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Hezbollah: Terrorism in Context, a Deeper Look

By Kevin Simon

There is a communication gap between the Western and Arab world. Take for example "Islamic Rage Boy,"¹ a young Muslim man in the Kashmir region who was the poster child for Islamist extremism to much of the western world for the past five years. His face has been virally recirculated all over the internet after he appeared in images, shaking his hand at the camera. "Rage Boy will never rise from the madness that enslaves him" is one of the many insults made by Islamophobic bloggers in the West. These comments are often purely based on the emotional face of this young man portrayed in pictures on the Internet. In reality, this man is a peaceful community organizer, working hard to have his voice heard¹.

Behind many stereotypes, there is a grain of truth. There are Middle Eastern associations responsible for terrorist activities. Hezbollah, a Lebanese organization is considered to be the 'A-team' of terrorism¹⁰. Hezbollah was born out of the more moderate Shi'a organization, Amal, in 1982 was a response to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. During the Lebanese civil war, which began in 1975, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) used southern Lebanon as a base to conduct attacks against Israel. Israel invaded southern Lebanon to put an end to these attacks in 1978. At first, Israel was welcomed as a force driving the PLO out. However, Israel's involvement resulted in more violence and deaths, especially in the southern region, which has a majority of Shi'a Muslims. Despite clashes between the PLO and Israel, and sectarian infighting between Christian Maronite Phalangists "and the predominantly Muslim Lebanese National Movement"²² took 18,000 Lebanese civilian lives and displaced 450,000 more before 1982¹³. The extreme condition that created Hezbollah is reflected in its early rhetoric.

Hezbollah's "manifesto includes three goals: the eradication of Western imperialism in Lebanon, the transformation of Lebanon's multi-confessional state into an Islamic state, and the complete destruction of Israel"⁹. Since its formation, Hezbollah has been responsible for bombing US military barracks, Israeli embassies, kidnappings, and assassinations²⁰. Their world-wide reach has placed Hezbollah high on the list of international terrorist organizations²³. Insurgent strikes into Israel have been attributed as the cause of several campaigns into Lebanese soil, which have resulted in the death of thousands of Lebanese civilians²⁰.

Although Hezbollah has extremist rhetoric, the Lebanese people can be described as reasonable from a western perspective. Lebanon's spiritually diverse population that is 40% Christian, 30% Sunni, and 30% Shi'a has ensured that an Islamist regime is all but impossible³. Popular surveys have shown that 81% of Lebanon finds Democracy preferable to another form of government, putting it ahead of Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, the Palestinian territories, Indonesia, and Pakistan, the other nations surveyed in a PEW research study⁴. This indicates that Lebanon would also not likely tolerate Militant Islamic extremism, and that is the case as well. Another PEW Survey shows that only 2% of Lebanese Muslims have a favorable view of Al Qaeda⁶. In contrast, 11% of American Muslims have a favorable view of Al Qaeda⁵. This difference could be colored by the fact that Lebanese Muslims feel the regional effects of Al Qaeda more than American Muslims. American Muslims can more easily support Al Qaeda ideologically because they are disconnected from the direct actions of the organization. However, this fact is still a strong indicator that extremist violence is not welcome in Lebanon.

It should follow that Hezbollah is unpopular in Lebanon. Maybe Hezbollah is only supported by an extremist few among this otherwise moderate country? This is not the case. A PEW Survey has shown that 38% of Lebanon has a favorable opinion of Hezbollah⁶. This is not the type of support that a militant organization should expect in a seemingly moderate nation. 38% favorability is the popularity that is expected of a major political party. For example, the US Republican party reportedly had 36% favorability on October of 2011 with a study similar in methodology to the Lebanese study⁷.

This dichotomy prompted the research question that this paper, and the accompanying infographic, is based on: why would the otherwise moderate people of Lebanon support an organization with a violent agenda? Although Hezbollah does have a violent history and a frightening rhetoric at times, Hezbollah is much more than a terrorist organization. They fulfill critical political, charitable, and military roles within Lebanon. These different levels of engagement in Lebanese society are the source of Hezbollah's legitimacy within part of the Lebanese society.

This contention is well accepted by many academics^{2, 8, 16}. The purpose of this paper, and its accompanying infographic, is not to delve deeper into the relationship between Hezbollah and Lebanon, but rather to present the story of Lebanon and Hezbollah in one accessible place to an educated audience not deeply engaged in Middle Eastern Policy. It is my hope as the author of these two pieces of work that by promoting a more complete understanding of Hezbollah in the US, a more appropriate response to their extremist rhetoric and violence can be achieved.

Hezbollah's popularity is fueled by its very successful implementation of social services¹². Before examining the nature of Hezbollah's charitable spending, it is necessary to understand where Hezbollah's funding comes from. The majority of its income comes from Iran. The estimated yearly aid that Hezbollah receives from Iran is around \$200 Billion¹⁴. This statistic is commonly used by right-wing analysts and commentators to link Hezbollah and Iran's policy making processes. This is a reasonable point to believe, but it does not encapsulate the entire picture. Hezbollah is a distinctly unique organization from Iran. Most of Hezbollah's "everyday decisions" are made "without consulting Iran"²⁰. In general, "there is little evidence to suggest that Iran is controlling Hezbollah's decision making process"³.

Hezbollah's second largest source of funding comes from wealthy Lebanese ex-pats who smuggle money into Lebanon. The Lebanese ex-patriot community is larger than the Lebanese that are living domestically in Lebanon. One expat died while carrying 2 million dollars into Lebanon that he had raised abroad¹². The Party of God's third largest source of funding also comes from overseas activities, as profits scraped off of international drug trade that Hezbollah operatives are involved with. Much of the Hezbollah-connected drug trade takes place in South America's tri-border area¹⁰. Ayman Joumma was caught laundering up to \$200 million/month from drug trade to international locations¹⁴. The majority of that money has reportedly gone to Hezbollah¹⁴. This connection to drug trade is concerning because it shows the extent that Hezbollah is willing to go in order to go in order to achieve its goals. It is also a sign that there is a wide diversity in the activities and membership of this organization.

Zakat, a Muslim practice of giving 2.5% of one's net worth to charity each year is the final major source of income as well for Hezbollah¹². Some of that money comes directly from the Lebanese to domestic charities such as the Hezbollah run *Jihad al-Bina*. Other international charities have more vague connections to Hezbollah, and have been accused of covertly funneling money to Hezbollah. The United States has clamped down on those charities in an attempt to cut off some funding sources for international terrorism. As a point of reference, the Lebanese government received \$246 Million in FY2011 from the United States¹⁵. It is interesting to note that Lebanon receives a little more money from the US than Hezbollah receives from Iran. Could Iran's soft power over Hezbollah be the same as the United States' soft power over Lebanon? Iran likely has more influence over Hezbollah than the US has over Lebanon because that amount of money is a more significant part of Hezbollah's budget than it is for Lebanon.

The majority of Hezbollah's funding comes through Iran and drug cartels, but much of that money goes towards social services in Lebanon. Hezbollah currently spends between \$500 million and \$1 billion per year, putting the funding that Hezbollah receives from Iran at less than half of their yearly budget¹³. It is estimated that 50% of Hezbollah's spending goes towards providing social services, meaning that Hezbollah spends between \$250 million and \$500 million dollar per year on domestic social services and reconstruction¹².

This spending represents Hezbollah's most strategic asset. By positioning itself to be indispensable in the effort to rebuild Lebanon after War with Israel, Hezbollah has garnered the support of much of the Shi'a population in Lebanon². That spending, while mainly in Shi'a communities, also extends to Sunna and Christian Maronites in Lebanon with financial, healthcare, and farming assistance among Hezbollah's wider range of

activities¹⁸. Although Hezbollah is a predominantly Shi'a organization, Hezbollah is not against reaching across spiritual lines to work with Lebanese who are willing cooperate with them.

The social services that Hezbollah provides in Lebanon are immense. Hezbollah provides healthcare to over 500,000 Lebanese, which is about 1/8 of the population¹³. Between 1988, and 2002, Hezbollah built 5 hospitals, 35 schools, 9,000 homes, 800 hops, 8 clinics, 100 mosques, 8 cultural centers, and 7 agricultural co-ops¹³. This statistic traces back to a Hezbollah official, so its reliability is dampened by the source's bias. Regardless of the precise numbers, the infrastructural services rendered by Hezbollah cannot be disregarded. Another source has indicated that, between 1988 and 1996, Hezbollah built 57 artisan wells, 5 power stations, 400 tanks of potable water, laid 15,000 meters of pipe, and 4,100 meters of high-voltage wire³. Between 1996 and 2001, Hezbollah offered \$14 million in educational scholarships¹³. Of the 40 NGO's operating within Lebanon, Hezbollah provides 25% of all loans granted in Lebanon³.

The counterpoint to Hezbollah's charitability is that its services only scratches the surface of the economic and human damages inflicted upon Lebanon by conflicts like Operation Peace for Galilee or the Grapes of Wrath Campaign conducted by Israel in response to Hezbollah's regular rocket attacks into Israeli suburbs^{3,9}.

Since Hezbollah provides social services to those in need, one could speculate that much of their popular support is from poorer Lebanese who are willing to overlook Hezbollah's terrorist track record. The majority of Hezbollah's support comes from southern Lebanon which is both a poorer region in Lebanon and where most of Hezbollah's services are conducted. Still, half of the wealthy and educated Shi'a support Hezbollah³. This is a sign

that Hezbollah is doing more than just charity to garner support at different class levels.

The Party of God's military and political activity has also made them significant players in Lebanon's identity.

A historical moment for Hezbollah's role as a military presence in Lebanon was the formation of a Hezbollah-led multi-confessional military brigade in 1997 to fight Israeli occupation. This event is better known as the 'Lebanonisation' of the resistance²¹. This pan-Lebanese approach to the anti-Israeli resistance is one of the reasons that their activities are regarded by some Lebanese "as legitimate resistance, and [others] as *jihad*"⁹. One point in particular where Hezbollah is viewed as resistance is their fighting in the 'security zone' on Lebanese land which has been occupied by Israel^{3, 9}.

Hezbollah is attributed by the Lebanese as playing a "central role in ending the occupation" by Israel in 2000¹⁶. This opinion is only a piece of the entire picture. There were many Hezbollah-independent factors that also attributed to Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000¹¹. Hezbollah's broadcast of injured Israeli soldiers and successful engagements into Israeli broadcasting space expedited the Israeli people's tiring of the drawn out military engagement¹⁶. Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon has made Hezbollah uniquely a force in the Middle East that can force Israel "to take the decision and withdraw"²¹.

The relative size of Hezbollah's forces also makes it a significant presence in the region surrounding Lebanon. The current UN peace-keeping force in southern Lebanon has between 13,000 and 14,150 active members. The Lebanese Army has deployed around 15,000 soldiers to ensure stability in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's active force is

estimated between 5,000 and 7,000 active members, but “Hezbollah can theoretically draw upon its entire membership which could be as many as 25,000”⁹. That makes Hezbollah’s military footprint about equal to the combined UN and official Lebanese peacekeeping presence in Southern Lebanon. Furthermore, it is popularly believed that “the 70,000-member Lebanese Armed Forces have limited capabilities and largely obsolescent equipment”¹¹. Even though the Lebanese military is larger than Hezbollah, their track record of being less effective than Hezbollah has weakened their public opinion.

Hezbollah is not purely a defensive military force. It is also a militia that attacks Israeli civilians. In 2006, Hezbollah conducted rocket strikes against a hospital that was in no way near a military base according to the hospital spokesman. This attack was one of several strikes against Israeli civilian targets at the beginning of August in 2006¹⁹. This is just one example of a long history of targeting civilians. This kind of violence is unacceptable. Furthermore, Hezbollah pioneered suicide bombings in an armed resistance. Suicide bombings have a strong association with extremist and Islamist organizations. On the contrary, “at least half of the suicide attacks against Israeli occupying forces in Lebanon were carried out by secular and leftist parties”¹⁷. This statistic is used to illustrate that the psychology of suicide attacks is driven more by desperation rather than religious fervor. Although Hezbollah pioneered suicide bombings, more sophisticated organization and technology has helped them drift away from this extremist tactic¹⁶.

The ‘Lebanonisation’ of Hezbollah’s resistance and both their perceived and actual presence can explain a strong sense of national pride in Hezbollah as a Lebanese military force. Hezbollah has used their military popularity to their advantage politically. The end of a conflict with Israel historically results in increased political power for Hezbollah in the

following political election. One great example of Hezbollah capitalizing on this popularity is a poster used during the 1996 elections which read “They resist with their blood. Resist with your vote”¹⁶.

It has been argued that the rise of Hezbollah as a major political player in Lebanon has led to a moderation of Hezbollah’s military activities¹⁶. The effectiveness of this argument is limited. Even after Hezbollah reached a significant role in Lebanese government, they continue to incite Israel. In 2006, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers which escalated to a major war in the region. The 2006 war caused “approximately \$3.5-4 billion” in damage to Lebanon’s infrastructure¹¹. Still, this confrontation “greatly enhanced the prestige of Hezbollah at the expense of the Lebanese government”¹¹.

Hezbollah has politically evolved from a resistance created to serve a military purpose out of frustration into a national political leader. Hezbollah was created by militant Islamist from Amal, another Shi’a militia and organization, who found Amal to be too secular. Throughout the remainder of the civil war, Hezbollah continued military action to weaken other sectarian groups in Lebanon, and Israel. The capitulation of Hezbollah’s sectarian infighting occurred in 1989 when Hezbollah defeated Amal, then their rivals, by destroying Amal’s military strongholds, consolidating Shi’a support under one banner⁸.

The next significant moment in Hezbollah’s political history came when the civil war ended, and the Ta’if agreement was signed. This agreement gave a more equal share of political power within Lebanon’s confessionally divided parliament, a remnant of the French colonizers, to Muslims. Shi’a Muslims, at this point in time 30% of the population, received a significant increase in political representation¹⁷. The end of major conflict and

the increased political sovereignty of the Shi'a marked the first major opportunity for Hezbollah to enter the political scene. Abbas al-Musawi, the then leader of Hezbollah, did not support entering mainstream politics. It was not until 1992, when he was assassinated by Israel, and Nasrallah took over Hezbollah that the party of god ran in its first election, winning 8 seats¹⁷.

Hezbollah's ascent to political power was not without military intervention. The indirect effect of Hezbollah's military on their political presence is discussed above. In 2008, a political stand-still caused in-part because Hezbollah sought veto-power in parliament resulted in 'clashes' between Hezbollah supporters and government supporters. In response, the Lebanese government threatened to shut down Hezbollah's extensive telecommunications network. Hezbollah considered this a 'declaration of war' and took control of much of Beirut²². The conflict was ended by a summit in Qatar at which the Hezbollah-led opposition was granted veto-power in the Lebanese government. This was a blatant use of military force to grab for political power and draws Hezbollah's political agenda into question. One less extreme explanation for Hezbollah's extreme response to this incident is that their telecommunications network was necessary to both military and charitable activities – neither of which could afford to risk catastrophic failure.

In 2011, Hezbollah and its allies withdrew from the Saad al-Hariri led government due to political tensions over investigations of the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, a previous prime minister, and the father of Saad al-Hariri²². Hezbollah withdrew because it was clear that Hezbollah operatives were responsible for the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri. Hezbollah's withdrawal from the government cabinet caused a collapse of Lebanon's unity government, requiring that a new government be formed. Sunni billionaire, Najib Mikati

was then nominated as the new prime minister of Lebanon, and created a Hezbollah-led government coalition²². This marks Hezbollah's transition from a political party to a major national leader, and has interesting consequences for the future of Hezbollah's role in Lebanon. Will Hezbollah continue to conduct military raids against Israel now that they represent all of Lebanon? This political maneuvering also raises concerns about Hezbollah's ultimate goals. Do Hezbollah's actions fall within a greater goal of gaining more control over Lebanon, or do their actions fall within traditional political maneuvering similar to what is seen in England or the US?

Hezbollah's political success in Lebanon is an indicator of either the Lebanese population becoming more Islamist, Hezbollah's talent at politics, or a moderation of Hezbollah's political position. The PEW statistics presented in the beginning of this paper is a sign that popular Lebanese opinion is not extremist. Additionally, there is a general lack of evidence to show a trend towards extremism, whereas history shows that Hezbollah has become more moderate and politically adept as it has moved towards the mainstream¹⁶.

Political viability of Hezbollah is limited as long as they are associated with extremist Shi'a Islam. Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah once said "We believe the requirement for an Islamic state is to have an overwhelming popular desire, and we're not talking about fifty percent plus one, but a large majority. And this is not available in Lebanon and probably never will be"²⁰. Their open letter published in 1985 reads "we don't want Islam to reign in Lebanon by force" in spite of the organizations express desires to create an Islamist state¹⁷. These opinions are mirrored by external analysts who have pointed out that "religious organizations cannot gain excessive political ground in Lebanon. As such, Hezbollah is limited in political scope as a fundamentalist organization"³. Joseph Sahama, a secular

Christian writer for the daily *as-safir* is quoted as saying “has Hezbollah tried to ban books or impose sharia? Not once. Their electoral program is [an] almost social democratic [one]. So we’re confronting a very different kind of Fundamentalist Party”²⁰. Hezbollah has shown that it is a politically astute organization. These quotes illustrate Hezbollah’s strategy to expand their support base is through moderate a moderate political platform relative to the party’s rhetoric. An alternative explanation of Hezbollah’s political strategy is that they are secretly plotting to subversively take over Lebanon and forcibly convert it to an Islamic state. This is unlikely given the party’s track record.

Matthew Levitt wrote that Hezbollah is one of the “groups with entrenched causes, an overwhelming sense of frustration, a self-justifying worldview, and a healthy dose of evil, who will resort to violence as a means of expression”¹⁰. Levitt’s language depicts Hezbollah as a rogue actor within the nation of Lebanon. Levitt’s wording casts Hezbollah as a delusional, immature, and wicked organization. This does not match the spectrum of Hezbollah’s activities, nor does it address the wide popular support that Hezbollah receives in Lebanon.

In light of Lebanon’s complex relationship with Hezbollah, segmenting the different perspectives of Hezbollah sympathizers provides a more interesting answer than sweeping statements to cover a diverse population.

One segment of the population likely tolerates Hezbollah as a necessary evil, like a toddler superhero who occasionally throws dangerous temper tantrums. They appreciate the functionality that Hezbollah provides. They wish that there was a more responsible organization running the charities and government parties, and would prefer it if the

Lebanese Army were making the strategic military decisions instead of the Party of God. They might prefer it if Hezbollah were to demilitarize by joining the Lebanese military due to a general distrust of Hezbollah.

Another segment likely perceives Hezbollah as Lebanon's premier national movement. They see immense value in the role that Hezbollah's charities play, and trust Hezbollah decisions over other, corrupt political and military officials^{8, 21}. People within this segment likely sympathize strongly with Hezbollah's fight against Israel, and see Hezbollah as another military power fighting Israel in a war against 'Arab oppression' rather than as an insurgent militia.

Hezbollah supporters likely are a mix of the two different personas. A good next question is: 'how does this support break down?' Is Hezbollah viewed more so as a necessary evil, or as a national movement?

Alongside this paper, there is an infographic, showing the dichotomy between Hezbollah's illicit funding sources and charitable social services, and the historical development of Hezbollah's military and political branches. It is intended to more clearly represent why Hezbollah is such a complicated but essential part of Lebanon. Until we begin to look at Organizations like Hezbollah in all of their dimensions, the West will never be able to effectively interact with them in a productive way.

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