

Letters Page

Hezbollah and Terrorism: An Exchange between Rayyan Al-Shawaf and Barry Rubin

Editors: Barry Rubin's 'Confessions at a Funeral' (*Demokratiya* 12) includes a serious mischaracterisation of recent pronouncements by Hezbollah. Rubin makes much of Hezbollah's posthumous praise of recently assassinated Imad Mughniyyah and the revelation that he was one of its leaders. (The author apparently is unaware that Hezbollah had long praised Mughniyyah but refused to confirm his membership in the organisation due to a security policy concerning the makeup of its armed wing. Now that Mughniyyah is dead, Hezbollah can openly claim him.) Rubin's central argument is that in confirming Mughniyyah's membership and praising his actions, Hezbollah has admitted to involvement in terrorism, and that the same holds true for Hezbollah's backers Iran and Syria.

Unfortunately, the entire premise of Rubin's article is false. Hezbollah's confirmation that Imad Mughniyyah was one of its members does not in any way imply an admission that Hezbollah and Mughniyyah were involved in acts of terrorism. In fact, Hezbollah specifically denies such allegations. Contrary to the evidence, Hezbollah continues to maintain that it played no role in terrorist attacks such as the bombing of both the US marines' and French paratroopers' barracks in Beirut (1983), the US embassy in Beirut (1983, embassy annex in 1984), and both the Israeli embassy and Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires (1992 and 1994, respectively).

Only once – addressing former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani's comments – does Rubin mention that Mughniyyah's supporters do not consider his 'actions' to have constituted terrorism. Crucially, however, Rubin does not reveal that the 'actions' in question are Mughniyyah's military exploits against Israeli troops occupying Lebanon; indeed, Hezbollah, Iran and Syria deny outright Mughniyyah's involvement in terrorist attacks against civilians. *Rubin misleadingly makes it appear as though Hezbollah, Iran and Syria admit Mughniyyah's involvement in attacks on civilians but do not consider such acts to be terrorism.*

Letters Page

In fact, Rubin goes further, engaging in an explicit mischaracterisation of Hezbollah/Iran/Syria's position on Mughniyyah. 'When Iran, Syria, and Hizballah embrace such a person as a great hero and role model they are openly admitting their association with many past acts of terrorism, and making clear that they favor murderous attacks deliberately designed to kill civilians.'

Nowhere in the various Hezbollah tributes to Mughniyyah – most of which were televised – was there any admission of his involvement in the terrorist outrages that the United States, Israel, Argentina, Kuwait and other countries ascribe to him. Instead, Mughniyyah was lauded for his role in the struggle against Israel's occupation of south Lebanon, which ended in 2000, and his command of Hezbollah's forces in the 2006 war with Israel, in which the latter failed to achieve its objectives.

Knowledge of Arabic is not required to follow Hezbollah's pronouncements; the organisation runs a television and internet propaganda campaign in several languages – including English – that has not veered from the official line. When Hezbollah officials have been asked about Mughniyyah's alleged involvement in terrorism – including specific acts for which there is specific evidence – they have resolutely denied all charges, reiterating that his role was confined to the struggle against Israeli military forces occupying Lebanon. For all its implausibility, Hezbollah's propaganda remains consistent. Statements made by Hezbollah official Ibrahim al-Mousawi during his recent tour of the UK are but one example of this.

Rubin has erroneously concluded that because Hezbollah exalts a man accused by many of terrorism that this is an implicit admission of his culpability. Rubin even finds time to assert that Iran and Syria – not just Hezbollah – claim responsibility for Mughniyyah's actions: 'Now that Hizballah, Iran, and Syria have 'taken credit' for Mughniyyah's past killings.' This assertion is ludicrous; Iran and Syria deny providing Hezbollah with material support, let alone being responsible for its actions.

More important than Rubin's overreaching is the nature of Hezbollah's propaganda. It is telling that Hezbollah should scrupulously avoid claiming responsibility for terrorist attacks, and focus instead on the defensive military role it has played since the party's inception in 1982. In the Arab world (and beyond), Hezbollah's and other groups' attacks on Israeli military forces occupying Lebanese land from 1978 until 2000 are considered to have been entirely legitimate. Similarly, although many Arabs condemned Hezbollah's unprovoked attack on Israel in July 2006,

few questioned the militia's right to resist the subsequent massive Israeli onslaught, especially insofar as military operations targeting Israeli troops on Lebanese soil (as opposed to rocket attacks on civilians in Israel) were concerned.

Support for the kidnapping of foreigners, hijacking of airplanes, destruction of embassies and wholesale slaughter of civilians, however, is another matter entirely. The same applies to Hezbollah's recent violent takeover of the western half of Beirut.

Indeed, Hezbollah is well aware that most Arabs maintain a distinction between legitimate armed resistance and terrorism. As a result, when singing the praises of Mughniyyah and its other fallen operatives, Hezbollah remains careful to avoid linking them to attacks on civilians – despite evidence to the contrary – and commemorates only their role in military resistance of the sort deemed acceptable by the majority of Arabs and Muslims.

Rayyan Al-Shawaf, Beirut, Lebanon

Rayyan Al-Shawaf misunderstands the whole point of my article: A Reply from Barry Rubin

Editors: I was going to write a long and detailed response to this letter but will not do so because the correspondent simply misunderstands the whole point of my article and thus what he says is irrelevant. His critique is that I claimed that Hizballah has consciously and deliberately admitted its involvement in terrorism by its behavior around the death of Imad Mughniyyah. He also claims to read my mind as to what I was or was not aware of regarding these questions. Let me state, as someone who knows very well what I think and know, that I was completely aware of every point he makes. I was not saying at all what he claims. My point was that objectively the statements of Hizballah and behavior are clear evidence of its involvement in international terrorism. As I have written repeatedly elsewhere, of course Hizballah does not consider anything it has done to be terrorism. Everyone knows that.

But Mughniyyah has been involved in acts of international terrorism as generally defined – and specifically so charged by the United States – so celebrating him as

Letter Page

a great hero and leader does involve taking responsibility for all those operations. And of course Hizballah did not explicitly list them and of course Hizballah did not characterize them as terrorism.

The key point is one the letter-writer himself acknowledges: they admitted that Mughniyyah was a leader of the organization and it took pride in his 'accomplishments,' without reservation. That was my point. At a moment when Lebanon has fallen under Hizballah's sway and the country's short-lived true independence has been lost it is a shame to be wasting time on whether or not Hizballah wants to admit publicly or merely to demonstrate publicly its own record. Constructive criticism is always welcome but it is silly to have to deal with insults regarding ideas I never held nor put forth. I have consulted with other readers of the article, including those in Lebanon, who have all told me that they completely understood my article and intentions.

Let me try an example which admittedly goes further but I think makes the point effectively. Suppose a group praised the leader of the September 11 attack as a high-ranking official of the organization in whom they take great pride and has done a wonderful job. Someone writes an article saying this and is then attacked by a reader who says: but the organization did not explicitly claim responsibility for the September 11 attack or say that it was an act of 'terrorism.'

So what? Such a response would be either the product of an apologist or someone who did not properly understand English. Of course, many in the region still don't think al-Qaeda was responsible for – or objectively admitted – responsibility for September 11 so I suppose there is a good parallel here.

All the same goes for Iran and Syria. I couldn't care less whether they said: 'Yes! We gave them arms and we are responsible for their actions!' Political analysts use evidence to demonstrate the actual situation. If the evidence is compelling than their conclusions are accepted. As I write this response I read a recent interview in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* by Muhammad Hassan Akhtari who writes, 'The sons of the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance are the legitimate sons of the Islamic Republic of Iran, spiritually and morally.' He added that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, 'supported Hizbullah in terms of training and special orders. I don't remember that any of them took part in the fighting.' He also noted that, 'We held meetings with them. They would arrive, report their situation and say what they would do and what they need. They would report to us and we would relay the reports to Iran.'

Democratiya 13 | Summer 2008

Sounds like an admission of sponsorship to me going beyond anything I wrote in my article.

Mr. Nasrallah is, of course, the official representative in Lebanon of Iran's leader. Crates of weapons were recovered and shown by Israel bearing the marks of the Russian factory that produced them and the Syrian military that received them. I could go on providing details for many pages.

In future I do hope that the letter writer tries to understand what an author is actually saying before making all sorts of nasty characterizations about other people's ignorance and mistakes. Otherwise, he only succeeds in looking rather foolish.

Professor Barry Rubin,
Director, Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center
Editor, *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA)
Journal Editor, Turkish Studies