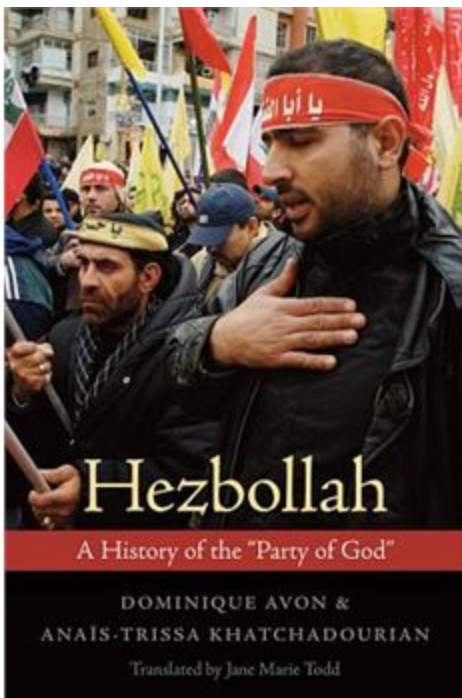


BOOK REVIEW

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Hezbollah: A History of the "Party of God"

Dominique Avon and Anaïs-Trissa Khatchadourian

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Review by

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MEI@ND

May 2000 was milestone in the history of Hezbollah as it redefined the Middle East landscape by forcing Israel to unilaterally pull out of Lebanon. The 18-year Israeli presence in southern Lebanon, mostly through the Maronite Christian-dominated South Lebanese Army, became futile before Hezbollah and its superior guerrilla campaign. Until then the Arab military strategy against Israel did not go beyond political rhetoric and since 1948, each military confrontation with Israel proved worse than the previous round. Convincingly defeated in the battleground, the Arab powers were forced to sue for peace. If President Anwar Sadat opted for a negotiated settlement to regain the Sinai Peninsula, Yasser Arafat preferred the

Oslo route to seek Palestinian statehood. By early 1990s, even Hafez al-Assad abandoned the military option and hoped to reclaim the Golan Heights through talks.

Seen within this wider Arab context, Hezbollah has been different. True to its self-image of being a resistant group, the 'Party of God' exposed the limitations of Israel's military options vis-à-vis non-state actors. If its unilateral withdrawal in May 2000 was not sufficient, six years later Israel pursued a costly and unsuccessful military campaign against Hezbollah over the kidnapping of two of its soldiers. Not only the Hezbollah endured the 34-day military campaign but also managed to fire a barrage of rockets against Israel, thereby forcing more than a quarter of million civilians to flee their homes in northern Israel. Even after the Israeli pullout in 2000, Hezbollah sought to maintain resistance image by harping on Sheba farms along the Israel-Syria-Lebanon border. The external 'successes' especially against Israel, at times made the Shia Hezbollah and its leader Hasan Nasrallah more popular among the Arab Sunni masses.

Hezbollah's domestic track record, however, is more complicated and challenging. At one level, it has a social welfare component and provides a host of welfare measures such as education, employment, medical care, etc. Its role in the re-construction efforts following the Second Lebanon War has been considerable. It also has a wide media network, including satellite channels and runs a parallel security apparatus. However, despite emerging as a major force within the Lebanese politics, Hezbollah has limitations. Its growing influence is marred by serious misgivings and apprehensions. Its linkage with the Islamic Republic of Iran has been principal concern for a vast majority of the Lebanese. At the ideological level, Hezbollah sought an Iran-style Islamic republic in the multi-religious and sectarian Lebanon. Though the demography has moved in favour of Muslims, the idea of rule by clergy has been an anathema to most Lebanese, Christian and Muslims alike. This forced Hezbollah to temporarily compromise its Islamic state agenda.

For decades, Lebanon has been the playground for a host of external players. At one time or another, Israel, Syria, France, Saudi Arabia or the US tried to dictate the Lebanese politics. Under the Hezbollah, things only got worsened. Because of its proximity with external powers, Hezbollah has been pursuing a foreign policy independent of the Lebanese Government. As highlighted by the Second Lebanon War in 2006, resistance component of Hezbollah's policy often comes with a devastating consequence for the Lebanese state. Likewise, its pro-Syrian position regarding the UN-sponsored probe into the assassination of former premier Rafik Hariri has been paralysing the country. If these were not sufficient, Hezbollah has been accused of resorting to violence and terrorism both within and outside the country.

As a result, Hezbollah has not been able to completely capitalise on the gains of its resistance against Israel. In short, its emergence as a principal player in Lebanon has been accompanied by

a fear-driven unity among the non-Shia sections of the population. The confessional electoral system in Lebanon also results in Hezbollah having to share the Shia votes with its predecessor and rival Amal. While dealing with this complex picture, Hezbollah contains texts of two critical documents. “Open Letter” disclosed in February 1985 outlined the core objectives of the group, especially its binary ‘oppressor-oppressed’ worldview, commitment for an Islamic government and the pursuit of jihad. The second document is new Hezbollah charter published in November 2009. The latter is an improved and more nuanced version of the former. While retaining the first and third pillars outlined in the 1985 documents, in tune with its position since the early 1990, the second document pushes the Islamic government to the background. It is essential to note that both these documents were available in English for quiet sometime and the authors have translated them into French for the first time.

Hezbollah was originally published in French and was translated into English and this has some rough edges. For example, Bekaa Valley is referred as Bekaa Plains or hostages were ‘liberated’ rather than freed. The authors use Cisjordan to refer to the Kingdom of Jordan when the latter is in vogue since 1949. Likewise, contrary to their claims, in 1999 Ehud Barak was ‘elected’ not ‘appointed’ as Israel’s Prime Minister.

The history of Hezbollah is not only complex but also contradictory due to its external linkages and operations. Its willingness to be a proxy of Iran and Syria has placed the militant group at odds with the Lebanese as well as wider regional consensus. Indeed, along with its patrons in Tehran, Hezbollah emerged as the only major Arab group to rally behind the beleaguered Assad regime in Damascus. Even Hamas which operated from Syria for over two decades was not ready to endorse Assad and moved its headquarters out of Damascus. There are suggestions that Hezbollah militants are actively fighting along with the regime and are facing casualties. The authors try to depict and partially succeed such a complex narration within 100 pages of text.

Note: This was earlier published in **The Pioneer** (New Delhi) on **15 December 2012**. Web link: <http://www.dailypioneer.com/sunday-edition/sundayagenda/books-reviews/115717-gods-own-army.html>

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