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Myth and reality

Of the many Islamist groups that have emerged within Islam, Hizbullah of Lebanon has become a significant force not only in domestic politics but throughout the Middle East, particularly since its success in driving the Israeli army from Arab land in southern Lebanon

Shi'ite aspirations for a better political and economic deal – they are Lebanon's largest sectarian group but grossly under-represented in both areas – began to take shape in the early 1970s. Under the charismatic leadership of Musa al-Sadr, founder of Amal (Hope) in 1975, the community did not adopt a militant, revivalist stance. That was left to Hizbullah (Party of God), whose militant radicalism was inspired by the Iranian revolution in 1979.

The ideological origins of Hizbullah, however, go back to Iraq rather than Iran. Iraq in the 1960s was home to a Shi'ite religio-political revival in the *hawzat al-ilmiyyah* (circles of learning) in the holy city of Najaf led by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. These circles became the epicentre of Shi'i activism and the home of Hizb al-Da'wah al-Islamiyyah (Party of Islamic Call), which sought to propagate its message throughout the Shia communities of Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and the Gulf as a prelude to revolution. Virtually all Lebanon's major Shi'i leaders came out of the Najaf *hawzat* including Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, Shaykh Subhi Tufayli, Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi and Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah.

Once settled in Lebanon, the shaykhs established *hawzat* under the aegis of the Da'wah Party. Yet it was not until the disappearance of Musa al-Sadr in 1978 and the victory of Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979 that the call for *jihad* (holy war) became real and a revolutionary programme based on that of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini emerged. The Israeli invasion

of June 1982 delivered a mass Shia constituency to Hizbullah for its subsequent *jihad* against Israel, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), the Lebanese forces, the rival Shia grouping Amal and the US- and French-led multinational forces. This was further strengthened with the dispatch of 1,500 Iranian Revolutionary Guards to the Syrian-controlled Beqaa region that same summer. Hizbullah was secretly formed with joint Iranian-Syrian sponsorship. For the former, it was a tangible demonstration of its intention to export the Islamic revolution; for Syria, Hizbullah was an essential instrument in its proxy war against Israel and in the preservation of its interest in Lebanon.

Hizbullah subscribes to Khomeini's theory of the governance of the *wilayat al-faqih* (religious jurist), the supreme and absolute authority at the head of a theocratic state. Long-term accommodation or compromise with Lebanon's complex confessional arrangements is, therefore, out of the question. Hizbullah's political game as an opposition force in Lebanon has more to do with 'one man, one vote, once and only once' than with a democratic conversion to parliamentary government. *Jihad* coexists with Hizbullah's parliamentary role and is called into action when the need arises. Whatever the mode at any given moment, the aim remains the same: the seizure of political power and imposition of clerical government.

Hizbullah's oscillation between militancy and political pragmatism has always been determined by a given situation. After the Israeli invasion of 1982, for instance, *jihad* against the enemies of Islam was a popular move: it targeted Israel and the SLA in the south, the US embassy and the US and French military compounds in Beirut. Hizbullah was seen as the most prominent actor in compelling Israel's retreat to their self-proclaimed security zone and prompting the withdrawal of the multinational force from Lebanon in 1984. It was also believed to be responsible for kidnapping dozens of westerners and holding them hostage, in some cases for up to seven years.

Hizbullah's militancy also had a target closer home: its main Shia rival, Amal, now under the leadership of Nabih Berri. From 1986 to 1989, Hizbullah fought Amal for control of the Shia areas in Beirut, Beqaa and the south. It ended with Amal's defeat and Hizbullah's supremacy, particularly in the suburbs and slums on the southern outskirts of the capital where Shia fleeing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the south had settled.

Hizbullah's organisational structure remained largely invisible. It was led by a collective leadership composed of the seven-member *shura* (consultative) council linked directly to Khomeini with Shakh Fadlallah as its spiritual leader. Its military apparatus was backed by the Martyr's foundation and the Islamic Health Committee, both active in grass-roots social welfare work. With Tehran financing 90% of this work after 1984, Hizbullah won many recruits in the poorer Shi'a areas.

By the end of the 1980s, with Lebanon inching toward a Syrian-guaranteed peace based on the Taif Accord, Iran under President Hashemi Rafsanjani anxious to avoid confrontation with the West and Syria's determination that Islamist groups, (including its one-time protégé Hizbullah), must not expand at the cost of Lebanon's newly balanced confessional arrangement, militant activity was curtailed.

While the Islamic resistance continued its attacks against Israel in the south throughout the 1990s, Hizbullah began to evolve into a political party, more committed to grass-roots social welfare activities than to military recruitment. It runs three hospitals, over 20 medical centres and a commercial network that includes supermarkets, gas stations, department stores and construction companies. Its bid for political power within the system in the parliamentary elections of 1992 and 1996 gave it eight seats the first time, seven the second. But its real show of strength came with its success in the municipal elections of 1998 when it won almost 30 municipalities in the south, 25 in the Beqaa and two in Beirut's southern suburbs.

Since then, Hizbullah has, predictably perhaps, split along ideological lines with its former secretary general, Shaykh Subhi Tufayli, rejecting the party's political activity in favour of continuing *jihad*. His creation of a rival movement, Ansar Allah (Friends of Allah), led to his expulsion from Hizbullah in the summer of 1998.

With the liberation of the south, the likelihood of pressure from Syria restraining cross-border action against Israel, the possibility of a peace deal and Iran's rapprochement with the West, it looks increasingly difficult – if not impossible – for Hizbullah to continue its military operations. But if Hizbullah drops this aspect of its activity, settles for long-term accommodation with the system and abandons its original aims, it risks disintegration and the loss of its appeal as a party. □

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