



# A HOT SUMMER IN THE GALILEE:

## Reflections On the Israeli-Hezbollah Confrontation of 2006

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*by Don Matthews*

This summer I stood with a group of American university professors on a mountain in Israel overlooking the border with Lebanon. Through the telephoto lenses of our cameras, we could see plainly Hezbollah's yellow flags and installations on the Lebanese side. An Israeli Defense Forces spokesman—a New York-born major in the reserves—had told us earlier in the day of the estimated ten thousand rockets in Hezbollah's possession and the hundreds of Iranian military personnel advising the organization. He added complainingly that south Lebanon was the only place in the world where the Bush Doctrine had not been applied. He was referring, of course, to President Bush's dictum that the United States would not tolerate states harboring terrorist organizations.

The major can now stop carping and begin reconsidering his assumptions. Only two weeks after his comments in the hills of the Galilee, the Israeli army—with U.S. material and diplomatic support—launched a military operation intended to destroy Hezbollah in Lebanon. A month later it became clear that the Israeli-American effort had failed. That failure reveals much about the prospects of states with top-echelon militaries achieving political goals against the will of highly motivated non-state organizations. For me, as an historian, the Israeli-

Hezbollah confrontation of the past summer illustrates some of the profound shifts in power and developments in political identity that have taken place in the Middle East over the course of a century.

The events precipitating the Israeli operation occurred on July 12. Hezbollah fighters rocketed the northern Israeli town of Shlomi and attacked Israeli army units on the border, seizing two Israeli soldiers who were taken back into Lebanon to be exchanged for Lebanese and Palestinians held by Israel. The Israeli government, determined to punish Hezbollah, responded by invading south Lebanon, blockading the country's coast, and bombing the interior, including parts of Beirut. Hezbollah's fighters were remarkable not only for the casualties and damage they inflicted on the Israeli military, but also for their ability to take the war to the civilians of northern Israel by raining down on them some 3,700 rockets.

By the time a ceasefire finally ended thirty-four days of fighting, the campaign had cost Israel nearly five billion dollars and 159 lives, among them 43 civilians. Israel still had not recovered its two abducted soldiers. The United States has paid the price of the operation with a sharper decline in its already low prestige in the Arab world. Many Lebanese blame the U.S. as much as Israel for more than nine billion dollars in damage to their infrastructure and homes, the displacement of nine hundred thousand Lebanese citizens, and the deaths of approximately a thousand, some of whom were victims of cluster munitions fired into civilian areas. Hezbollah, however, was not a victim of the operation. The organization emerged intact and, by some measures, even strengthened.

Hezbollah's ability to deny Israel victory represents in part the rapid diffusion of the technology of violence during the last century. In 1898, an Anglo-Egyptian military in the Sudan confronted an army loyal to the Mahdi, leader of an Islamic militant movement. In a five-hour battle, British-armed and led forces slaughtered some twenty thousand of the Mahdi's fighters but suffered only forty-eight fatalities. The huge disparity in casualties was due in no small measure to the

British army's artillery, Lee-Enfield carbines, and especially, the water-cooled, rapid-fire Maxim guns. Winston Churchill, who participated in the battle as a young cavalry sergeant, called it "the most signal triumph ever gained by the arms of science over barbarians." By the time of his death in 1965, Churchill had witnessed guerrilla movements in the decolonizing world obtaining "the arms of science" and using them to make the cost of empire prohibitive. As computers later did, automatic weapons had become smaller, faster, and cheaper. It is no exaggeration to say that now, in many parts of the world, Kalashnikovs are more easily acquired than microwave ovens.

Hezbollah's ability to take advantage of the proliferation of cheap and effective weapons has not been confined to firearms, but has extended also to rocket technology. The Katyusha rockets that the organization directed against the population of Israel's northern cities are by origin Soviet weapons, developed in the 1940s. They are so-called "artillery rockets," having no guidance systems and designed to be fired in volleys of several dozen from truck-mounted launchers. They can also be fired singly by one or two technicians, transported on a donkey, and easily hidden. By now, millions of Katyushas have been produced, and they are cheaply copied and modified by a number of countries including Iran, which supplies them to Hezbollah.

Although the Katyusha is cheap and inaccurate, neither Israel nor any other country has yet developed an effective defense against it. Hezbollah technicians crudely enhanced the killing capacity of many of the rockets launched against Israeli civilians this summer by filling the warheads with ball bearings. But over a hundred of the rockets bore Chinese-manufactured cluster munitions. This was the first documented use of that particular type of cluster bomb anywhere in the world, and it indicated the rapid diffusion of another weapons technology. Budget-priced, short-range ballistic missiles like the Katyusha are also likely to become much more accurate in the near future because of the falling prices of commercial satellite

navigation and high-speed computing systems used in missile guidance.

Another reason that Hezbollah attracts the attention of the historian is that the organization seems to represent a new level of development in popular movements. Many political parties in modern history have created militias and paramilitaries, but the Hezbollah units that Israeli forces confronted in south Lebanon displayed the discipline and professionalism of a regular army, although a small one. Hezbollah media display images of fighters in crisp camouflage uniforms, helmets, and body armor. This summer, small Hezbollah units expertly employed night-vision equipment and anti-tank weapons—apparently European made—to inflict losses upon Israel’s infantry and armor, despite the latter’s monopoly over the use of fighter-attack jets, helicopters, and drones. The Israelis found that Hezbollah’s underground bunkers and tunnels, constructed with the aid of Iranian engineers, were resistant to air assault and were outfitted with electrical generators and air conditioning.

The professionalism, organization, and technological expertise that characterize Hezbollah’s military wing extend also to the movement’s other institutions. In addition to its four radio stations, Hezbollah’s al-Manar television station delivers news, political commentary, entertainment, and commercials to an estimated ten million viewers. Its programming, produced in state-of-the art studios, has included Hebrew-language propaganda directed at Israeli audiences and many feet of film recording successful attacks against Israeli forces in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Programming of the latter sort has contributed to the undermining of the image of invincibility that the Israeli Defense Forces enjoyed in the past.

Hezbollah’s educational unit operates thousands of schools, several technical institutes, and provides scholarships to tens of thousands of students. The organization’s health unit runs six hospitals, a dozen mobile dispensaries, and ten dental clinics, all of which are integrated into Hezbollah social welfare services for poor families, orphans, and students. The

organization's Holy Struggle Construction Foundation has supplied Lebanon's Shi'ite communities with electrical power generators, artesian wells, and reservoirs for drinking water. It also has developed roads and irrigation systems for farmers in south Lebanon, which complement Hezbollah's agricultural credit institutions. Hezbollah opens its facilities to non-Shi'ites and enjoys a reputation of being free of corruption. Especially after the fighting ended this summer and the reconstruction process began, it became evident that the Lebanese government cannot compete with Hezbollah in providing services to Lebanon's disadvantaged.

All of these factors, and especially the fact that Hezbollah is the only military presence in south Lebanon have led some observers to describe Hezbollah as a state within a state. This description oversimplifies the complex relationship between Hezbollah, the government of Lebanon, and other states in the region. Hezbollah, in addition to its other roles, is a Lebanese political party. It contests municipal and national elections, and currently holds twenty-three seats of the 128 seats in Lebanon's parliament and, until recently, two seats in its cabinet. With its coalition partner Amal, Hezbollah represents the Shiite population, which is almost certainly the largest of Lebanon's religious communities. Hezbollah also maintains working relationships with non-Shi'ite politicians.

Despite Hezbollah's engagement with Lebanon's electoral politics, it is neither a democratic movement nor a nationalist organization. Hezbollah shares with other modern Islamist movements a hostile attitude toward the idea of authority deriving from the will of a people. Islamist movements therefore generally reject, or at least downplay, nationalism. Ascribing sovereignty to humans is perceived as detracting from that of God. Thus, in the ideology of Islamist movements, authority derives solely from God and was expressed to human beings by his messenger, the Prophet Muhammad.

Where Hezbollah, as a Shi'ite movement, differs from Sunni Islamist organizations is in the way it conceptualizes the

next stage in the transmission of authority to humans and its application on earth. Shi'ites of the Twelver (Imami) tradition, as most Lebanese Shi'ites are, believe that the Prophet passed his authority and an esoteric knowledge of God to his first cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali ibn Abu Talib, and through him to a line of eleven descendants. These twelve successors are known to Shi'ites as the *imams*. Twelver Shi'ite theology holds that the last of the imams vanished and went into occultation in the year 874. The absence of his leadership from human affairs is regarded as the reason for evil and injustice in the world. Observant Shi'ites live in anticipation of the Twelfth Imam's reappearance near the end of history to lead a final apocalyptic struggle against evil, after which he will inaugurate a reign of justice on earth.

The imam's occultation implies that for the last eleven centuries there has been no mediator to implement God's authority in the world. Shi'ite theologians solved this problem by developing the doctrine that each person should seek out and follow the directives of a competent Islamic juriconsult until the reappearance of the Hidden Imam. Between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, Shi'ite scholars of Islamic law organized themselves into an informal hierarchy. Its most senior and respected scholars are known by the title *ayatollah*—"sign of God." Among those scholars, one is regarded as issuing opinions and judgments that are models for emulation. Today, that preeminent scholar is Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader and former president of Iran. Prior to his assuming this role, the source of emulation in jurisprudence was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the central figure in Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979.

Thus, in Hezbollah's ideology, legitimate authority originates with God, has been passed to his prophet, Muhammad, from him through the line of twelve imams, and finally to the Supreme Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei, who interprets the will of the Hidden Imam until his reappearance. The implication of this is that Hezbollah is a transnational movement, concerned as much with the policies of the Iranian government as with

those of the Lebanese. The relationship between Lebanon's and Iran's Shi'ite religious scholars extends back to at least the sixteenth century, when the Safavid dynasty in Iran recruited scholars from the Jabal 'Amal area of south Lebanon to inculcate the principles of Shi'ism among the Safavid subjects as the religion of state. In the intervening period, Lebanese, Iranian, and Iraqi scholars have studied and taught together in the religious academies of Najaf in Iraq and Qum in Iran, and also married into one another's families.

Even more significant for Hezbollah than the longstanding network of Shi'ite legal authorities in Lebanon and Iran was the latter country's revolution, which culminated in the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This—after perhaps Israel's 1982 invasion and occupation of Lebanon—was the single most important event leading to the establishment of Hezbollah in the same year. The emergence of the Islamic Republic in Iran demonstrated to Lebanese Shi'ite political activists and religious leaders the possibility of a radical transformation of the national and regional order.

In the United States, Iran's system of government is often mischaracterized as a return to a medieval mode of rule. The theory of the Islamic Republic is in fact a recent innovation in Islamic intellectual history, developed by Khomeini during his exile from Iran in the 1960s. His concept of governance, known as the state of the jurist, (*wilayat al-faqih*) fused the modern bureaucratic state and representative institutions with the Twelver Shi'ite conception of authority. The same principles are embodied in Hezbollah's organization. Revolutionary Iran is an experiment in running a state purely on the principles of Islamic law. Just as revolutionary was Khomeini's contribution to the refashioning of Shi'ism to make it an ideology of social transformation. Until the coalescence of his movement, Twelver Shi'ites had considered any government to be at best a necessary evil and believed that efforts to build an ethical political order before the Hidden Imam's return were futile. Khomeini was a central figure in changing Shi'ism from a doctrine of patient piety to one of revolutionary action.

The success of Khomeini's revolution in Iran was therefore an example and inspiration for Lebanon's Shi'ites, who, despite their numbers, exercised the least political power of any of the country's religious communities and who were concentrated in the poorest strata of society.

Hezbollah's political power and its ambiguous attitude toward the notion of a Lebanese political identity is one of many indicators of how arbitrary were the boundary drawing and state making engaged in by Great Britain and France after World War I. The current border between Israel and Lebanon is the handiwork of an Anglo-French survey team, which in 1923 divided the Galilee between the League of Nations mandates of Syria and Palestine. On the northern side of the line, French authorities carved from the Syrian mandate an entity they called Greater Lebanon. They endowed it with a republican form of government, but one that made religious affiliation the basis for representation. Maronite Christians, because of their numbers at the time and their close relations with France, benefited most by the system, even after independence in 1946. Disputes over the distribution of power among Lebanon's confessional communities and its relationship with Syria and the rest of the Arab world were major reasons for the Lebanese civil wars of 1958 and 1975–1990. Hezbollah's principal mission has been to acquire for Shi'ites their share of power in the Lebanese system.

The formation of Hezbollah also resulted from shifts in the regional balance of power after 1979. The Islamic Republic of Iran found itself isolated internationally after the revolution and in a precarious strategic position when Iraq launched a war against it in the summer of 1980. With few allies among states, Iran attempted to compensate by forming alliances with movements. It thus came to the aid of the Lebanese Shi'ite religious scholars, who had long maintained ties to the Iranian mullahs and were attracted to Khomeini's theories of revolutionary activism.

At that time, the one state with which Iran was successful in developing a strategic relationship was Syria. After Egypt



signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979 and after the deterioration of Syria's relations with Iraq in the early 1970s, Syria found itself nearly as regionally isolated as Iran. The partnership formed by the two countries in 1982 appears at first blush to be truly a marriage made in hell. The pair could hardly have been more different. In contrast to the Iranian government's theocratic principles of governance and its hatred of the Soviet Union, Syria's governing Ba'ath Party then advocated a generally secular version of pan-Arab nationalism and had close relations with the Soviet Union. Despite such differences, the strategic partnership between Syria and Iran has endured now for nearly twenty-five years.

That relationship was crucial for the establishment of Hezbollah in 1982. Israel had recently invaded Lebanon with the goal of destroying the Palestine Liberation Organization, then based in the country. The Israeli military operations killed perhaps seventeen thousand Lebanese citizens and residents, most of them civilians. Shi'ites in the south bore a great proportion of the casualties and hardships, and they began life under an Israeli military occupation that lasted eighteen years for some of them. These were catalyzing events for Lebanese Shi'ites, who only a few years before the invasion had just begun the process of political mobilization. Syria had by 1982 been in occupation of eastern Lebanon for six years and had also taken a beating from the Israeli forces during the invasion. Seeking a means of putting pressure on the Israelis, Syria facilitated the entry into Lebanon of fifteen hundred members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran), who began to train Lebanese Shi'ite fighters. It was around the Revolutionary Guard that the Shi'ite activist scholars coalesced, and Hezbollah was born that year as a movement of resistance against the Israeli occupation.

The Israeli invasion and its consequences also reignited a Lebanese civil war that had raged intermittently since 1976. Hezbollah became one of two militias that protected Lebanese Shi'ites and their interests, and thus positioned itself to make political demands on the state after the Syrian army forced an

end to the civil war in October 1990. Two years later, Hezbollah participated in national parliamentary elections, winning eight seats and indicating its transformation into a Lebanese political party. Hezbollah was able to position itself in Lebanon's politics as a defender of the country's sovereignty by continuing its guerrilla war against Israeli occupation in the south. Each year, Hezbollah fighters killed in Lebanon about twenty-five Israeli soldiers, some of them young conscripts recently graduated from high school.

The Israeli government, unwilling to bear such human losses while reaping so few gains for its security, withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. Israel's conceding south Lebanon was a victory for Hezbollah but deprived the organization of a cause that it could champion on behalf of all Lebanese; Syria, as Hezbollah's sponsor, lost a means of bleeding Israel. Hezbollah therefore decided to make its new cause the liberation of an area known as Shaba' Farms. Although the United Nations has certified the area as Syrian territory, the French demarcation of the Lebanese-Syrian border in 1923 was imprecise enough for Hezbollah to claim Shaba' Farms as Lebanese land. Israel and Hezbollah have fought a low-intensity conflict over the area over the last six years. At fourteen square miles, Shaba' Farms covers less than half the area of Rochester Hills and has no more strategic value than any of the border land that Israel abandoned to Hezbollah in 2000. The struggle for the area brings to mind Luis Borges's characterization of the Falkland Islands War as "Two bald men fighting over a comb."

Hezbollah also portrays itself as an ally of the Palestinians against Israel. This is apparently much easier after the passing of twenty-four years since Israel evicted the PLO from Lebanon. The frequently thuggish behavior of the Palestinian guerrilla organizations prior to their departure had not endeared them to south Lebanese. Hezbollah leaders found Hamas, as a Palestinian Islamist organization in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, to be considerably more attractive as a cobelligerent against Israel than the PLO. Hezbollah's snatching of the two Israeli soldiers this summer was in fact an act of soli-

parity with Hamas, which had also abducted an Israeli soldier, attacked Israel with rockets, and was then resisting an Israeli offensive in Gaza. For Hezbollah, the conflict with Israel is a fundamentally religious, rather than national struggle. Like Hamas, Hezbollah draws upon some of the enduring images of European anti-Semitism and portrays Zionism not as a national movement, but as a Jewish plan for world domination.

Some American commentators, struggling to place Hezbollah within a familiar historical narrative, have characterized it as an example of “Islamofascism.” A term so conspicuously contrived reveals more about the ends of those who use it than it does about Hezbollah. Fascism, even in its European context, is a notoriously slippery concept. José Ortega Y Gasset remarked, “Whichever way we approach fascism we find that it is simultaneously one thing and the contrary, it is A and not A. . . .” Its adherents exalt the masses while following a sole leader, fear capitalists while vilifying socialists, admire machismo while recruiting women, and incite revolt while demanding order. Because of fascism’s elusiveness, little precision is required to deploy the term as a dysphemism for the threatening or unfamiliar. Characterizations of Hezbollah as fascist rarely represent efforts to understand the organization; more commonly they are part of a debate about American identity—one that draws on the mythology of a historic national mission to bring down the likes of Hitler and Mussolini, and requires their counterparts for our age.

On this level, it can be said that Hezbollah is not like the European authoritarian parties of the interwar period. It shares with the Nazi and Italian Fascist parties none of their obsessions with the nation; Hezbollah’s anti-Semitism is much closer to that of the medieval church than to the pseudo-scientific racialist theories of Nazism. Neither does Hezbollah’s conception of authority have a place for a single leader on the model of *Il Duce* or *Der Fuehrer*. The organization’s secretary general, Hasan Nasrallah, certainly exemplifies charismatic leadership, but he publicly subordinates himself to Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei. Neither man portrays himself as infallible.

Hezbollah does not fit easily into the categories that are familiar to the historian because it is part of a new phenomenon. The Islamic revolution in Iran, the establishment of Hezbollah, and the emergence of other Islamist movements at the end of the 1970s were all unanticipated by Western scholars and policy makers. At the time, they generally presumed that the advent of modernity in the Middle East and other parts of the world, characterized by urbanization, increasing rates of literacy, industrialization, and social mobilization, was a necessarily secularizing process. Although they became aware of Islamist organizations by the 1960s, American intelligence officials and scholars could only identify Marxist internationalism as an effective rival ideology to secular nationalism. No one in American or European academe studied the networks of Shi'ite scholars who were becoming political activists and architects of a new political order.

For the historian, looking back across the span of a full generation since the rise of popular Islamist movements, these developments suggest how resilient religious traditions are and how their adherents can find new political meaning in them under radically changed circumstances. The emergence of Hezbollah and other Islamist organizations by the early 1980s also appears to be a part of larger global trend. We observed in the same period the increased politicization of fundamentalist Christianity in the United States, the strengthening of Zionist religious parties in Israel, and, a little later, the reassertion of Russian Orthodox Christian identity as the Soviet Union imploded. We do not understand yet how these trends might be related. That question will likely preoccupy historians in the next century and after.

## **SOURCES AND SUGGESTED READING:**

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