

Militant Islam and jihad in Lebanon

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There are two main forms of militant Islam in Lebanon. The first, embodied in the Shia militia group Hezbollah (the 'Party of God'), is highly integrated socially and politically, at grassroots and regional levels. The second, embodied by Sunni transnational radical networks, operates covertly, mainly among disfranchised segments of Lebanese society.

Lebanon today can appear as the focal point of two axes of crisis that have shaped the main features of radical Islam globally: Iran; and Afghanistan-Pakistan. Security and peacebuilding interventions in Lebanon need to bear in mind the different paths through which these two expressions of Islamist radicalism have evolved. In a sectarian society such as Lebanon, militant Islam – which essentially prioritises Divine Law over collective Muslim affiliation, in contradiction to traditional Islam – has had a very different impact among Sunni and Shia constituencies.

Radical Shia: Hezbollah, Syria and Iran

In a polity where Shia have felt both socially despised and politically marginalised, radical Islam has helped many Lebanese to enhance their sectarian collective identity in relation to other Lebanese sects.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 boosted Shia communal empowerment in southern Lebanon, the Beqaa Valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut. Key figures in the new Iranian leadership had spent many years in the highly politicised Lebanon of the 1970s. One month after Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran*) set up the first training camp for the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon in the Beqaa. Future Hezbollah leaders were enlisted at the camp, such as Abbas al-Musâwi, its first Secretary-General, and Hassan Nasrallah, al-Musâwi's close friend and replacement after the former's assassination by the Israeli army in 1992.

Hezbollah was born through its military wing in 1982, before its existence was publicly acknowledged in 1985. In 1983 it claimed responsibility for terrorist action against the Multinational Force – deployed to oversee the withdrawal of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and comprising American as well as British, French and Italian troops. This chronology points to the organic relationship between the hard line of the Iranian regime and the military institutions of the 'Party of God'. Subsequently, Hezbollah was able to supplant other leftist and Palestinian organizations in Lebanon and establish itself as the only able player to fight Israeli occupation.

The regional alliance built at the beginning of the 1980s between Hafez al-Assad's Syria and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran meant that Hezbollah came to be seen by Damascus as a useful tool both to frustrate Western influence in Lebanon and to force Israel to accept Syria's role as a legitimate regional power. From the mid-1980s the Syrian regime enabled Hezbollah to reinforce its military capacity, while at the same time trying to convince the West that only Syria had influence over it.

In post-war Lebanon Hezbollah successfully consolidated its position, both within its confessional constituency and abroad. From 1992 the Party decided to take part in legislative and municipal elections, establishing through the polls a large parliamentary group and control over two-thirds of predominantly Shia municipalities. It masked its jihadist agenda to the benefit of a more widely acceptable 'resistance' rhetoric, to justify its armed struggle against Israeli occupation in the south. This allowed it to remain the only heavily armed group in post-war Lebanon, contrary to the terms of the Taif Agreement that ended the civil war.

Hezbollah steadily expanded its influence within the state intelligence apparatus and the army. After the Qana

massacre by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) during Operation Grapes of Wrath in April 1996, the Israeli-Lebanese Ceasefire Understanding that sought to regulate ongoing fighting between Israel and Hezbollah in south Lebanon provided the Party with international recognition.

Radical Sunni: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the *Ummah*

Whilst the dynamic Shia revolution in Tehran projected its influence towards the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, most radical Sunni Islamists invested their hopes in a more remote jihad in Afghanistan. In countries such as Egypt or Syria, Islamic Sunni radicalism was denied access to power because it lacked support among the most influential parts of society. In Egypt, Islamist Sunnis who followed Sayyid Qotb's radical stance condemned their fellow Muslims for not abiding to their own vision of the Divine Law. In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood, who fought Hafez al-Assad's regime, was not able to control more radical groups, while the Sunni Muslim community's fear of civil war eclipsed its hostility to the regime.

The Sunni ideology that developed in Peshawar in Pakistan in the late 1980s, as theorized by the jihadist Palestinian Sheikh Abdallah Azzam, promoted a privatized jihad: in the absence of 'true Muslim states', jihad becomes a personal duty (*fard 'ayn*) as opposed to a collective obligation (*fard kifâya*) related to an official authority. It also saw jihad as democratized: rather than demonstrating a long scholastic religious curriculum, 'true Muslims' need only believe in the 'holy fight for the sake of God'. Finally, it demonized the international system and regional institutions, asserting that no positive solution could arise from them.

In viewing jihad as an end in itself, this ideology relieves militants of the need to access state power and frees their religious commitment from strategic or territorial belonging. Indeed, isolation from politics is proof of religious purity. The true believer is supposed to act on behalf of the *Ummah* – the global Muslim community – an ideological construct that is remote from many Muslim societies.

Jihad in Lebanon

Jihadist ideology evolved in Lebanon in the 1990s among disenfranchised groups in places such as Palestinian camps, popular districts in Sidon, Beirut or Tripoli, or in remote villages in Akkar or Western Beqaa. In the Palestinian camp of Ayn al-Helweh, radical preachers undertook to resocialise impoverished youth deprived of professional prospects in post-war Lebanon. Ayn al-Helweh became a haven for foreign jihadist militants who had fled their respective countries, and some al-Qaeda representatives also established themselves there from the mid-1990s.

Due to its Sunni demographic importance, northern Lebanon became a communal centre for Sunni militants and religious Sunni clerics in the 1990s, comparable to Mount Lebanon for Christian Maronites and south Lebanon for the Shia. The northern city of Tripoli had been the scene of armed resistance against Syrian forces in the 1980s. In this Sunni demographic hub – historically linked to Syrian cities such as Homs or Aleppo – Salafi preachers urged their followers to remain detached from politics, which they considered illegitimate. Conversely, Lebanon's main civil Sunni leader, Rafiq al-Hariri, was prohibited from establishing a political Sunni constituency in Tripoli, which was closely managed by Syrian intelligence services.

In December 1999, a violent clash in northern Lebanon between a Salafi jihadist guerrilla movement and the Lebanese Army left 35 dead. Lebanon's official resistance ideology at that time, propagated by Hezbollah and backed by President Lahoud, welcomed 'good' jihad – resistance against Israeli occupation – but denigrated other 'bad' versions as essentially self-destructive. Sunni jihadist militants took the opposite view: that Hezbollah was hijacking the southern Lebanese front for its own communal and regional purposes, leaving Sunni jihadists no other choice but to defend the *Ummah* against its foes, as was happening in places like Bosnia, Chechnya or Afghanistan.

Hezbollah's resilience

Hezbollah's regional and national reputation has ensured its survival. Following the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Hezbollah defied challenges to its military status and managed to turn the controversial Chebaa Farms – a tiny territory still claimed by Lebanon but occupied by Israel – into a national Lebanese cause to justify continued armed struggle. Hezbollah was also able to resist huge demonstrations condemning Syria's role in Lebanon in the wake of Hariri's assassination in February 2005.

In summer 2006, Israel launched a major attack on Lebanon following a Hezbollah operation across the international border. The Party refused to bear any responsibility for provoking the Israeli reaction, arguing that Tel Aviv had already been planning the invasion. The scale of destruction caused by the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon provided the Hezbollah leadership with an additional justification to maintain the Party's military capacity.

Hezbollah also managed to circumvent UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that sanctioned the Israeli withdrawal and the reinforcement of UN forces in the south, replenishing its stock of rockets and missiles in areas located south of the Litani River.

Sunni dissonance

After Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 the new anti-Syrian and pro-Western Sunni leadership – the main component of the 14 March coalition – sought the cooperation of quietist Salafi clerics in northern Lebanon in order to protect the cohesiveness of the Sunni community. Quietist control over the Salafi corpus was intended to legitimize the rule of the civil Sunni representatives – MP Fouad Siniora and Rafiq's heir Saad al-Hariri.

But pro-Syrian and pro-Hezbollah Sunni Islamists stressed the lack of Islamic legitimacy of Hariri's leadership, accusing it of furthering Western designs by implementing UNSC resolutions in the Middle East. In yet another attempt to control Sunni Islam, al-Qaeda's Egyptian ideologue Ayman al-Zawahiri issued two statements on 20 December 2006 and 13 February 2007 urging Lebanese Muslims to oppose UNSC Resolution 1701.

In November 2006, jihadist fighters from Iraq established the *Fatah al-Islam* radical Sunni Islamist group in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian camp in northern Lebanon. Its leader, Shaker al-Absi, a Palestinian from Syria, recruited volunteers to support his cause to 'liberate Palestine by fighting the Western Zionist Crusaders'. In an attempt to win over Hezbollah and its allies, Shaker al-Absi stressed his resistance credentials, focusing on opposition to UNSC resolution 1559 which called for the disarmament of all militias on Lebanese soil.

Fatah al-Islam was involved in several anti-civilian terrorist attacks and also targeted the UN presence in Lebanon. In May 2007 Lebanese Internal Security Forces (FSI), who are closely aligned to the 14 March coalition, launched an attack against *Fatah al-Islam*. This triggered a war between the group and the Lebanese Army in Nahr al-Bared, which lasted more than three months and resulted in 163 military and 222 jihadist casualties.

Divisions among Islamist militant groups, regardless of nationalist or religious affiliations, continue to fuel ongoing political violence between 8 and 14 March alliances. On 7 May 2008 Hezbollah turned its guns on 14 March Sunni institutions in Beirut, under the guise of protecting its military activities against the Israeli army.

Sunni Salafi clerics reacted by setting their followers against the 'Shia Iranian threat'. The civil Sunni leadership in Lebanon, whether opposed to the Syrian regime (Saad al-Hariri) or close to it (Najib Mikati), faces a dilemma. It is weakened from within each time a Lebanese Sunni jihadist movement canvasses support in the Sunni constituency, which involves prioritising Divine Law over community politics; but in order to demonstrate its Islamic legitimacy, it also has to acknowledge the importance of Sunni religious appeals.

Conclusion

Hezbollah and its Sunni Islamist allies are backing the Syrian regime – for both strategic and ideological purposes, including the need for a continuing supply of arms in the name of regional resistance. At the same time, they cannot risk military action in northern Lebanon to curb Sunni militants helping Syrian insurgents there, as such a move could unleash internal war between Shia and Sunni factions.

The 14 March Alliance is hoping for the fall of the regime in Damascus, which might enhance its own position within the Lebanese political system. But its main Sunni component also fears proliferation of Sunni Islamist militias should the situation in Syria continue to deteriorate.

For Iranian leaders, support for the Syrian regime is necessary in order to maximise Hezbollah's role as a deterrent in south Lebanon. According to such views, the Shia organisation should be able to act both against the UN peacekeeping force and the Israeli army in the event of a military attack on Iranian nuclear installations. Against this background, Jihadi Sunni networks could exploit regional turmoil by continuing to target UN peacekeepers in the south.

So what is needed to consolidate peace and security? A direct channel of communication between Lebanon's main national Sunni and Shia leaders – starting with Saad al-Hariri (14 March) and Hassan Nasrallah (8 March/Hezbollah) – would help to protect peace in Lebanon. Hezbollah is currently politically ascendant, both inside and outside state institutions, and the Shia organisation should be encouraged to resist outside pressures that might embroil Lebanon in a new cycle of destruction.

By the same token, Lebanon could also welcome Syrian refugees providing they do not threaten public security, and Lebanon's security apparatus could stop handing over Syrian dissidents to the Syrian state – a practice that leads many to question Beirut's neutrality. Sunni Lebanese militants could also restrict their humanitarian commitment towards their Syrian comrades. Increased UN interest in internal peace and stability in Lebanon could raise the profile and significance among Lebanese citizens of national perceptions of regional developments.

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