



Hezbollah: A Short History

Augustus Richard Norton

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Most policymakers in the United States and Israel have it wrong. Hezbollah isn't a simple terrorist organization--nor is it likely to disappear soon. Following Israel's war against Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, the Shi'i group--which combines the functions of a militia, a social service and public works provider, and a political party--is more popular than ever in the Middle East while retaining its strong base of support in Lebanon. And Hezbollah didn't merely confront Israel and withstand its military onslaught. Hezbollah's postwar reconstruction efforts were judged better than the U.S. government's response to Hurricane Katrina--not by al-Jazeera, but by an American TV journalist. In *Hezbollah*, one of the world's leading experts on Hezbollah has written the essential guide to understanding the complexities and paradoxes of a group that remains entrenched at the heart of Middle East politics.

With unmatched clarity and authority, Augustus Richard Norton tells how Hezbollah developed, how it has evolved, and what direction it might take in the future. Far from being a one-dimensional terrorist group, Norton explains, Hezbollah is a "janus-faced" organization in the middle of an incomplete metamorphosis from extremism to mundane politics, an evolution whose outcome is far from certain. Beginning as a terrorist cat's-paw of Iran, Hezbollah has since transformed itself into an impressive political party with an admiring Lebanese constituency, but it has also insisted on maintaining the potent militia that forced Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000 after almost two decades of occupation.

The most accessible, informed, and balanced analysis of the group yet written, *Hezbollah* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the Middle East.

Hezbollah: A Short History Details

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From Reader Review Hezbollah: A Short History for online ebook

Noor says

Lebanese politics is in one convoluted pickle. While relatively concise, this book contextualises the historical backdrop with an appropriate level of detail. For a topic so vast, Norton breaks down the Lebanese political sphere into digestible chapters, starting before the civil war and culminating with the events following the Lebanon-Israel war of 2006.

Published in 2007, many additional turning points have occurred that might make this book seem outdated; nonetheless, the most recent edition, released in 2014, contains an updated preface and afterword that fills in some remaining gaps of recent history.

Lebanon's multifaceted community, even within individual sects, is well-depicted, allowing for the dissipation of stigma from those who wish to paint each of Lebanon's sects as monolithic. That Amal and Hezbollah, now allied, used to be at war with one another, or the capricious politician Walid Jumblatt (who allies himself with accordance to the political tide), are some listed examples that demonstrate this.

Norton documents the rise of the influence of Shia in Lebanon, who, prior to the civil war, were a mostly impoverished and sidelined community. The emergence of Hezbollah in 1982 is explained as resulting from a void in the social fabric that Amal failed to fill. Hezbollah transformed from a grassroots resistance paramilitary that initially rebuffed the political system, to a dominating force in Lebanese Parliament.

Hezbollah's influence in Lebanese government is not to be undermined; in fact, they have been able to operate with relative impunity. For example, the author illustrates how, through nuanced semantics, they have gotten away with refusing to disarm their military wing, as per the demands of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias to disband. They have also thwarted all attempts to bring those culpable of the Rafik Al-Hariri assassination to justice, most likely due to strong links that associate them with the attack. They influence their agendas through their power over a third of ministers in parliament. For example, in 2009, this third of ministers resigned over a UN tribunal investigating the perpetrators of the Rafik Al-Hariri murder, causing Lebanese Parliament to collapse and essentially usurping the rule of the then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri (son of the aforementioned).

Elsewhere, Norton does well to dispel the simplistic and reductionist diatribe often offered by Hezbollah's most ardent critics. He shows that, while Hezbollah may be a terrorist organisation, it is often not for the reasons stated by Israel and the USA, and that it is political allegiances that drives its actions more-so than any theocratic beliefs. At the same time, he also delves into the social and historical context which allowed for Hezbollah to gain such deference, particularly amongst the Shia community in Lebanon. Thus, I found it to be a balanced account.

The afterword brings to our attention one of the most pressing issues that Hezbollah faces today: the ramifications of its military involvement in the Syrian war from as early as 2012. This intervention, in fact, has been a seminal cause for the loss of much of Hezbollah's credibility within the Arab world over the past few years. Once revered as group that stood up to Israel and caused its withdrawal from occupied Lebanon in the year 2000, Hezbollah is now viewed with much suspicion, owing to its strong ties with Iran and the Assad regime in Syria. While retaining a relative bastion of support in southern Lebanon and in the dahiya, even Lebanese Shia are growing wearisome of Hezbollah's reckless endeavours in Syria, which have caused the deaths of hundreds of its fighters, in addition to fomenting sectarianism on both sides of the conflict, and

ultimately spilling the carnage onto Lebanese soil. Hezbollah may very well have sown the seeds for its own destruction through allowing itself to become a pawn and play into the regional and sectarian interests of its allies. The next few years will be critical.

Leo Africanus says

A well informed 'behind the scenes' analysis of an oft misunderstood organisation.

Jess says

People say it's sort of polemical, which is true, but I think it makes a good point about the way the US dismisses Hizb Allah as a monolithic organization for terrorism.

James says

A balanced and often nuanced examination of Lebanese political, sectarian, and international affairs that gave rise and support to Hezbollah first as a resistance organization and eventually as a viable political party. Like most things in Lebanon, surety of support domestically is a fluid thing and depends on how well the organization manages to walk the precipices that comprise the regional conflicts (Israel, Syria/Iraq), the rising sectarian tensions that underscore those conflicts, and the capricious involvements of regional and non-regional powers.

Christopher Grainger says

Incoherent and superficial. Lacking narrative or argument. Random information basically flung on the page. I learned a few things, but it was wrested from a sea of uninformative generalising mixed with uninformative detail.

Ted says

A great summation of the confusing and difficult political quagmire that is Lebanon. Also, a great piece of history in the author's conclusion as he does a tour of Mubarak in Egypt, the society of Muslim brothers, al-Assad in Syria, and more.

Josepha says

Very well written and captivating introduction to Hezbollah and the complex political and demographic landscape of Lebanon. Balanced, detailed, factual and objective. The author doesn't jump on the terrorist

bandwagon and manages to explain clearly what kind of organization Hezbollah really is.

Aylinalpustun says

I read the 2007 version of Hezbollah.

The book is no doubt very rich in content, however I had trouble following the "train of thought".

It jumped between events, the many many political and religious characters and between countries of the region.

For me it just did not "flow", maybe because the craftsmanship was too scholarly.

I will give it five for content but a poorer mark for "readability"

The book gives great insight into how complex Lebanon is as a country which cannot be reduced to Christian vs Muslim labels.

It digs into all the many different sects which play a major role in the politics of the region;

the main players of the Shi'a party, Hezbollah,

the never ending crisis;

the invasions;

the nonsense assassinations;

the deadlocks;

the neighbours' stakes which extend well beyond security;

the networks of corruption, smuggling and crime.

I believe the main theme is that Lebanon is a diverse, multicultural society. And it is precisely this diversity which defines its unique appeal and character.

Whether there will ever be peace in that area...with so many sects, countries with myriad stakes...I just hope there will be.

Bradley Farless says

This is a pretty good overview of the Hezbollah and the major turning points in the group's evolution. The afterword, which adds a bit to the narrative, is current up to August 2008.

Patrick Belair says

A very interesting read. I'll have to read it again to get all the info straight it's that good and complex !!

Robert says

A concise history of Hezbollah from its emergence in Lebanon in the mid '80's through the aftermath of its 2006 conflict with Israel. This book is valuable for the detailed information it provides on the organization - for the many character studies of Hezbollah's leaders, past and present - for the detailed analysis of its

political evolution, its changing philosophy and goals - and especially for its description of the major impact this organization has had on the social and political life of Lebanon. In fact, the book can be viewed as a succinct history of Lebanon during this period. The author gives a lucid exposition of that country's multi-confessional society and government - illuminates the chaotic events of those years - the "Cedar Revolution", Syria's involvement in assassinations, the rivalry between Amal and Hezbollah - clarifies these incidents, makes them understandable. His analysis is a powerful corrective to the usually Israeli-sympathetic, one-sided view of Lebanon and its people. Norton is refreshingly objective; his analysis of Hezbollah, non-judgmental. Rather than the stereotypical characterization of it as a "terrorist group sponsored by Iran", he provides a realistic assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, detailing those aspects that make it so attractive to many people in the mideast, as well as the qualities that inspire fear and loathing in others. Norton provides the information necessary to understand Hezbollah, information necessary to respond to it effectively.

University of Chicago Magazine says

Augustus Richard Norton, PhD'84
Author

From the author: "Drawing on extensive fieldwork and more than three decades of work on the Shi'i community of Lebanon, this volume offers an authoritative introduction to the history, culture, politics, strategy and dilemmas of Hezbollah, the Iran-supported party and military force which plays a dominant role in Lebanon while also confronting Israel and striving to thwart U.S. and western influence in large swaths of the Middle East. This edition, published in 2014, extensively expands the original 2007 edition."

Wissam Raji says

The book describes the evolution of Hezbollah since its establishment. It gives a historic background of the Shiites in Lebanon and how social and political factors led to the rise of Imam Mousa Sader and the initiation of Harakat al Mahroumeen and how the Iranian influence after the revolution was able to produce Hezbollah which started as a military ideological organization and then evolved after 2000 to a political organization besides keeping its military power. The book can be classified as a reference book of political history where the author avoids any political analysis and avoids undocumented assumptions.

Mr. says

Richard Norton has chronicled the origins and development of the Lebanese resistance party Hezbollah, which rose to prominence as one of the major political players during Israel's occupation of Lebanon during the 1980's. This account benefits from Norton's background in anthropology which enables him to analyze the cultural and ethnic complexity of Lebanon in his discussion. However, his historical background on the political history of Lebanon is somewhat meandering and also slim.

At the same time, this book clears up some misconceptions about Hezbollah. The first of which is that Hezbollah should be regarded as a terrorist group with similar aims of other Islamic fundamentalists

organizations like the Taliban and Islamic Jihad. Hezbollah is primarily a defensive organization, and it developed largely in response to Israel's aggression in Southern Lebanon. Norton also points out that the Western belief that Hezbollah was responsible for the death of over 30 U.S. Marines is false, and that that particular atrocity is probably the work of Shi militant agents working for Iran. However, Norton also clears up the misconception that Hezbollah is a "freedom-fighting" organization, and that its tactics are legal, and that its aims are accommodationist and pluralistic. Hezbollah remains an Islamic theocratic party committed to the destruction of Israel, and it has often chosen poor military tactics with regard to Israel's borders.

This is a worthwhile, though incomplete account of a rising political force in the Middle East.

Harold Citron says

It was OK.

The book lives up to its subtitle; 'a short history' of the Lebanese terrorist group.

This is indeed, a history book, recounting people and dates within the Lebanese Shi'a community, both religious and political, as well as the broader international Shi'a religious and political community.

Of significant interest is chapter 2, the rise of Hizballah, notably the group's cross pollinating from the seminaries of Iraq, and more critically, the 1979 Iranian revolution by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Hizballah's 1985 religious / political manifesto reads very similar in tone and topic to the ideology found in the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb. Additionally, the revolutionary zeal, refusing all compromise and cooperation with those not holding the same ideology highlights the real concern of the group.

Several of the author's points are found wanting. Most of the cause and effect of Hizballah's view is superficial. Much of the blame is placed on Israel and its 1982 invasion. However, to accomplish this, the author pushes aside broader internal Lebanese history, including the multiple civil wars that took place during the 20th century, and the subsequent 25 year occupation by Syria. It also minimizes the intense competition for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In addition, while Norton builds his book towards the 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel, that chapter falls flat, both in terms of content, and even more critically, analysis. Several flaws are exposed, notably, Norton's claims of equal name calling by Hizballah and Israel swapping the term of each as a cancer. What Norton misses, is his own writing from chapter 2, noting Hizballah's political extremism coupled with its use of extreme violence. One could make the same argument how Hitler's brown shirts were misunderstood and focus on the Nazi's attempts to improve the political and economic lives of Germans, while ignoring Hitler & Co's, deep and extreme dehumanizing of minorities, including Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, and homosexuals as well as the disabled (both physically and mentally). Hizballah's demand that all fall under the banner of the rule of political Islam, especially in the vein of Iran's mujtahids coupled with its call for the eradication of Israel and its Jewish inhabitants would garner closer observation and critique rather than a he said / he said, argument.

Since I read the first edition, the version misses out on many post 2006 critical factors - notably the 2008 intra-Lebanese fight over attempting to rein in Hizballah, and of course, the group's participation in the larger and bloodier Syrian civil war. Within Lebanon, Hizballah's lock on power has led to political gridlock that has resulted in a breakdown in basic services, including garbage collection (a long-running story in 2017 /

2018).

One other critical discussion that should be addressed, is the absence of any question of peace between Israel and Hizballah. It is nearly 20 years since Israel unilaterally left Lebanon. Yet, rather than looking for ways to create a calm and peaceful border, dare one say, with cross-border economic benefits, we see Hizballah continuing to push military adventurism, growing its military capacity, especially in ground-to-ground missiles, likely leading to another war between the organization and Israel. With Iran looking to extend its influence, and look for additional borders to launch attacks against Israel, this issue has growing significance.
