

## ***Hezbollah: A Short History***

by Augustus Richard Norton, Princeton University Press, 2007, 183 pp.

### **Donna Robinson Divine**

This book begins with what the author claims is a puzzle: the transformation of an ‘Iranian-influenced conspiratorial terrorist group [initially] rejecting participation in Lebanese politics,’ into ‘a party with considerable autonomy and a talent for playing politics and winning elections.’ (p. 6) Augustus Richard Norton explains the makeover as both a consequence of the growing consciousness among the Shi’a of Lebanon that their religious identity could bring the necessary energy to change their marginal political and economic status in the country and as a reaction to the profoundly destructive Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 that may have weakened one enemy – the Palestine Liberation Organisation – but that helped bring to life a far more formidable one another – Hezbollah.

As others have noted, if anyone is equipped to explain Hezbollah’s complex trajectory, it is Augustus Richard Norton. Trained as an anthropologist, teaching in a department of international relations, Norton saw the birth of Hezbollah when he served as military observer for the United Nations in southern Lebanon in the early 1980s. A dedicated researcher and writer, Norton has contacts all across Lebanon who are both his friends and informants. He writes with the same fluency about Shi’a religious customs as he does about Lebanese politics. The book comes with advance praise from scholars who tell us Norton has written an accessible and balanced account of a movement poorly understood by many in the United States who too often view the Middle East through the ‘terrorist’ lens.

Norton’s book is indeed accessible. Although it covers events that have been well-rehearsed by scholars, the book calls attention to the varied political interests sometimes dividing Hezbollah from Syria and Iran, its state sponsors, but at other times, drawing them together. Norton explains how Hezbollah’s leaders dexterously managed both cooperation and confrontation with regard to Amal, the older movement representing Shi’a interests. His spirited writing presents political developments through a cast of memorable Lebanese political leaders. Full of narrative vigour, *Hezbollah*, while acknowledging the movement’s multi-faceted nature as its starting point, ends up by emphasising its success and popularity as a resistance movement and as a powerful advocate for Shi’a political interests.

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But is the book really balanced? Norton's determination to take his analysis beyond what he labels the stereotypical 'black and white world view,' (p. 8) is belied first and foremost by his discussion of the 2006 war in Lebanon where he substitutes caricature for interpretation and where he seems to hang his analysis on the slender reed of newspaper accounts of the momentous decision by Israel to launch massive air attacks against Hezbollah headquarters and installations. There is scant evidence that Israel's 'political and military leaders' wanted 'to have it out with Hezbollah' (p. 133) as Norton writes. Nor does his description of Hezbollah's raid into Israel as merely 'stretching' the principles of an implicit agreement that had stabilised into a 'six year period ... [of relative] ...quiet, peaceful...by historical standards...' (p. 135) [1] really capture the experience of trauma in Israel just a month after the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier along the Gaza border by groups widely believed to be associated with Hamas. Between the two kidnap raids rumours spread through Israel's media of missing soldiers possibly held captive by one radical Palestinian faction or another. And while Norton mentions the flow of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah, he fails to grasp its primacy as a critical reference point for Israel's security calculations, particularly given the growing perception that withdrawal from occupied territories – South Lebanon and Gaza – had put more of the country's civilian population in harm's way by degrading defences along its fragile borders.

The ferocity of Israel's retaliation for Hezbollah's deadly and successful raid may have surprised Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, the movement's leader, but it should not have impressed Norton as either novel or extraordinary. Norton, who comes to the topic from West Point, the commanding height of American military expertise, noted elsewhere in his book that 'Operation Grapes of Wrath' was launched in 1996 'to undermine popular support for Hezbollah among the Lebanese, as well as prompt Syria to rein in the organisation.' (p. 84) That it did not work as well as Israeli strategists hoped does not mean these strategists identified alternate mechanisms for stopping the attacks against their country mounted from Lebanon. There is greater evidence for the proposition that Israel's response in 2006 was consistent with past strategic doctrine than that it was a departure from the notion – correct or not – that 'support for the resistance would wither ... if ... [Israel's military action] placed an awesome burden on the Lebanese...' (p. 87)

Hezbollah's leaders triggered anxiety in Israel not because of their personal taunts but rather because of their promises to unleash an arsenal of rockets to destroy the country's economy and as much of its civilian population as could be reached. That

they could not deliver on this promise does not mean Israel could forever ignore the expanding garrisons on its northern border. And although the deficiencies of Israel's military campaign have suggested a failure to many – including Norton – even these deficiencies are rarely compared to the damage wrought by Hezbollah's provocation to its own Shi'a base of support. The Lebanese Shi'a lost their lives, and most of the homes and businesses they had painstakingly built in the past several decades – often with aid proffered by the movement – were demolished.

Norton's account of the 2006 War falters for another reason as well. His argument that Hezbollah wants access to the Lebanese political system is simply wrong; it wants domination. And while it holds the loyalty of Lebanon's Shi'a, it does so partly by the promise of 'spoils' but also by promoting a fear that infects the country. Armed to the teeth with sophisticated weapons, the organisation does not want to be integrated into Lebanon's political system because without its arms, Hezbollah loses its waiver from the imperatives of compromise and negotiation, elements crucial to the making of policy in Lebanon.

The idea of perpetual resistance against Israel enables Hezbollah to anchor itself as an agent of Syrian power and as a tactical instrument of Iranian influence regardless of the calamities this brings down on Shi'a heads from time to time or on Lebanon's political system. Hezbollah's strategy, destined to deliver misfortune to everyone, has now led Lebanon into an era of prolonged volatility where the sectarian divide grows and where Hezbollah's fiercest opponents are the country's Sunni Muslims. To assert, as Norton does, that 'the war solidified Hezbollah's role as both a political player in Lebanon and a regional exemplar for other opposition minded Muslims,' (p. 7) is not only misleading; it is to descend into exactly the kind of stereotypical reasoning Norton insists has depleted our understanding of this movement.

The conflict Hezbollah brought to Lebanon not only wreaked havoc with the lives and fortunes of its Shi'a followers; it also had a debilitating effect on the country's economy and polity. Hezbollah triggered the clash with Israel to turn attention away from the investigation of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination whose early findings pointed to Damascus. Hoping to protect its Syrian ally, Hezbollah overplayed its hand with Israel and has not been able to re-impose a Syrian writ back on Lebanon. But it has been able to stop Lebanon's government from operating. With periodic assassinations and car bombs punctuated by deadlock, Lebanon seems perilously close to losing the remnants of its sovereignty already heavily compromised by years of civil war and foreign occupation.

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Norton's analysis gives no hint of a country that has now almost ceased to function. Had he done so, his book may not have won praise for its 'balance' but rather for its penetrating study of the multitude of difficult questions raised by Hezbollah as a military and political force.

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### Notes

[1] The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict began when Hezbollah launched a cross-border raid in which three Israeli soldiers were killed, two wounded, and two kidnapped and taken to Lebanon. For Norton, the Hezbollah raid 'stretches' the terms of an unsigned agreement while Israeli actions 'disrespect' it. (See pp. 134-5)