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The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God

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Introduction

Hezbollah was formed in 1985 during a period of intense political crisis characterized by the Lebanese Civil War and the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982. It was established as an Islamic political group, based in Shiʿa-populated areas in Lebanon, with an emphasis on armed resistance against Israel. Over the years, Hezbollah came to be seen by many—in both Lebanon and the wider Arab world—as the only viable force able to resist Western and Israeli encroachment on the country. Following the various wars of aggression on Lebanon by Israel, most notably the 2006 invasion, Hezbollah was celebrated for its apparently well-disciplined military and propaganda capabilities, and its ability to effectively resist the Israeli state. Portraits of Hassan Nasrallah, the movement's General Secretary, could be seen in demonstrations in the major capitals of the Arab world. Even in the Gulf Arab states, where ruling regimes have traditionally expressed hostility towards Hezbollah, following the 2006 Lebanon War, prominent individuals such as the wealthy Kuwaiti businessman Nasser al-Kharafi have publicly praised the group (Farid 2001 and Wehbe, B. 2011).[1]

In addition to its armed capabilities and standing in the Arab world, Hezbollah has become one of the most important political actors in Lebanon, holding a large parliamentary bloc of no less than ten deputies since the first post-Civil War legislative elections in 1992, and a minimum of two ministers in every Lebanese government since 2005. Hezbollah has confirmed its popularity by winning many municipal elections and now controls the most significant Shiʿa-populated areas in the South of Greater Beirut, South Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. The organization is a mass movement, with an extensive network of charities and other institutions that meet needs and provide services for the population. Indeed, Hezbollah's social and political influence among the Shiʿa population is much more significant than its ally Amal.

Hezbollah's ideology is a Shiʿa-inspired version of an Islamic political movement. Islamic political movements are found across the world—from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, the *Jamaat-i-Islami*, the

multiple Ulema associations, and the movement of Iranian Ayatollahs. In all these cases, Islam is erected as an absolute principle to which all demands, struggles and reforms are to be subordinated. The common denominator of all of these Islamic political movements is "Islamic fundamentalism," according to Gilbert Achcar, "in other words a will to return to Islam, the aspiration of an Islamic Utopia that is not limited to one Nation and that should encompass all the Muslim peoples, if not the whole world" (Achcar 1981: 2). This definition can be seen reflected in the words of Muhammad Khairat al-Shater, the former Deputy Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood:

> The Ikhwan are working to restore Islam in its all-encompassing conception to the lives of people, and they believe that this will only come about through the strong society. Thus the mission is clear: restoring Islam in its all-encompassing conception; subjugating people to God; instituting the religion of God; the Islamization of life, empowering of God's religion; establishing the Nahda of the Ummah on the basis of Islam […] Thus we've learned [to start with] building the Muslim individual, the Muslim family, the Muslim society, the Islamic government, the global Islamic state.
>
> (Amal al-Ummah TV 2011; Bargisi, Mohameed and Pieretti 2012)

Religious fundamentalism is not limited to the Islamic religion, and we can see common elements among various religious fundamentalist movements throughout the world. It is important to note, however, that despite the call to return to an earlier age, fundamentalisms should not be seen as fossilized elements from the past. While they may employ symbols and narratives from earlier periods, fundamentalisms are alive, dynamic and representative of major contemporary trends, designed to satisfy cultural needs (Marty 1988: 17). Their emergence must thus be fully situated in the political, economic and social context of the contemporary period.

In the Middle East, the rise of both Shiʿa and Sunni Islamic political movements took place in a period—through the 1980s and 1990s—in which the left and nationalist forces were considerably weakened for various reasons: setbacks for Arab nationalism; US support to the Saudi Kingdom, which, in turn, helped foster various Sunni Islamic fundamentalist movements, most particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, as a

counterweight against Arab nationalism; regional events starting with the 1973 oil boom that allowed Gulf monarchies to increase their regional funding; weakening of the progressive forces in the early 1970s, with the intense repression by Arab regimes such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq that abandoned their previous radical social policies and increasingly adopted a rapprochement with the Western countries and the monarchies of the Gulf; weakening of Palestinian and Arab national progressive forces by the multiple attacks against the Palestinian national movement by both the Arab states and Israel; and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.

This was the regional context in which Hezbollah was formed. Hezbollah's popular social base among the Lebanese Shiʿa population, which was first concentrated among the relatively poor Shiʿa and some petit bourgeois components, was then extended to encompass all social classes. Today, the party has significant political and social support among a growing Shiʿa bourgeoisie, located both inside the country and in the diaspora.

Given this process of integration into the political system, and the extending social base of the organization, a range of questions can be raised about the nature of Hezbollah as a political party and as a social force. How can we explain the politics and practice of Hezbollah in relation to the political economy of Lebanon and the country's Shiʿa population? How has it been able to build such a widespread base of support amongst Shiʿa in Lebanon? What is the nature of the relationship between Hezbollah and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)? What role do Hezbollah's military capacities play in its hegemony over Lebanese Shiʿa populations? How can we explain the political and social evolution of Hezbollah?

The answers to these questions are significant both in terms of the insights they offer into Political Islam as an ideology, as well as their implications for understanding the broader political economy of Lebanon and the Middle East.

The objective of this work is to understand Hezbollah through a historical and materialist understanding of Political Islam, tracking the evolution of the organization's structures and relationship within the wider political system, and locating this evolution within the changing class and state formation in Lebanon. In this manner, this book moves the debate beyond the typical focus on ideology as a means of identifying

and understanding the policies of Islamic political movements. The book argues that while the "Islamic way of life" may be the professed goal of Hezbollah, its actual practices can best be understood as harmonious with—and reflective of—the nature of the capitalist environment in which it operates.

In addition to helping conceive the evolution of Hezbollah and its place within the contemporary politics of the region, we seek to counteract a prevailing Orientalism within much of the study of the Arab world. This Orientalism tends to hold up the region as being beyond the grasp of social scientific frameworks typically employed to understand processes of political change elsewhere in the world. In this regard, this book concurs with the conclusion of Arab writer, Aziz al-Azmeh, that: "the understanding of Islamic political phenomena requires the normal equipment of the social and human sciences, not their denial" (Al-Azmeh 2003: 39).

Structure of the book

This book is organized into seven main chapters.

Chapter 1 looks at the origins of sectarianism in Lebanon from the time of the French Mandate (1920) through to the end of the Civil War (1975–1990). It traces the position of different sectarian communities over this period, and analyses the impact of the Civil War on the political and social conditions of the Shiʿa population in particular. This period coincides with the establishment of Hezbollah in 1985, and provides important insights into its subsequent evolution. Throughout this chapter, sectarianism is viewed as a tool used by the Lebanese bourgeoisie to intervene ideologically in the class struggle, strengthening its control of the popular classes and keeping them subordinated to their sectarian leaders (Amel 1986: 323, 326–27). Sectarianism needs to be seen as constitutive, and reinforcing, of current forms of state and class power. Along these lines, we consider sectarianism as a product of modern times and not a tradition from time immemorial. As the Lebanese–Palestinian scholar Ussama Makdissi has noted, "sectarianism is a modern story, and for those intimately involved in its unfolding, it is the modern story—a story that has and that continues to define and dominate their lives" (Makdissi 2000: 2).

Chapter 2 studies the evolution of the Lebanese political economy from 1990 to 2016, the period covering the end of the Civil War until today. It focuses in particular on the Shiʿa population, whose political and socio-economic status was significantly lower than other Lebanese religious sects at the end of the Lebanese Civil War and has since changed considerably. We will see the changes in the position and stratification of the Shiʿa population as a result of neoliberal policies, and the connection of these changes to the development of Hezbollah as a political organization. These neoliberal policies led to the deepening of the historically constituted characteristics of the Lebanese economy: a finance and service oriented development model in which social inequalities and regional disparities were very pronounced. The chapter discusses the consequences of these characteristics as they developed through the neoliberal period, and the subsequent political orientation of the Hezbollah towards both economic policy and the sectarian political system. It concludes with a survey of three specific case studies in areas where the Hezbollah has significant influence and control: (1) the management of urban policy in the municipal neighborhood of Ghobeyri; (2) attitudes towards rent-control laws in Beirut; and (3) agricultural policy in the Bekaa Valley.

Having established these developmental trends over the neoliberal period, Chapter 3 examines their implications for Lebanon's class structure, in particular amongst the Shiʿa population. The chapter demonstrates that the neoliberal period saw the emergence of a new Shiʿa bourgeoisie within various sectors of the economy, and the resulting re-balancing of sectarian power across the country. This process, however, was not evenly distributed, and many Shiʿa remain marginalized throughout significant urban and rural areas. The chapter then turns to a concrete mapping of the new Shiʿa bourgeoisie through an analysis of the largest Shiʿa business groups and their relationship to the Hezbollah itself. These factors are then brought together in an analysis of the changing social base of the party.

Chapter 4 traces the growth of the party as a mass movement and attempts to understand how the party has managed to achieve a position of hegemony in Shiʿa areas, despite the tensions arising from the nature of its social base. This chapter examines in detail the internal organization of the party and its large network of institutions. The latter has played an important role in diffusing the ideas of the party

through the Shiʿa community and extending its hegemony through the provision of much-needed services. The chapter analyses how the success of Hezbollah's network of organizations, managed mostly from Hezbollah's Executive Council, has allowed it to strengthen its position amongst the population, focusing in particular on four critical sectors: (1) social support, (2) religious institutions, (3) media and culture, and (4) education/youth work. The chapter explores the ideological content of Hezbollah's work in these sectors, emphasizing the role that two concepts—*hāla islāmiyya* (the Islamic milieu) and *iltizām* (personal commitment)—have played in building allegiance to the party. It also analyzes the distinctively gendered characteristic of these ideological underpinnings of the party's work.

Chapter 5 turns to Hezbollah's orientation towards the Lebanese labor movement. Beginning with the history of the trade union movement through the Civil War period, the chapter examines the various social and worker protests that continued through the 1990s and into the contemporary period. It shows how the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (known as the CGTL), the main trade union confederation, was progressively weakened by the main bourgeois and sectarian political forces and subordinated to their interests, because they feared the CGTL's capacity for mobilization. In this regard, Hezbollah's behavior towards various economic demands, strikes and the organization of labor is analyzed. The chapter thus provides a link between the political economy analyses provided in Chapters 2 and 3, and the socio-political analysis of Chapter 4. In this manner, it offers an important illustration of the tensions that have arisen in the organization as a result of its claim to represent the struggles and needs of the poorer ranks of the Shiʿa population, concomitant with its changing social base.

Chapter 6 analyzes a crucial aspect of Hezbollah's organization: its military activities and armed apparatus. The chapter begins by examining Hezbollah's military struggle against the State of Israel, followed by its coercive activities towards other Lebanese actors during the Lebanese Civil War and, later, in 2008, when it led military operations against the March 14 coalition. Hezbollah's use of its military capacities to guarantee its power and security in the region is also analyzed.

Chapter 7 looks at Hezbollah's behavior regarding the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, which started in December 2010 and January 2011 with the overthrow of dictators

in Tunisia and Egypt and which are still unfolding. This chapter will particularly examine Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, and the ways its involvement has exacerbated sectarianism within Lebanon. We will also see the consequences of the Syrian uprising on the relationship between Hezbollah, Iran and the Palestinian Islamic movement Hamas. The concluding chapter brings together the overall analysis in both a theoretical and political sense.

A Note on Sources

This study draws upon a wide range of academic writing in the fields of politics, political economy, sociology and development theory. As the following chapter will outline in greater detail, its basic theoretical framework is based upon Marxian and other critical analyses of Lebanon and the Middle East. In addition to the academic literature, research for the book has involved a detailed textual analysis of many books, newspaper articles, reports, political pamphlets and written interviews of key political personalities in Lebanon. My fluency in English, Arabic and French has enabled me to conduct interviews and consult primary material in the language of the sources and documentation used to establish the findings of this book.

In addition to the insights gained from these written materials, I spent over twelve months in Lebanon conducting fieldwork, from August 2011 to September 2012. During this time I was able to travel extensively throughout Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and the southern and the northern regions of the country. This research period, which included wide-ranging consultation with activists, trade unionists, workers, students, members of political parties and academics was a valuable complement to my previous experience in the country. More than forty people were interviewed in Lebanon (in Arabic, French and English depending on the circumstances), and I also learnt from countless "off the record" discussions with individuals and groups involved in Lebanon's political scene. Moreover, my time in Lebanon allowed me the opportunity to consult various libraries, archives and research centers.

Given the political environment of Lebanon, this fieldwork was faced with numerous obstacles. First, accessing Hezbollah officials has become more difficult than in the past because of internal security measures within the party and the secrecy of the organization. I nevertheless

obtained some interviews with Hezbollah-affiliated intellectuals and party representatives in the organization's mass fronts and research institutes. I also met with rank-and-file sympathizers and members of the party. Throughout this process, I had to take into account the highly sectarian atmosphere of the country when assessing the information I gathered. My long involvement with and knowledge of Lebanese politics helped me assess the more ideological and biased claims made by some sources.

Finally, my own personal vantage point contributed greatly towards the writing and framing of this book. I am a Swiss citizen of Syrian origin. I have spent long periods in Syria and in the region since my childhood. My family and close friends have been affected by the ongoing events in Syria, and a large number of them have had to leave the city of Aleppo (where we are originally from), for other safer parts of the country or to neighboring states. My interest in Hezbollah long pre-dates the party's involvement in Syria, but the events of recent years have helped me to corroborate and refine many of the arguments made below.

1

Sectarianism and the Lebanese Political Economy

Hezbollah's Origins

In September 1920, after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the country of Greater Lebanon was established under the authority of the French Mandate. The territory of the new country included Mount Lebanon, which had gained a semi-autonomous status under Ottoman rule through the interferences of European foreign powers in 1860, and also the regions of the Bekaa Valley, *Jabal ʿAmil* (South Lebanon), Akkar, Beirut, Saida and Tripoli. These latter regions had been, until 1918, part of the two Ottoman *wilāya* of Damascus and Beirut. At this time, Lebanon was composed of seventeen religious groupings that each had particular geographical and social characteristics.[1] Christians, who composed 55 percent of the total population of the country in 1920, were mainly concentrated in Mount Lebanon. The Christian population was divided into various sects, the main ones being Maronite, Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic.[2] Muslims—Sunni, Shiʿa, Druze and Ismaeli—were a majority in the new territories incorporated into Greater Lebanon: the Bekaa Valley, *Jabal ʿAmil*, Akkar, Beirut, Saida and Tripoli. In these regions, Muslims formed a majority of 200,814 against 117,332 Christians (Picaudou 1989: 57).[3]

The French Mandate in Lebanon and Syria was a means of furthering France's political and economic interests in the Middle East (Khoury 1981: 452; Makdissi 1996). Lebanon and Syria were controlled by two sets of French companies called "*Intérêts communs*" and "*Sociétés concessionaires*." These two companies had a monopoly over public services and controlled the main sectors of the economy. Lebanon's role as an economic intermediary towards Syria was also confirmed during French occupation (Owen 1976: 24), with Beirut continuing to act as the main

port for the Syrian interior (Traboulsi 2007: 91). Beirut's role as a regional warehouse was strengthened by the Mandate's policy of reserving the large Syrian market for Beirut merchants in exchange for higher tariff protection for agriculture and industry, which was more important to the Syrian hinterland economy (Gates 1989: 14).

These projects consolidated the Christian bourgeoisie's power linked to European capitalism and the tertiary sector—notably banking and finance (Gates 1989: 16). The large landowners of the periphery, who constituted the local notabilities, also benefited from the French Mandate. Projects of agricultural development and government aid in the Akkar, the South and the Bekaa principally benefited the large landowners supported by French governors (Traboulsi 2007: 92).

A principal means through which France dominated the country was the encouragement of sectarian patterns of rule, particularly its strategic alliance with the Maronite population. Under French control, elections for a representative council took place in 1922 followed four years later by elections for the Chamber of Deputies. These two elections were conducted along sectarian lines and were boycotted by the country's Sunni Muslim population, who were generally opposed to the partition of Syria and the formation of Greater Lebanon.[4] Sunni Muslim leaders complained that 83 percent of the fiscal revenues came from territories with a Muslim majority, in which 380,000 people lived, while 80 percent of those revenues were spent in Mount Lebanon that held only 330,000 inhabitants (Traboulsi 2007: 81). Furthermore, in the new Greater Lebanon under French rule, Maronite Christians from Mount Lebanon constituted a majority of state politicians and civil servants, as opposed to the previous *wilāyat* of Beirut, which were mainly Sunni Muslims and Greek Orthodox (Traboulsi 2007: 93).

Within the uneven political economy dominated by French capitalism, the Maronite population played a principal intermediary role involving themselves in international import and foreign trade, finance and the representation of European firms. For this reason, the announcement of the French Mandate was supported by the Maronite Patriarch Huwayk, and those sections of the Maronite population linked to (and dependent upon) French rule. Other smaller Christian denominations were less inclined to the Mandate, partly because they were more closely linked to regional trade networks—especially trade between Beirut and Damascus.[5]