Shi'ite Militarism in a Lawless Land: Israel's Effect on the Formation of the Party of God

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Hezbollah, or "The Party of God," has definitely made their name in the realm of Middle Eastern politics. From innovating the use of car bombs, to pushing the Israe- li Defense Force out of Lebanon, and even to becoming a state-sponsored military force within the Lebanese government's borders, the Party of God has succeeded and even thrived where several terrorist organizations have failed. This is due to the unique geographical and political makeup of Lebanon, the divisive history of its former rulers, and the militant policies Lebanon's occupiers. In this paper, a specific focus is given to the occupation of Lebanon by the Israeli Defense Force and how its militaristic tactics gave birth to a militant movement that would be unrivaled by any that came before.

BEIRUT
33° 53' 13" N | 35° 30' 47" E

In today's political climate, Hezbollah is an all too well-known name in Lebanese politics. Although it started as a local Shi'ite resistance organization designed to fight the Israeli occupation following Operation Peace in Galilee in 1982, it has now grown into a political party so powerful that some already referred to it as a "state within a state" as early as 1996.[1] The ability of a terrorist organization to become so powerful that it is legitimized by its own government and given direct permission to liberate occupied lands is extraordinary; further, that it has been politically powerful enough to make treaties with other nations is an unprecedented feat amongst religious militias at the time of these events.[2,3] The political climate in Lebanon may be a perfect breeding ground for extremist organizations, but the extent of the success of Hezbollah was only made possible due to the climate created by its greatest enemy: Israel. Israel's 1982 invasion and subsequent attempts to control southern Lebanon are directly responsible for Hezbollah's rise to power in the region.

Lebanon is a land created for conflict. From the beginning of the French mandate in the region, the French occupiers designed the borders so that the various religious sects would naturally clash with one another, making the region naturally unstable and easy for fringe groups to make their claim to power. This was done by basing the government on how prevalent each ethnic and religious population was represented in a census taken in 1932, which was never updated despite the change in the religious proportions in the country. Although this was to France's advantage during the mandate as it allowed for easier control of the region, the overlapping religious territory and intentional political separation of the sects guaranteed a source of constant strife long after the French withdrew from the region.[4] Although the census-based government never achieved social equilibrium it was more or less stable until the religious makeup of the nation began to change, causing the now-underrepresented religious denominations to become increasingly agitated in their pursuit of equal representation. This agitation boiled over in the 1975 revolution, which practically removed the Lebanese government as an effective force in Lebanon and replaced it with a litany of militia groups that fought each other for power in bloody room-to-room combat.[5]

Hezbollah, or "The Party of God," is without a doubt the most prevalent of these militia groups in the present day. This organization soared to power in the 1980s by encompassing all the known extremist Shi'a groups in Lebanon and mobilizing them in the pursuit of Israel's destruction.[6] The extreme marginalization of Lebanon's Shi'ite population by the time the Party of God came into existence allowed for Hezbollah's extreme success in recruitment and support

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[1] Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 188.

[2] US Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *State.gov*, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm (Accessed 3/30/2019).

[3] Nafez Qawas, "Berri summons Parliament to vote on policy statement," *Daily Star* (Beirut, Lebanon), May 2, 2018, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/Aug-06/50807-berri-summons-parliament-to-vote-on-policy-statement.ashx.

[4] Thomas Collelo, ed., *Lebanon: A Country Study* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1989), 4-5.

[5] David Gordon, *The Republic of Lebanon: Nation in Jeopardy* (Kent: Westview Press, 1983), 71.

[6] Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 95.

among those in southern Lebanon, especially in the capital of Beirut. However, this was not always the case in the region.

Prior to the marginalization of the Shi'a, southern Lebanon was still a hotbed of terrorism, but of a different breed. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) relocated to Lebanon after being expelled from Jordan and had since used the region as a staging ground to attack Israel. These attacks then triggered counterattacks from the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), both of which caused civilian casualties and extensive property damage. Although the Shi'ites initially sympathized with the Palestinian militants as an oppressed people, not only did the PLO occupation oppress those living in the Shi'ite heartland of southern Lebanon but the counterattacks they sparked turned the area into a warzone without the consent of the occupants.[7] This turned the population against the PLO as Israeli reprisals harmed Lebanese civilians - as opposed to Palestinian militants - while the PLO guerillas would organize themselves in Lebanese villages. As a result, the locals began to organize different training camps in order to defend themselves in case either the Palestinians or Israelis began targeting civilians in order to advance the respective group's goals.[8] This was the beginning of the arming and training of the Shi'ites in southern Lebanon that would later be used to fight Israeli occupation, but at that time the citizens simply concerned themselves with the defense of their own villages. Ironically enough, the armament took place under the training and supervision of the Palestinians, who hoped that armed villagers would help them resist Israeli counterattacks.

It was these Palestinians that the Israelis were initially targeting during their 1982 invasion codenamed Operation: Peace For Galilee. Contrary to what many would expect in the present day, the Shi'ite population in the south did not resist the Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation at first. The Israeli invaders were welcomed with rice and flowers as they rolled through the Lebanese villages because they were seen as liberators, freeing the Shi'ites from their Palestinian oppressors.[9] However, Israeli attacks during the invasion served to galvanize the local population that initially supported them. Not only did they bomb some Lebanese villages before entering, but they also caused extensive damage to the Lebanese capital of Beirut when they began bombing "randomly and indiscriminately" at times, which stood in sharp contrast to the precision bombing used against military targets in other phases of the operation.[10] The climate of "fear and bitterness" caused by the Israeli invasion caused massive amounts of refugees to flee to Beirut, only to be bombed once again by the very Israelis they were fleeing. Many had to take refuge in sewers and dumps as the city was destroyed.[11] The damage caused to the Shi'ites in their villages and the capital of Beirut during the Israeli policy of saturation bombing resulted in 17,825 dead and 30,103

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[7] Thomas Collelo, ed., *Lebanon: A Country Study,* 196-200.
[8] Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance,* 12.
[9] David Gordon, *The Republic of Lebanon: Nation in Jeopardy* (Kent: Westview Press, 1983), 145.
[10] Collelo, ed., *Lebanon*, 214.
[11] Judith Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* (London, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 38.

wounded in all of Lebanon. The Beirut siege eventually turned the southern locals against Israel, even if it was not enough to actively make them engage in armed warfare.[12]

The Israeli attempt to stay in Lebanon and rule the land in a kind of provincial government eventually agitated the Shi'ite population to the point that Hezbollah was able to form. Once the Palestinians were completely pushed out of Lebanon, the southern Shi'ites assumed that the Israelis' job was over and that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) would return to Israel. However, even though the IDF withdrew from the capital, they stayed in the South and began installing measures that would assist in asserting Israel's control of the region to prevent the PLO's return. The Israelis tried to pressure the Shi'ites into providing both political and military long-term support by launching the "Organization for a Unified South" in early 1983.[13] This plan called for each village to select five to eight men to administer the entire region, as well as arming and training local men to create organized militias under the direct control of Israel. This plan was promoted with both positive and negative reinforcement: if the villagers decided to sign up for this militia, known as the National Guard, they were told that their friends and family located in Israeli-controlled prisons may receive expedited sentences. However, the IDF also implied that if men refused to serve, these same family members would experience negative consequences. The formation of the National Guard was just the first offense of what the local Shi'ites considered to be the Israeli occupation of the southern third of Lebanon. At this point, the Israelis began to suffer some light resistance from unorganized Shi'ite fighters, but the action that prompted the full Jihad of the Shi'ite people was the Ashura massacre of 1983. While Shi'ites in the town of Nabityeh were commemorating Ashura – the most sacred festival in Shi'ite Islam – an Israeli military convoy drove through the town. The commander of the convoy attempted to pass through the crowd of around 50,000 worshippers, which infuriated the Muslims who saw it as a violation of their holy day. The Israelis, in turn, saw it as an act of rebellion against their authority and decided to drive directly through the crowd to put it down, prompting the festival goers to throw rocks, burn tires, and blockade the roads. After a vehicle was overturned and set on fire, the Israeli soldiers called for reinforcements and began shooting at the crowd, killing two Shi'ites and injuring fifteen more.[14] The outrage from this incident changed a few isolated pockets of Shi'ite resistance into an entire mobilization of guerilla forces. At first, a fatwa was issued, followed by a full-scale *jihad* – or holy war - as the IDF tried to crack down on the newly founded militias.

The Israelites were shocked that this group - which had originally been tapped as a potential ally in southern Lebanon - had now turned into one of their most passionate enemies. As one Shi'ite hardliner stated: "Israel could have won the southerners' hearts and minds, but instead its warlike style has turned people against it . . . Had the Israelis left after three months, we would still think they were giants. But now it is open season on them, and even old men want to become martyrs."[15] Now that the sleeping giant of Shi'ite militarism had been unleashed, the IDF was

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[12] Gordon, *The Republic of Lebanon,* 144.
[13] Wright, *Sacred Rage,* 221.
[14] Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* 18-19.
[15] Wright, *Sacred Rage,* 223.

bombarded with guerilla attacks until they were eventually forced to retreat behind a "security zone" in Southern Lebanon where they remained in direct control until 2000.[16] Although the Israeli withdrawal prevented them from taking further casualties, it also created circumstances that would help Hezbollah rise to power.

After Israel withdrew from the territories they originally occupied during Operation: Peace for Galilee, they left a power vacuum in their wake that Hezbollah filled. Almost as soon as Israel pulled out of southern Lebanon, the Shi'a guerilla fighters, who at this point had been united into Hezbollah as an umbrella organization even if their manifesto had not yet been released, moved in. The area that had first been ruled by the PLO and then by the IDF now had no ruling force overseeing the region, so it was ripe for Hezbollah occupation and growth, which they immediately capitalized on. "Two days after the withdrawal, an estimated three hundred trucks and crowded buses from Beirut carrying members of Hizbollah, the Party of God, roared through . . . Honking horns and chanting the now familiar '*Allahu Akbar*."[17] Hezbollah, now in control of the majority of southern Lebanon, was able to utilize the power vacuum in order to grow and recruit massive amounts of young fighters to their cause while simultaneously taking positions capable of firing into both the Israeli security zone and Galilee with their Katyusha missile batteries. Of course, none of this would have been possible if not for the foreign arms and funds Hezbollah received from foreign powers.

Israel's occupation of Lebanon not only caused Hezbollah's rise to power by antagonizing young Shi'ite Muslims, but it also prompted other Middle Eastern powers to endorse the young militia movement, cementing their power through arms and funding. Prompted by Israel's invasion, Iran sent 1,500 of its Revolutionary Guards to the Bekaa valley in Lebanon in order to agitate and then train young Shi'ites so they could help spread Iran's Islamic revolution and stop the advance of the Israelis.[18] With the arrival of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG), the Shi'ite clerics that would soon lead Hezbollah were now free from the worry of attacks by opposing militia groups that were also patrolling Lebanon in the absence of any real government. This allowed them to preach freely and motivate several young Muslims in both Baalbeck and Beirut, forming what became Hezbollah by uniting the various splintered militant Shi'ite groups under one unified spirit of *jihad*.[19] In this way, Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon led to the creation of Hezbollah by prompting Iran to send troops to guard the clerics spreading the movement.

Another nation prompted to support Hezbollah due to the arrival of Israeli forces was Syria. Syria had long been occupied with the pastime of manipulating Lebanon's various militia groups to further its own agenda, but with the arrival of Israeli forces, Syria was forced to take a more direct role in the nation due to the IDF's presence so close to Syria's heartland. Although they tried to stop Israel's advance directly, the IDF eliminated the Syrian military as a factor on June 9 in a

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[16] Collelo, ed., *Lebanon*, 210.
[17] Wright, *Sacred Rage,* 228.
[18] John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 147.
[19] Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance*, 20.

massive air battle, and by June 11, Israel had forced Syria into a cease-fire.[20] Without being able to directly stop Israel's occupation, Syria was left to lending political and financial support to the various militia groups that were willing to resist Israel and its proxies. Although Syria's main proxy was Aman, the secular Muslim militia group that Hezbollah splintered off from, it also lent its support to Hezbollah and others to make them shift their focus from fighting each other towards fighting Israel.[21] Although Hezbollah's main sponsor was Iran, the joint pressure from both nations was more than enough to encourage the fledgling militia – who needed very little encouragement to attack Israel in the first place – to focus its attention on Israel and the multinational forces that they regarded as Israel's ally. Syria also played a key role in the funding and arming of Hezbollah as Iran had to move their shipments through Syria for it to reach the guerilla fighters in Lebanon. Without direct support from Syria, Hezbollah knew that it wouldn't be able to survive, so pleasing Syria became a key facet of the Party of God's international relations.[22] Israel's Operation: Peace for Galilee not only brought Hezbollah's primary sponsor Iran into the fold – directly supporting and helping in the formation of Hezbollah – but it also brought Syria in as a major player in the both supporting and manipulating the Party of God.

Israel's invasion and occupation of Lebanon in 1982 was the primary vehicle for the formation of Hezbollah. By agitating the southern Lebanese Shi'ite population through their attempted occupation of the land formally run by the PLO, creating a power vacuum following both the removal of the PLO and partial withdrawal of the IDF from southern Lebanon, and by causing the nations of Iran and Syria to provide direct support to any militia group willing to fight the Israeli occupation, Operation: Peace For Galilee provided the perfect environment for Hezbollah to form and grow. The Party of God became a much more brutal opponent than the Palestinians ever were, making guerilla attacks sometimes seven or eight times a day and launching 900 attacks against their Israeli enemies in 1984 alone.[23] In a single suicide attack innovated by Hezbollah, the Party of God could kill more Israelis than the entire PLO in the five years leading up to Israel's 1982 invasion.[24] As it was stated by Israeli Defense Minister Yitzak Rabin, "I believe that among the many surprises, and most of them not for the good, that came out of the war in Lebanon, the most dangerous is that the war let the Shi'ites out of the bottle. . . . If as a result of the war in Lebanon, we replace PLO terrorism in a southern Lebanon with Shi'ite terrorism, we have done the worst [thing] in our struggle against terrorism."[25]

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[20] Gordon, *The Republic of Lebanon,* 142.
[21] Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance,* 81.
[22] Ibid., 35.
[23] Wright, *Sacred Rage,* 233.
[24] Ibid., 223.
[25] Ibid., 233.