

Terrorism's Mask of Sanity

Hezbollah: A Short History

by Augustus Richard Norton

Princeton, 2009,

199 pages.

Reviewed by Michael J. Totten

As of this writing, a war of words is heating up between Israel and Hezbollah that may lead to yet another round of armed conflict between the two. Hezbollah recently threatened to carry out overseas operations against Israeli interests in order to avenge the assassination of its military commander, Imad Mughniyeh, last year in Damascus; the Israeli government, for its part, has warned Hezbollah that a steep price will be paid if it dares to proceed. Will Hezbollah make good on its claims and risk bringing the wrath of the IDF down on Lebanon's already battered southern villages and the Shi'ite quarter in Beirut? True, predicting

the course of events in the Middle East is difficult, if not impossible. When it comes to Hezbollah, however, one can play it safe by assuming the worst—or at the very least, by being wary of rosy predictions. And there has been no lack of those: Ever since Lebanon's "Party of God" (a literal translation of *hizb 'Alla*) stopped hijacking planes and taking Westerners hostage, chronic underestimation of its intentions and capabilities has been the norm among journalists, policy analysts, and even Hezbollah experts.

One such widely acknowledged expert is Augustus Richard Norton, whose book *Hezbollah: A Short History* is essential reading for anyone interested in the subject. Norton has earned his reputation as an authority on Hezbollah, having conducted research in Lebanon for more than two decades and authored several volumes on that country in particular and the region in general. During the 1980s,

when Hezbollah first emerged, he was a U.S. Army officer and military observer for the United Nations near the southern Lebanon border with Israel. In 1993, he became a tenured professor of both international relations and anthropology at Boston University. Like all good academics, Norton strives here for an objective view of his subject: “The purpose of this book,” he writes in the prologue, “is to offer a more balanced and nuanced account of this complex organization” than has been provided before. He mostly succeeds. His short history is not a polemic, after all. He does not grind an axe, nor does he serve as a Hezbollah apologist, as some sympathetic Westerners have been wont to do. On the contrary, the book is long on facts and refreshingly short on opinion. Moreover, the new 2009 paperback edition includes an afterword that corrects some of the mistakes in the first edition.

In this short but dense volume, Norton documents in detail how and why Hezbollah was founded in South Lebanon in the crucible of civil war, and he goes on to explain the group’s role during that war and how it emerged as the champion of Lebanon’s ideologically fractious Shia community. Like Hamas, Norton shows, Hezbollah acquired much of its support by providing social services

such as education and medical care to parts of the country long neglected by the state—even as it waged a proxy war against the “Zionist enemy” to the south. During the last decade or so, however, Hezbollah has attempted to show a more moderate face to the world, following the laws of war a bit more than Hamas and a lot more than al-Qaida. Yet if Hezbollah may be described as “restrained” in comparison to some other terrorist groups, it is hardly moderate in any objective sense, a fact of which Norton is well aware. Indeed, he points out that toward the end of Lebanon’s civil war in the 1980s, Hezbollah’s kidnapping spree made the country so dangerous for Westerners that the U.S. State Department prohibited using American passports to travel there until 1997. And if some analysts have split hairs over whether it is in fact a guerilla organization or a terrorist group, Norton’s account of the source of Hezbollah’s notoriety—its slate of kidnappings, murders, hijackings, and car bombings, usually against civilian targets, and some as far away as South America—should lay to rest any questions of that particular debate’s relevancy.

Nonetheless, there are some problems with Norton’s book, which the benefit of two years’ worth of hindsight have brought squarely into light. Aside from its exhaustive research and

wealth of detail, it offers a valuable lesson on the misunderstanding that permeates most Westerners' assessments of Hezbollah—a misunderstanding with dangerous implications for foreign policy in the Middle East.

As Norton's book makes clear, there is such a thing as being *too* even-handed and balanced in one's analysis. While he undoubtedly set out to be as objective as possible, as any good analyst or historian should be, more than once Norton lets this tendency get away from him. The result is a series of equivalences that are far-fetched at best and absurd at worst.

Perhaps the most glaring example is Norton's depiction of Hezbollah's long series of confrontations with the State of Israel. From its inception, war with Israel has been a defining aspect of Hezbollah, and it is therefore no surprise that Israel's northern border seems always just about to boil over. Yet, from Norton's description, one would assume that *both* parties are equally to blame for this situation. Regarding the Second Lebanon War, for instance, he writes that "both sides were clearly itching for a fight." Norton has a point here, but just barely: After Israel evacuated southern Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah started one skirmish after another along the border fence. The IDF, over time, grew

weary of these low-level attacks and prepared for a stronger response if they continued. To say, however, that Israel "itched" for a fight is a stretch. Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak was elected in part because he promised to withdraw the army from Lebanon and end the conflict once and for all. As far as Israelis were concerned, they no longer had a reason to fight with Hezbollah about anything. They were flat-out sick of combat in Lebanon, and in no way eager for more. In contrast, Hezbollah justifies its existence, ideologically, by continuing its "resistance" against and war with Israel.

Not four pages later is a similar example: Israeli ambassador Dan Gillerman, Norton writes, referred "to Hezbollah as a cancer that would have to be cut out. The Israelis certainly have no monopoly on this sort of language; Hezbollah propaganda routinely refers to Israel as a cancer." Again, this is technically accurate. Both Israel and Hezbollah have used the word "cancer" to describe each other. Norton's attempt to draw an equivalence between these two usages, however, is questionable. Like it or not, there is a world of difference between describing an entire country as cancerous and describing an aggressive terrorist organization in the same way.

In the conclusion to Norton's chapter on the 2006 war, he uses the "both sides" formulation to make a point that is not just misleading, but false. "After the war of arms ended," he writes, "the war of words began, as each side struggled to persuade friend and foe alike of [its] victory, revealing the fragility of claims on both sides." It is true that plenty of Israelis mocked Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's declaration of "divine victory" from the smoldering ruins of the suburbs south of Beirut, but hardly any of them insisted they had won. On the contrary, the war was perceived as a catastrophe by Israel's left, right, and center alike. In its aftermath, then-prime minister Ehud Olmert's approval ratings plunged to single digits. Meanwhile, Nasrallah put up bombastic, triumphant billboards throughout the territory he controlled, including the major road that connects Beirut to its international airport.

Such strained attempts at equivalence are at times just a minor annoyance, and I would be inclined to give Norton a pass on the matter, except for the fact that they expose his worst blind spot: his difficulty in acknowledging the simple fact that Hezbollah is nothing like Israel. Israel is a sovereign country and a democracy. Hezbollah is a theocratic terrorist

organization backed by an equally theocratic regime in Iran. To paint them as in any way similar is bound to lead a historian into error, especially with regards to predicting how one, the other, or both are likely to behave in the future. In Norton's case, that is exactly what has happened.

Martin Kramer, a fellow at the Shalem Center and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has pointed out on his Web site that Norton's habit of giving Hezbollah too much credit long preceded the publication of *Hezbollah: A Short History*. In 1998, for example, before Ehud Barak ordered the IDF out of southern Lebanon, Norton wrote in the journal *Middle East Policy*,

Hezbollah, of course, must be mindful that the mood of general support that it now enjoys is hardly guaranteed, and that it would sacrifice much of its support base if it provoked violent Israeli retaliation against southern Lebanon. For that matter, it is apt to reiterate that Hezbollah calculates that it will be the beneficiary of an Israeli withdrawal, given its celebrated role in the resistance. Certainly, the modality of an Israeli withdrawal would include provisions for disarming Hezbollah in the South, as well as the creation of a security regime for the area. It is precisely this eventuality for which Hezbollah has been visibly preparing since its party congress in July 1995.

Two years later, in an article published in *Middle East Insight*, Norton predicted that “Episodic attacks on Israel might occur from Lebanon, but the broadly popular resistance will close up shop when Israel leaves.”

Unfortunately, none of this turned out to be true.

Norton further compounds the problem when, in the conclusion to *Hezbollah*, he equates the pro-Syrian “March 8” coalition, of which Hezbollah is a key member, with Lebanon’s “March 14” movement, whose series of 2005 street protests succeeded in ousting the Syrian military from Lebanon. In late December of 2006, Hezbollah held a gigantic rally in downtown Beirut against the March 14 government led by Prime Minister Fouad Seniora and demanded that its own “March 8” alliance be given veto power over all government decisions. Hezbollah refused to disperse until its demands were met, drawing the country into a seventeen-month-long political crisis. “The previous year,” Norton writes,

Western governments, especially the U.S. government, endorsed and encouraged similar protests to topple a pro-Syrian government, but now the shoe was on the other foot. If Washington and the predominantly Sunni world was aghast at Shi’ite muscle flexing, especially since it might well benefit Iran’s power projection

into the wider Middle East, perhaps the most profound importance of the December protest, if it remains peaceful, will be a model for collective action in other Arab locales, which is a prospect no less distressing to the Arab world’s autocrats.

But Hezbollah’s protest did not remain peaceful, as the March 14 protests did. On May 7, 2008, following the Lebanese government’s decision to shut down Hezbollah’s illegal telecommunications network in the country’s international airport, the organization initiated an armed assault on the western half of Beirut and the Chouf Mountains, carried out by militiamen wielding AK-47s, Molotov cocktails, sniper rifles, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Government buildings, businesses, and houses in the university and international-hotel districts were attacked. Television stations were ransacked and firebombed. At least 81 people were killed.

There was, in other words, no symmetry whatsoever between the March 14 demonstrations and Hezbollah’s siege on Lebanon’s government; neither their aims nor their methods were in any way similar. The March 14 protests succeeded in forcing out a foreign occupation army. Hezbollah sought to weaken or overthrow the Seniora government, which was

neither foreign nor a dictatorship, but rather democratically elected. Hezbollah's patrons and armorers in Syria and Iran, by contrast, rule by brute force, a quality they have passed on to their Lebanese protégé. Norton's unfortunate determination to see Hezbollah as similar to the Arab world's answer to the "color" revolutions that swept Georgia and Ukraine led him to underestimate the organization's intentions in the region, as well as the measures it would be willing to employ in their service.

If the first edition of *Hezbollah: A Short History* had been published this year, instead of in 2007, Norton might well have avoided most of these mistakes. He isn't a dishonest writer, after all; he simply got some things wrong. In the new afterword to the paperback edition, he clears up some of his errors and concludes with a far more realistic tone than before. "The threat of a new war cannot be ignored," he writes on the last page of the afterword, "even if neither Israel nor Hezbollah seem particularly anxious for it to erupt." Perhaps more important, Norton warns that "Should the United States or Israel, or both, attack Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities with the goal of thwarting Iran's drive to build nuclear weapons, it is possible that Hezbollah would retaliate with its rocket arsenal

against Israel." Gone, it appears, are his assumptions that Hezbollah is on a path to reasonableness and moderation. For Norton, the last two years have apparently been a reality check.

As they have been for most of the rest of us, too. To give Norton the benefit of the doubt, I must confess that, in the past, I have made some of the same errors in judgment regarding Hezbollah. Although the Lebanese scene is not foreign to me, I also thought Israel's withdrawal from that country should have ended the problem—though I wasn't writing professionally about Hezbollah at the time. I also was caught off guard by the 2006 war, but so were most Lebanese and most Israelis. Even Hassan Nasrallah himself said he was surprised by the intensity of the conflagration he ignited. In the end, Norton's errors are the same errors most of us made.

Why were so many people mistaken about Hezbollah? The truth is that it is easy to underestimate the organization. For a variety of reasons, Hezbollah often looks more reasonable than it actually is. For starters, it really *is* more disciplined and restrained than al-Qaida, the Taliban, Hamas, and other militant Islamic groups in the Middle East. It really *does* compete in elections and join in parliamentary coalitions. And while it sometimes uses force to get its way, at other times

it protests nonviolently—something that would not even occur to the likes of Osama Bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Moreover, its sophisticated media relations department employs spokesmen who know exactly what liberal-minded Westerners want to hear. If you squint hard enough at Hezbollah, it can sometimes look like a somewhat cruder version of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), a group of former Islamists who really have joined the democratic mainstream.

During the time I lived in Beirut and since, I've spoken with numerous Hezbollah officials, and I know from experience that they use sanitized, politically correct language when speaking to Westerners, studiously avoiding the hysterical and bigoted rhetoric typical of the party's *Al Manar* television network and newspapers. They're much more adept at this than they used to be, and Norton, after listening to them for years, seems to have taken much of this talk at face value.

It is also possible that Norton, unlike many of us in the media, is unfamiliar with Hezbollah's bullying tactics toward journalists of whom they disapprove. After cracking a joke about Hezbollah on my blog in late 2005, Hussein Naboulsi of their media relations department called me at home and said, "We know who you

are, we read everything you write, and we know where you live." During the war in 2006, Beirut-based *Time* reporter Christopher Allbritton wrote the following on his Web site: "To the south, along the curve of the coast, Hezbollah is launching Katyushas, but I'm loath to say too much about them. The Party of God has a copy of every journalist's passport, and they've already hassled a number of us and threatened one." Reporter Charles Levinson of the *Wall Street Journal* had problems of his own in 2007: "My experience with Hezbollah this week has left an unpleasant taste in my mouth," he wrote. "I had heard this from other journalist friends who have recently returned from Lebanon, but discovered it for myself this week: their interaction with the press borders on fascist." True, some of the Shi'ite party's officials can be charming, even disarming. I, too, might have been inclined to cut Hezbollah some slack and take some of its moderate statements more seriously had I not seen its public-relations mask slip myself.

But Hezbollah is not just the terrorist group, political party, and social-services organization Norton so ably documents. It is also a de facto overseas branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Nor does the organization make much of an attempt to hide this fact. Its original manifesto states, "We are... the

vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran.... We obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and *faqih* (jurist) who fulfills all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. God save him!" Posters of Khomeini and Iran's current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, are still plastered all over Hezbollah-controlled territory along the border with Israel and the suburbs south of Beirut, territory that is effectively an Iranian satellite state inside Lebanon. *This* is Hezbollah's most defining characteristic, and it is the number-one reason the group cannot be adequately compared to other terrorist organizations or political parties.

If Hezbollah actually did resemble Israel or Lebanon's March 14 coalition, Norton's predictions would likely have turned out to be accurate.

Unfortunately, the only equivalency that actually conforms to reality is between Hezbollah and its patron, the Islamic Republic of Iran. This, in turn, leads to the depressing conclusion that despite the confident analyses of Norton and many others, Hezbollah is not likely to change unless the government in Iran changes first. As long as people who, like Norton, make a living by writing on these issues miss this crucial point, they will continue to underestimate and misunderstand Hezbollah, its intentions, and the calamity it is capable of causing in the future.

Michael J. Totten is a freelance foreign correspondent specializing in the Middle East and a former resident of Beirut.