

The Meaning of Hizballah

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In the wake of Israel's 33-day war with Hizbulla, the 24-year-old Islamic movement has become the most popular political party in the Middle East.

Over 1 million Lebanese gathered in a vast square in a southern Beirut suburb on Sept. 22 '06 to celebrate their country's largely successful campaign against Israel. Seyid Hassan Nasrallah, secretary-general of Hizballah, risked his life by appearing in public after Israeli leaders had sworn to kill him, and spoke to his adoring supporters in Lebanon and around the world.

Many children were given the day off from school, and buses ferried supporters from all over Lebanon for the victory celebration. Lebanon had endured 33 days of war, and not only was the Shia Hizballah movement undefeated, it had achieved a near parity of casualties with the Israeli military—a first in the history of Arab-Israeli wars. In an Arab world whose leaders were dictatorial, mendacious and corrupt, who made false promises and were beholden to the United States, Nasrallah was renowned for his integrity and for maintaining his movement's defense of Lebanon at all costs. It had made him the most popular leader in the Arab world.

Women, children and men waved the flags of Lebanon and Hizballah from outside the windows and sang in jubilation as they waited in traffic. Also on display were the flags of Palestine and Palestinian movements, Lebanese Christian movements, the Communist Party, Sunni and Druze movements, as well as secular nationalists. Although many of the celebrants were men with beards or women whose hair was covered, many were not. There were youths in trendy attire, girls in tight jeans with hair exposed and who had turned their Hizballah T-shirts into stylish form-fitting fashion statements.

Nasrallah not only spoke to his natural constituents, the Lebanese Shia, but he also singled out the inhabitants of Palestine, Syria, Iran, Kuwait and Bahrain. He told his audience that they were sending a political and moral message to the world that Lebanon's resistance was stronger than ever. Their victory was a victory for every oppressed, aggrieved and free person in the world, he said, and an inspiration for all who rejected subjugation or degradation by the United States. He mocked Arab leaders for not using their oil resources as a strategic weapon, for prohibiting demonstrations, for not supporting the Palestinians and for kowtowing to Condoleezza Rice. He extended his people's hearts, grief and empathy for the Palestinians who were being bombed and killed daily, and whose homes were being destroyed while the world, and in particular the Arab world, was silent.

Surveying this massive crowd of boisterous people—the men and women, the teenagers and the small children, celebrating their identity and their steadfastness together with music it was as clear as anything else that this was

not the stuff of religious fundamentalism or terrorism. For although Hizb Allah, the Party of God, is undoubtedly of Shia origin, it is in fact a secular movement, addressing real temporal issues, its leaders speaking in a nationalist discourse, avoiding sectarianism and religious metaphors. They participate in politics, compromising and negotiating, and do not seek to impose Islamic law on others. Proof of this is readily available in Hizballah strongholds, where many of their followers are secular, supporting Hizballah because it represents their political interests and defends them.

Throughout the country, women in chadors walk beside scantily clad beauties. Along Lebanon's highways, or what is left of them, billboards celebrating Hizballah's "divine victory" over Israel share advertising space with posters depicting half-naked women wearing jeans or lingerie. Hizballah may have preferences, but unlike the authoritarian leaders of the Taliban or Saudi Arabia, it does not impose them.

Nor has the movement shown a long-standing inability to reconcile with its enemies. Most strikingly, in 2000, after Israel's withdrawal from the Lebanese territory it was occupying, the thousands of Shia and Christian collaborators suddenly found themselves vulnerable to retribution and street justice from understandably aggrieved Lebanese. On strict orders from Hizballah, however, the vast majority were not touched. Rather they were handed over to the Lebanese army, dealt with by the Lebanese government and imprisoned and amnestied prematurely, in a move that offended many Lebanese. Nevertheless, today they can be spotted in towns in the south; everyone knows who they are, and they remain unharmed. Hardly the actions of a violent fundamentalist terrorist organization.

And what was so unreasonable about Hizballah's demands? The movement insisted it wanted Lebanese prisoners to be freed by Israel, all of Lebanon's territory to be evacuated by Israel, and for the Lebanese army, which had never defended Lebanon, let alone its south, to come up with a national defense plan. Thirty years of proven Israeli brutality and 60 years of Lebanese government neglect of the south gave Hizballah a *raison d'être* its leadership insisted it did not want.

And unlike many of his counterparts in Iraq, Nasrallah is ingenuously urging a course of national unity in Lebanon. During his Sept. 22, 2006 speech, he went out of his way to use the rhetoric Lebanese nationalism while condemning sectarianism. In previous speeches Nasrallah had declared that he was fighting for the *umma*, the world Muslim community, which is vastly Sunni. He charmed the Lebanese in a recent television interview when he looked his female interviewer in the eyes, allowed her to interrupt him and smiled with her, practically flirting. His posters can be found in Iraq, Palestine, Egypt; his name is spoken with pride in Saudi Arabia. In Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, shops were named in his honor.

In Somalia, it is widely believed that the CIA is funding a slew of unpopular and criminal warlords against a popular Islamic militia movement (which the CIA neither confirms nor denies, of course). This suspected US support comes despite the fact that most analysts believe the militias are not harboring any

significant terrorists nor are they likely to set up a Taliban-style regime in the country. As a result, the perception in Somalia is that the US has allied itself with warlords who are terrorizing the populace in an attempt to stamp out a popular Islamic uprising.

It is this same distorting war-on-terror prism that has led the Bush administration to view resistance fighters in Iraq as mere terrorists-as opposed to elements of a popular movement made up of Sunnis and Shias with real grievances against an oppressive and increasingly onerous occupation. As a result, the inhabitants of entire towns and provinces have been branded as terrorists and “anti-Iraqi forces”-and treated as such.

Support for Hizballah transcends economic class divides and the divide between religious and secular Shias. Hizballah is one of the few movements in Lebanon addressing substantive issues that transcend sectarian identity-issues like corruption, social justice, rejection of America’s new Middle East project, resistance to Israeli occupation, and support for the oppressed Palestinians.

Hizballah now has strong allies and supporters among most of Lebanon’s Christians (who make up some 40% of the population); it also enjoys the support of most of the 400,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanese camps. Indeed, the war has only increased Hizballah’s supporters.

Followers of other Lebanese sects-Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Sunni, Druze-merely follow their leaders because of their positions, not because of their ideas. Hizballah is a people’s movement, having emerged in 1982 as an inchoate umbrella group representing the marginalized and oppressed and cultivating a culture of resistance to oppression and injustice.

It was this culture of resistance that led to Hizballah’s surprise victory in what is now being called in Lebanon “the Sixth War” with Israel. If war is politics by other means, then Israel failed to achieve its stated political goals of disarming Hizballah and pushing it north of the Litani River; so too did it fail to achieve its unstated goals of cleansing the south of all Shias and intimidating Lebanese and Palestinian resistance- two failures that even Israel’s own generals are beginning to admit. Hizballah, on the other hand, not only survived the war intact, and with relatively few casualties, but it inflicted relatively heavy casualties on the Israeli military and achieved greater popularity than it ever had-winning the hearts of Muslims around the world, and many non-Muslims in Lebanon.

Most of Hizballah’s soldiers in the most recent war were between 18 and 25 years old and had never fought before. Somehow some 100 fighters in Aita al Shaab held the town, never surrendering it to the Israeli military. Many of the town’s old people stayed behind to cook and care for Hizballah’s soldiers. Other people left their homes and shops open for them. The town was Hizballah. And the entire town gathered on Sunday, Sept. 17, to mourn its dead and celebrate its victory. Hundreds of black-clad women made their way up a dirt road from the newly constructed martyr’s cemetery where the nine Hizballah soldiers and

the nine civilian war dead had been buried. Many tearfully carried large framed pictures of their lost men.

The media has fast forgotten Lebanon: Americans are distracted by what former Rep. Mark Foley wrote to congressional pages; many Muslims worldwide are more concerned with whether or not the Pope insulted Islam than with who is actually killing Muslims. As the 1 million Lebanese refugees who fled Israeli terror return to sift through the rubble of their lives, they will be sidestepping cluster bombs and trusting that Hizballah will house and shelter them from the fast approaching winter. ~~del del~~