

Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion

Amal Saad-Ghorayeb

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Amal Saad-Ghorayeb's recently published and extensively researched study of the Lebanese Islamist group Hizbu'llah is a welcome addition to the literature on Islamist groups, especially given the present global climate that instinctively – but usually unsubstantially – associates Islamist groups with antiwestern terrorist activities. Based as it is on a select number of high-level interviews with senior Hizbu'llah leaders; numerous interviews with local, regional, and functional Hizbu'llah officials; and an extensive analysis of Hizbu'llah's publications in both print and television media, Saad-Ghorayeb offers us a rare but thorough glimpse into “the political mind of Hizbu'llah,” one that its officials themselves must have endorsed, given the ready availability of the book in Lebanese bookstores.

This is a work, first and foremost, about Hizbu'llah's political thought, which is designed to unravel the “central pillars of Hizbu'llah's intellectual structure.” In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, there are eight chapters that examine several issues and moral precepts that feature prominently in the deliberations and pronouncements of Hizbu'llah officials. The first four chapters focus on broader, more timeless questions that confront Islamic – particularly Shi'ah Islamic – groups, such as the choice between

accommodation or violence in non-Islamic states (chapter 1), the relationship between the ideal-type Islamic state and democracy (chapter 2), the jurisdictional authority of the *Wilayet al-Faqih* now established in Iran (chapter 3), and the relationship between Islamic universalism and national identity (chapter 4). The way in which Hizbu'llah officials have positioned themselves with respect to all four of these issues provides great insight into how Hizbu'llah has interpreted its political role within the Lebanese polity.

The last four chapters, on the other hand, deal with issues that are more temporarily related to the conflict over Palestine. They start with an examination of Hizbu'llah's attitudes toward "the West" (chapter 5) before moving to a more extensive examination of the theological roots of its resistance to Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon (chapter 6), the nature and extent of its opposition to Zionism more generally (chapter 7), and the degree to which its thought can be considered anti-Judaic (chapter 8).

The principle theme underlying this study is the interplay between Hizbu'llah's "intellectual structure" and "the ever changing sociopolitical reality." She clearly and repeatedly argues that the existing literature on Hizbu'llah has got it wrong. Some authors (notably Magnus Ranstorp and Chibli Mallat) are criticized for overemphasizing Hizbu'llah's political expediency, whereas others (notably Martin Kramer) are criticized for interpreting Hizbu'llah's ideological and religious imperatives in excessively narrow terms. Saad-Ghorayeb, on the other hand, offers a more nuanced understanding of the organization's political thought that stresses both its moral consistency and its political flexibility, what she calls its "artful" yet "precarious" balancing act, in which political concessions are interpreted as "calculated measures" designed to preserve its overall intellectual foundation. Where flexibility seems to enter into Hizbu'llah's decision-making process, it is a flexibility mandated by Islam's own dictates. Hence, Saad-Ghorayeb writes about the necessity to work out "moral trade-offs" between competing Islamic imperatives, trade-offs that are "influenced but not governed" by practical considerations on the ground.

Perhaps the most central question with which Hizbu'llah grapples, and by which its actions are judged by fellow Muslims and western governments, is the degree to which it sanctions the use of violence. Several of Hizbu'lla's guiding principles are outlined. First is Islam's abhorrence of chaos and instability: "The party feels duty-bound to preserve public order" writes Saad-Ghorayeb. Of equal importance is the Islamic principle of noncompulsion – better dialogue than violence. According to Saad-Ghorayeb, these more restrictive principles also lead Hizbu'llah officials

to accept the idea of pursuing “the greatest possible extent of justice” as opposed to absolute justice, which explains their decision to participate in the postwar Lebanese state as a “constitutional” rather than an “anti-system opposition.” Indeed, Hizbu’llah has participated in all of the various postwar Lebanese election campaigns and has been especially active in social justice and public freedom issues, castigating the government in particular over the corrupt and profligate manner in which the reconstruction program has been implemented.

However, it is Hizbu’llah’s understanding of oppression that most determines its approach to the use of violence. Oppressors are ranked and categorized, with the three worst being Israel, the United States, and tyrannical regimes more generally. One of the main ideological reasons why Hizbu’llah officials have chosen to participate in post-Ta’if Lebanese politics, even though it deflects them away from their goal of establishing an Islamic state, is because the system “is not oppressive enough to warrant a civil war.”

The United States and the West more generally generate a more complicated process of deliberation about appropriate responses. Certainly western civilization and, in particular the United States, is seen as “hegemonic and arrogant,” symbolized by the variety of ignoble titles given to the latter: “the great Satan,” “the pioneer of evil,” “the great terrorist state.” Yet Hizbu’llah repeatedly denies its involvement in the abduction of western hostages in Lebanon during the civil war, strongly condemns the killings of ordinary civilians in the West as being “inimical to Islamic interests,” and even argues that, if the “aggression” could be stopped, dialogue and reconciliation with the West would become “very real possibilities.” This suggests a degree of caution in linking Hizbu’llah with global “terrorist” networks.

With respect to Israel, however, intellectual constraints on Hizbu’llah’s use of violence appear to have been loosened considerably. The author describes Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon, for example, now reduced to its hold of Shiba’ [Shabaa] farms, as “the one pillar of Hizbu’llah’s thought that is not subject to any form of temporization or accommodation.” Its occupation of Palestine is further described as *sharr al-mutlaq* or an absolute evil, and even its continued existence is looked upon as “an act of aggression.” All of this means that “resistance” to Israel is elevated above all other intellectual pillars and commitments – including those in Lebanon. In response to those analysts who view the resistance as a tool for increasing popular legitimacy within Lebanon, “and not the other way around,” Saad-Ghorayeb argues that “it is the resistance which necessitates the creation of the political and social institutions that constitute Hizbu’llah.”

One of the particularly disturbing insights is the degree to which this antipathy toward Israel is underpinned not only by a strong anti-Zionist – and hence essentially temporal – thrust, but also by a more ingrained – and timeless – sense of anti-Judaism, which Saad-Ghorayeb argues is “as vituperative against Jews, if not more than, conventional anti-Semitism.” This suggests that whereas a Hizbu’llah dialogue with the West remains a possibility, one with Israel seems highly unlikely. The result, therefore, is a general legitimization of the use of violence against Israel, tempered at best by questions of political utility with respect to both martyrdom and the targeting of Israeli civilians. As Saad-Ghorayeb remarks, “the party unabashedly and regularly enjoins the Palestinians to kill Israeli civilians though always with reference to the instrumentality of such violence in defending Palestinian rights.”

This is a timely yet disturbing book. Saad-Ghorayeb provides us with a window into Hizbu’llah’s political mind, revealing a sophisticated process of reasoning that, while influenced by events on the ground, tries to remain true to its foundational intellectual pillars. She reveals a certain degree of flexibility in its political thought, particularly the farther one moves away from “oppressive” contexts. However, there is also much here that will not be welcome to the “liberal” mind, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, particularly with respect to its religious (as opposed to political) antipathy toward Jews and how this contributes to the sanctioning of violence against Israeli civilians.

Ultimately, however, this book must also be seen as a “snapshot” of Hizbu’llah’s thought at a particular moment in time. Rather than being predominantly norm-driven, and hence resistant to substantial alteration, as the author comes close to suggesting and as Hizbu’llah officials would like to think, the group’s political thought is bound to be influenced significantly by changing events on the ground, both within the organization itself as much as by the Arab-Israeli conflict more generally. As the context changes, so too may the norms and interpretations that make up Hizbu’llah’s “intellectual pillars.” The author herself admits this inevitability when she concludes that Hizbu’llah’s “precarious” balancing act between its existing intellectual structure and the ever-changing sociopolitical realities “typifies a marriage ... which cannot persist indefinitely.”

Paul Kingston
Department of Political Science
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada