbullah's presence emerged as the stronger one. The party's Islamic Resistance soon took the lead in fighting the Israeli occupation, along with other resistance contingents, including Amal and some of the leftist parties. Over the years levels of national support for the resistance fluctuated. Israeli attacks on Lebanese civilians and infrastructure – including the destruction of power plants in Beirut in 1996, 1999 and 2000 – generally contributed to increases in national support for the Resistance. This was especially true after Israel bombed a United Nations (UN) bunker where civilians had taken refuge in Qana on 18 April 1996, killing over 100 people.\textsuperscript{23}

Since its origins in the mid–1980s, Hizbullah has developed from its roots as a resistance militia into a full-fledged political organization and party which includes military, political and social welfare aspects. This chapter now turns to those elements of today's Hizbullah.

\textbf{Politics and resistance; resistance politics}

The Lebanese wars came to a spluttering and unresolved end in 1990, following the signing of the Ta'if Accords in 1989, an agreement that essentially reasserted a variation of the original sectarian system. The Ta'if Accords also made a formal exception for Hizbullah, and allowed the party to retain its armed wing in order to continue resisting the ongoing Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. It was also at this time that Hizbullah made two moves that mark its transition into the Lebanese national politics. First, the party expanded its decision-making apparatus. Two new institutions – an executive council and a politburo – were added to the original religious council (majlis al-shura). The second marker of this transition was Hizbullah's decision to participate in the first post-war elections, held in 1992. There was a great deal of debate about this within the party leadership between those who wanted to maintain a revolutionary stance outside the state, and those who thought that working within the state was the preferred route. Nasrallah took the latter view. He had just become Secretary-General of the party after Israel assassinated his predecessor, and it was under his leadership and direction that the party committed itself to

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second Israeli invasion from many of the Israeli settlers, as did the Iranian revolutionaries who al-Qaeda and al-Zubairi's ideologues, began to fight the Shiite resistance groups together, creating the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The Islamic State then occupied around 10% of the Lebanese territory, setting off conflicts between Sunni and Shia groups and Al Qaeda. The situation was exacerbated by the presence of Israeli forces in Bekaa Valley and the Sinjar Mountains, with the UN peacekeeping force unable to prevent the fighting. The conflict led to the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the War of Attrition in Lebanon, which lasted from 2006 to 2008.

When Israel withdrew from Lebanon, it did not withdraw from a small 15-square-mile border region called the Shebaa Farms. Lebanon and Syria both assert that the Shebaa Farms belong to them, and the UN has declared it to be part of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Two other major points of difference were over a map of Israeli-occupied land, and over prisoners, where a number of Lebanese were still detained in Israel. In this continuing low-grade conflict, between May 2000 and July 2006 both Hezbollah and Israel generally operated within a set of rules that were not publicly stated. These rules were based on an agreement not to target civilians that was written after the Qana attack in 1996, which had the effect of generally constraining violence in the Shebaa Farms area and to armed fighters.

At the same time, as documented in the biannual reports of observers with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, both sides occasionally broke these rules, including by abducting people from across the border. For example, Israeli forces kidnapped a number of Lebanese shepherds and fishermen. Hezbollah kidnapped an Israeli businessman who they claimed was a spy. In January 2004 several years of negotiations brokered by Germany ended in a prisoner exchange during which the kidnapped Israeli and the bodies of three Israeli soldiers killed in Lebanon in 2000 were exchanged for Lebanese and Arab detainees in Israel, including a Hezbollah official who had been kidnapped from Lebanon 15 years earlier. However, at the last minute, Israeli officials held onto to a few detainees, leading Nasrallah to vow that the party would secure their release through future exchange negotiations.

The July 2006 war

On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah set in motion a plan that the party thought would lead to the keeping of their threat, capturing Israeli soldiers on the border in order to reinitiate exchange negotiations. According to both the precedent set by the 2004 negotiations and the 'rules' that cross-border conflict had been following, Israel's response to the soldiers' capture would have been the...
selective bombing of a few sites in the south and perhaps one Lebanese power plant, followed by indirect negotiations. This time, though, the rules were broken.

For over a month, Israeli warplanes battered so-called ‘Hizbullah strongholds’ in Lebanon, unleashing an aerial assault on Lebanon’s cities, villages, civilians and infrastructure of a scale unseen since the 1982 Israeli invasion of the country. A naval blockade and ground invasion accompanied the air force attack. By the time a ceasefire went into effect in mid-August, in conjunction with UN Security Council resolution 1701, 1,300 Lebanese were estimated to have been killed, the majority of whom were civilians, mainly children.27 Thousands were wounded and nearly 1 million were displaced from their homes – one-quarter of the country’s population. Entire villages in the south of Lebanon were flattened in this attack, as were whole neighborhoods in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Analyst estimates of infrastructural damage to the country ranged from $3–8 billion, and included the destruction of runways and fuel tanks at Beirut International Airport, roads, ports, power plants, bridges, gas stations, TV transmitters, cell phone towers, a dairy and other factories, wheat silos and grocery stores. Humanitarian and environmental crises loomed, not least due to unexploded ‘bomblets’ remaining from Israeli-dropped (US-manufactured) cluster munitions.28

The magnitude of this Israeli strike was especially glaring because between 2000 and July 2006 there had been no deliberate Hizbullah attacks against Israeli civilian targets, the Islamic Resistance only had an active contingent of around 500 fighters and Hizbullah was in talks with the Lebanese government about disarmament. While the goal of the attack was supposedly to obtain the release of two captured Israeli POWs, this military response was so antithetical to the ‘rules of the game’ that it cast immediate doubt on the relationship of the attack to those captured soldiers. Indeed, Israel’s original rhetoric gave way to two new stated goals: the disarmament or at least ‘degrading’ of Hizbullah’s militia and the ‘removal’ of Hizbullah from Lebanon.29 Despite the devastation wrought, that goal was not met and, in fact, at the end of the war Nasrallah declared victory. This chapter now turns to the internal political ramifications of this war, and that declaration, for Hizbullah.

**Lebanese political machinations**

Hizbullah’s popularity among its constituents, and more broadly in the Middle East, soared after the July war, and many party supporters (as well as the party itself) cast the war as a victory. Nasrallah became one of the most popular leaders among people across the Middle East and beyond, his image appearing in taxicabs and store windows as far as Senegal. However, soon after, this notion of the war as a victory became one of the rhetorical weapons thrown around in an ongoing standoff between the government and the opposition.

This political bifurcation had begun to consolidate after Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated on 14 February 2005. Calls quickly emerged for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. On 8 March of that year Hizbullah and its allies held a rally thanking the Syrian troops, while on 14 March Hariri’s Future Movement Party, now led by his son Saad, and its allies held a demonstration against Syria. To this day, the Hizbullah-led coalition is known as the ‘March 8’ group and the Future-led coalition as the ‘March 14’ group. When elections were held a few months later, Hizbullah won 14 parliamentary seats in a voting bloc with other parties that took 35. For the first time, the party also chose to participate in the cabinet, and was allotted the Ministry of Energy. The 2005 elections demonstrated Hizbullah’s willingness to play the political game in Lebanon, where candidates run as multi-confessional district slates rather than as individuals, allying (however temporarily) with politicians who do not back its program. Ironically, the Sunni Muslim on Hizbullah’s slate in Sidon was Bahiya al-Hariri, sister of the assassinated premier and a 14 March stalwart.
In another twist, since the 2005 elections, former General Michel Aoun (and his party, the Free Patriotic Movement), once the quintessentially ‘anti-Syrian’ figure in Lebanese politics, has joined Hezbollah and Amal in the opposition and is now a key leader of the 8 March alliance. When Hezbollah represented the July 2006 war as a victory, the 14 March politicians quickly responded with accusations that the resistance had caused the war. A few months later, in October, the 8 March alliance called for a national unity government giving them one-third plus one of the cabinet seats, enough to hold a de facto veto. Prime Minister Siniora refused this demand and rhetoric on both sides continued to escalate until all six Shi'a Muslim ministers resigned, leaving the executive branch of the government without representation from the largest confessional group in the country. This was followed by an opposition sit-in in downtown Beirut, beginning on 1 December 2006 and fizzling out over a year later.

Perhaps the only success of the sit-in was to highlight the class dimensions of this conflict. The area of downtown where the sit-in took place is the area on which the rebuilding of Beirut under Rafiq Hariri had focused, replete with prohibitively expensive apartments and office space, designer stores and clubs. In contrast, those maintaining the sit-in on a daily basis included many who were displaced or were unemployed because of the July war. Despite having little in the way of an economic platform, the opposition also supported labor unions’ stances against Siniora’s proposal for a neoliberal economic reform plan to accompany requests for foreign government donations to alleviate Lebanon’s over $40 billion in debt – mostly accumulated during the post-civil war reconstruction of that elite downtown Beirut. As rhetoric continued to polarize, both class biases and anti-Shi’a sentiment emerged explicitly.

As the stalemate continued, Lebanon saw general strikes that included small outbreaks of violence, several rounds of talks that led nowhere, and a period where the country was literally without a President. Tensions culminated in May 2008, when in response to government majority calls to shut down its secure telecommunications networks, Hezbollah fighters led the opposition in a brief military incursion into several West Beirut neighborhoods, and for the first time since Ta’if, used their military strength internally. Eleven people were killed during the May battles, and more wounded. After quickly gaining the upper hand and taking control of these neighborhoods from Future Movement militia men, Hezbollah and its opposition allies handed them over to the Lebanese Army, which promptly reversed the telecommunications decision. Talks were then held that ended the political stalemate for the time being.

One recent arena for this bipolar conflict was the 2009 Lebanese elections, which eclipsed all other news in the country for much of the first half of the year. In those elections, Hezbollah held on to its 14 parliamentary seats, although the opposition as a whole did not emerge with a majority in Parliament, much to General Aoun’s disappointment. With the formation of a new government in 2009, an uneasy and short-lived rapprochement was achieved. But by summer 2010, conflict re-emerged, sparked by rumblings that the report of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating Hariri’s assassination would point fingers at Hezbollah members. In January 2011, the 8 March coalition resigned en masse from the cabinet, causing the government’s collapse by constitutional means. It took the new Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, months to form a government, which eventually received the necessary vote of confidence from Parliament in July 2011. For the first time, Hezbollah is, as this goes to press, part of the government majority coalition.

In general in politics, although Hezbollah is often accused of being a puppet of either Iran or Syria, the group’s decisions and actions have focused on maintaining its position and the support of its constituents within the Lebanese polity.30 Hezbollah does officially follow Ayatollah Khomeini as the party’s marja’ al-taqlid, or source of emulation in religious matters, 31 consults with Iranian leaders, and receives an indeterminate amount of economic aid from Iran. This relationship does not, however, mean that Iran dictates Hezbollah’s policies or decision-making,
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or can necessarily control the actions of the party. Meanwhile, Iranian efforts to infuse the Lebanese Shi’a with a pan-Shi’a identity centered on Iran have run up against the Arab identity and increasing Lebanese nationalism of Hizbullah itself. Similarly, while the party keeps good relations with the Syrian government, Syria does not control or dictate Hizbullah’s decisions or actions. Party decisions are made in accordance with Hizbullah’s view of Lebanon’s interests and the party’s own interests within Lebanese politics.

There is no doubt that Hizbullah is a nationalist party. Its view of nationalism differs from that of many Lebanese, especially from the nationalism based on the Phoenician origins myth espoused by Lebanon’s Christian right, and from the neoliberal US-backed nationalism of Hariri’s party. Hizbullah instead offers a nationalism that views Lebanon as an Arab state that cannot distance itself from Arab causes like that of Palestine. Its political ideology maintains an Islamic outlook, and the 1985 Open Letter that is often read as the party’s initial ‘manifesto’ notes the desire to establish an Islamic state, but only through the will of the people, stating ‘We don’t want Islam to reign in Lebanon by force’ (Hizbullah 1985). The party’s decision to participate in elections in 1992 underscored its commitment to working through the existing (sectarian) structure of the Lebanese state, and also shifted the party’s focus from a pan-Islamic resistance to Israel toward internal Lebanese issues. Furthermore, since 1992 Hizbullah leaders have frequently acknowledged the contingencies of Lebanon’s multi-confessional society and the importance of sectarian coexistence and pluralism within the country. It should also be noted that many of Hizbullah’s constituents do not want to live in an Islamic state; rather, they want the party to represent their interests within a pluralist Lebanon.

In 2009 Hizbullah articulated many of these positions and policies in their new Usothiq siyasiyya – which the party itself is calling its Manifesto in English (although ‘political document’ would be a more accurate translation). This document represents the first formal statement by the party of its principles and positions since the 1985 Open Letter. The manifesto includes leftist and economically oriented language in its diagnoses of the state of the region and country, but does not provide concrete economic solutions; it emphasizes Hizbullah’s commitment to the Lebanese state as well as its continued commitment to resistance against Israeli threat; it abstractly calls for the disestablishment of sectarianism in Lebanon; and it calls for greater rights for Palestinians in Lebanon and continued relationships with Arab and Islamic states in the region. As detailed above, none of this is particularly new, yet the document grants a formalized quality to the ideas and practices espoused by the party since the 1990s.

What sets Hizbullah apart from other Lebanese organizations is the professional level of organization that exists within the party and its institutions. This is the Lebanese political party that best responds to its constituencies’ needs and desires in the country, politically and economically. In contrast to many of the stereotypes about Shi’a Muslims held in Lebanon or stereotypes about religious Muslims held in the West, this is related to the party’s explicit embrace and promotion of a particular conception of modernity that is integrative of material and spiritual goals of progress in such a way that the two come to depend upon one another (Deeb 2006). In this vision, Islam and development go hand in hand, and in fact promote one another. It is the adherence to this particular vision of development and progress that appeals to many of Hizbullah’s supporters. This chapter now turns to one manifestation of that vision: the party’s social welfare networks.

Social welfare in the southern suburbs, the south and beyond

Like politics, most social welfare organizations, or jami’iyat, in Lebanon are sectarian in orientation. Among the consequences of the civil war and Israeli invasions were economic stagnancy,
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government corruption and a widening gap between the ever-shrinking middle class and the ever-expanding poor.33 Shi’a areas of Beirut also had to cope with massive displacements from the south and the Beqaa. In this economic climate, sectarian clientelism became a necessary survival tool. ‘Lebanon may have its charms, but the government has no social conscience and provides no safety net for the poor. One turns to the family and a variety of sectarian charities for assistance’ (Norton 2002: 44).

One of the consequences of historic Shi’a marginalization in Lebanon was a lack of resources being funneled into Shi’a areas. Before the 1960s there were only a few scattered Shi’a organizations, including the ‘Charity and Benevolence Society’ established in the south by Musa al-Sadr’s father-in-law in 1948.32 Beginning in 1963, al-Sadr added to this organization, building institutions in Beirut as well as in Tyre, including the Imam al-Khu’i orphanage in Beirut. Following al-Sadr’s disappearance, his inha, or inheritance, was divided among the major players in the Shi’a Islamic movement. In that division, the Imam al-Khu’i orphanage came to Fadlallah. From that starting point, he established al-Mabarrat Charitable Association (jam‘iyat al-mabarrat al-khayriyya, henceforth, al-Mabarrat). Today, al-Mabarrat has grown into one of the best-respected charitable associations in Lebanon, with over 20 schools, six orphanages, hospitals, cultural centers, and institutions for the blind, deaf and physically disabled spanning the country.34

The other major group of large-scale Shi’a Islamic jam‘iyas in the area are those affiliated with Hizbullah. Staffed mainly by highly trained volunteers, these institutions assess the needs of their constituents and work to meet those needs, whether by providing monthly support, or supplemental nutritional, educational, housing or health assistance. The institutions are located around Lebanon and serve the local people regardless of sect, though they are concentrated in the mainly Shi’a Muslim areas of the country.35 Examples include the Islamic Charity Endowment Committee (ICEC), the Martyr’s Association, jihād al-Bina’ Development Organization, the Hizbullah Women’s Committee, the Association for the Wounded, and the Islamic Health Committee. Some of these organizations, such as the ICEC and the Martyr’s Association, were founded by young Lebanese volunteers assisted by representatives from sister organizations in Iran. By 2000 the ICEC was running several schools and institutions and supporting over 4,000 orphans by helping their mothers or extended families raise them at home with monthly support and supplemental nutritional, educational, housing and health assistance. The association’s budget comes mainly from donations, religious tithes, Ramadan fundraisers, almost 3,000 full orphan sponsorships, and the ubiquitous collection boxes that are scattered all over Lebanon.

All of these social welfare organizations are heavily dependent on volunteer labor. For example, the ICEC in 2000 had only around 90 employees, but over 350 volunteers. Like the resistance fighters who were with the initial mobilization that eventually became Hizbullah, many women volunteers began their work during the mid-1980s, before there was an institutional structure to facilitate it. Just as resistance fighters found inspiration in Shi’a religious history, and especially the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, Shi’a women volunteers found inspiration in the active leadership of Husayn’s sister, Sayyida Zaynab, and look to her as a model. Not only was Sayyida Zaynab at the Battle where Husayn was killed, she was also the leader of the Shi’a community for a time after his death and is credited with holding the community together during a time of crisis. Hizbullah actively promotes this activist model for pious Shi’a women and promotes women’s public participation. The party has provided many of the venues where pious women are able to find employment, for example, not only at their social welfare institutions but also at media outlets like their television station and at their hospitals and clinics. The party also has a Women’s Committee that holds educational seminars on everything from health issues to interpreting religious texts to combating sexism within their community. They have also devoted time to convincing the party to run women as candidates on election slates, thus far
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successfully running women on municipality slates and having the first woman elected to the party's politburo.

Hizbullah's social welfare network is one aspect of the party's activities that sometimes leads to accusations that Hizbullah is a state within a state, but this type of welfare network actually fits quite well into the way that Lebanon has worked as a sectarian system. Hizbullah is filling gaps left by the state when it comes to welfare issues, by providing resources for a sectarian community in precisely the ways that other religious organizations in Lebanon do.

It is in part the efficiency and efficacy of the party's social welfare networks on the ground that contributed to the maintenance and increase in Hizbullah's popularity among many Lebanese following the July 2006 war. In a televised address marking the end of the war, Nasrallah devoted one-third of his airtime to discussing plans to rebuild homes and house the displaced. The very next day party volunteers with clipboards were out assessing damage, prioritizing repairs, providing rent money and basic needs for displaced families and school supplies for students, and beginning the work of reconstruction. Yet the social welfare networks do not fully or adequately explain why so many Lebanese support Hizbullah. As this chapter concludes, it turns to an exploration of the party's civilian constituencies.

Civilian constituencies: What does it mean to be a Hizbullah supporter?

Hizbullah is of Lebanon, but does not have a metonymic relationship to Lebanon. It does not represent all Lebanese, nor does it represent all Shi'a Muslim Lebanese, despite recent sectarian political polarizations in Lebanon. Similarly, not all Hizbullah supporters are Shi'a Muslim. The religion into which one is born, the religion one may or may not practice, does not determine one's political affiliations or preferences.

Nor does one's socioeconomic status. The view that Hizbullah is using its social organizations to 'buy' support betrays a simplistic view of the party. Hizbullah's constituents are not only poor, but increasingly come from the middle classes and include many upwardly mobile, highly educated Lebanese. In fact, much of the financial backing of the party's institutions comes from its supporters, including many expatriate Lebanese. The idea that Hizbullah's work of rebuilding will be funded entirely by Iran ignores that millions of dollars are donated to the party annually by Shi'a Muslims around the world, in the form of religious taxes, individual contributions and orphan sponsorships. Pious Shi'a Muslims pay an annual tithe called the khuums, one-fifth of the income they do not need for their own family's upkeep. Half of this tithe is given to the care of a marja' al-taqlid of their choice — a religious leader who is consulted and consulted on religious matters. Since 1995, when Ayatollah Khomeini appointed Nasrallah and another Hizbullah leader as his religious deputies in Lebanon,37 the khuums revenues of Lebanese Shi'a who follow Khomeini have gone directly into Hizbullah's coffers. These Shi'a also give their zakat, the alms required of all Muslims able to pay, to Hizbullah's vast network of social welfare institutions. Other Lebanese Shi'a instead pay this tithe to the care of Sayyid Fadlallah, and many of the independent social welfare organizations in the southern suburbs have been delegated acceptable 'surrogates' for these donations as well.

Hizbullah's popularity among Lebanese is multi-faceted, based on a combination of its resistance (and crucially, successful resistance) to Israeli occupation and attacks, Islamic ideology, political platforms and record in Lebanon, and an approach to political-economic development that includes an efficient welfare-provision network. Different Lebanese find different aspects of the party appealing for different reasons. As with political affiliation and allegiance anywhere, these are not simple equations. For some, Hizbullah is viewed as providing a viable alternative to a US-supported government (it is part of the opposition in the current government) and its
Today there are 18 recognized groups. The ratio of Christians to Muslims in Parliament was 6:5. Christian seats were primarily allocated to Maronites. Sunni Muslims received 11 of the 25 Muslim seats and the Druze received four. Picard (1997) notes that in 1948 Shi'a made up 70–85 percent of the population of the rural south and Beqaa, and only 3.5 percent of the population of Beirut.

By 1973 only 40 percent of Shi'a Muslims remained rural, and Shi'a Muslims constituted 29 percent of Beirut's population (Picard 1997). Despite CNN's insistence on describing this area as 'the Hizbullah stronghold,' it is today a vibrant and densely populated part of Beirut's urban fabric that is far more diverse than that media misnomer suggests. See Harb 2000.

Lebanon's location, geography, pro-business government policies and banking secrecy laws facilitated this, along with the closures of Haifa and the Suez Canal due to the Arab-Israeli conflicts.

In addition, by the mid-1980s many Shi'a Muslims had emigrated to West Africa, including Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ghana. They maintained ties to Lebanon and had a high rate of return, contributing to the connectedness of the population.

Many Shi'a Muslims initially supported Fatah, the military wing of what became the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), but in the 1970s, when Israeli retaliations began to affect Shi'a villages, many turned against the Palestinians. The first Shi'a militia, Amal, was initially trained by Fatah (Norton 1987), but this relationship disintegrated into violence during the 1980s' 'Camp War.'

'Amal' means 'hope' in Arabic and is also an acronym for Al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya (the Lebanese Resistance Brigades).

Muhs al-Sadr's success in uniting the Shi'a under a sectarian banner has been variously evaluated, with some (Ajani 1986) attributing him greater success than others (Norton 1987).

AbuKhalil (1991) observes that Fadlallah and al-Sadr were working from different perspectives as early as the 1960s.

Before it ended in 1990, the civil war involved over 20 militias and several state armies, including those of Syria and Israel. It is crucial in the contemporary climate to note that this was not a religious war or a sectarian war, but rather a war rooted in political issues that merely overshadowed sectarian divisions. In fact, some of the most devastating fighting took place within sectarian communities.

Other contributing factors to this distancing from the left include a general mistrust of Arabism and the end of the Nasser era. For more on the failures of the Lebanese left, see AbuKhalil 1988.

Meaning 'guidence of the jurisprudent,' this is the basis of the Islamic state in Iran: spiritual and political authority rest in the same institution, headed by a cleric who is the Hidden Imam's representative on Earth.

There is some debate as to whether it was a Phalanist or Lebanese Forces militia. Casualty figures range from 800 to 3,500, and are most likely in the vicinity of 2,000. Several hundred people also 'disappeared.' The 1983 Israeli Kahan Commission attributed 'personal responsibility' for the massacres to Hariri (Hariri 2004). For reports and documentation of these massacres, see Fisk (1990), Kapeliouk (1989), Siegel (2001), the reports of the Kahan Commission (1983) (available from www.mfi.gov.il) and the MacBride Commission (MacBride et al. 1983). See also Harri (2004: 35–36, 64–65).

This was related to a shift in Amal's leadership after al-Sadr disappeared; since 1980 it has been led by Nabih Berri, who angered many by participating in US-brokered negotiations in 1982. Today, Amal remains one of the two major Shi'a political parties in Lebanon, with strength in parts of the south and a few al-Dahiya neighborhoods—and Berri is Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament.

Fadlallah is frequently inaccurately characterized as 'the spiritual leader' of Hizbullah. He has always held that Islamic work should occur through multiple institutions and has always denied having any official role in the party. Yet as one of the most prominent figures in the Lebanese Shi'a community, Fadlallah's teachings and sermons have influenced many Hizbullah members.

There is a plethora of literature detailing Hizbullah's origins, history, relations with Iran and Syria, and military and political activities. See especially AbuKhalil (1991), Hamzeh (2000), Hariri (2004), Norton (2007), and Saad–Ghorayeb (2002).

See the UN Report on this incident, dated 1 May 1996. It states that, contrary to Israeli claims, 'it is unlikely that the shelling of the United Nations compound was the result of gross technical and/or procedural errors.'

25 Norton notes that 'unilateral withdrawal was a default strategy' for Israel, which would have preferred withdrawal to take place in conjunction with an Israeli-Syrian agreement (Norton 2000: 31).
27 During this time Hezbollah killed 118 Israeli soldiers and 41 civilians, Israel claimed to have killed over 300 Hezbollah fighters, but Hezbollah denied that number and publicly mourned its dead at much lower numbers. The ratio of Lebanese to Israeli civilian casualties was 3:1.
29 For an excellent analysis of this particular Israeli attack on Lebanon and its relationship to the US ‘war on terror’, see Kaiman (2006) and Hersh (2006), as well as the writings and interviews of political anthropologist Augustus Richard Norton in various media sources, posted on his blog at www.bostonuniversity.com, the commentary of political scientist Asad AbuKhalil at www.angryarab.blogspot.com, and collected analyses at www.electronicintifada.net.
30 While she oversimplifies and presents the still today over the party, Sheehy-Eisenlohr (2009) provides a good discussion of the historical complexity of the nature of Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shi’a community more broadly to Iran, pre- and post-revolution, especially with regard to changing Iranian perspectives on that relationship. She also shows how the historical complexity and roots of accusations of being 'Iranian' in Lebanon, relevant to contemporary political machinations in the country.
31 Party members, however, are free to follow any mafi’il al-taqlid they choose, and many follow Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah instead.
32 See Norton (2002) and Kubursi (1993) on the post-war economy. Per capita income went from $6,600 in 1974 to less than $250 in 1989 (Kubursi 1993). Severe inflation sent the value of a US dollar in Lebanon dropping from the single digits to 2,000 in the span of a few years. Today the lira is fixed at 1,500 to one US dollar, and both currencies are used interchangeably.
33 El Khezer (2000) lists social service associations by sect in 1965 and 1977-78. In 1965 there were 13 Shi’a organizations, as compared to 28 Maronite, 42 Greek Orthodox and 26 Sunni. In 1977-78 38 Shi’a organizations, as compared to 70 Maronite, 44 Greek Orthodox and 66 Sunni (El Khezer 2000: 67). These differences are magnified by differential populations (e.g. there were many more Orthodox institutions per capita).
34 Much of the money for this expansion has come from wealthy Shi’a Muslims who followed Khu’i and/or follow Fadlallah as their mafi’il, especially in the Gulf States. For example, the Bahman Hospital in al-Dahiyya was built from a donation of $60 million by its Kuwaiti nameake.
35 For more on this social welfare network, see Deeb 2006.
36 Personal communication from several of the displaced. See also Agence France Presse 2006.
37 This is not a political appointment, but rather an appointment as Khamenei’s deputies in his (centred) capacity as mafi’il al-taqlid. The importance of this appointment is that it allows for the collection of khums on his behalf.

References


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