
From The Times

October 6, 2007

Voices of Hezbollah The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah edited by Nicholas Noe translated by Ellen Khouri



Reviewed by Michael Young

THE EMBRACING OF Hezbollah by many on the international Left has been perverse. But it is no mystery why an autocratic, religious party with close ties to Iran's theocracy and Syria's dictatorship appeals to secularists supposedly defending humanism against neocolonial oppression. Both share intense antipathy for the US and Israel, because of the Palestinian conflict.

In Western debate, Hezbollah (the Party of God) has become part of a parochial conversation. Views of it are shaped not by what it represents, but by where it stands in Western foreign policy disputation. *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*, edited by Nicholas Noe, offers two decades of statements by the party's secretary-general, put in their Lebanese context, and showing how selective those idealising Hezbollah's actions can be. (Disclosure: I talked with Noe once about the project before the book was prepared, but otherwise did not participate.)

Hezbollah is an immovable obstacle to Lebanese national reconciliation. It is heavily armed, more powerful than Lebanon's army, refuses to surrender its weapons, protects a semi-autonomous Shia Muslim mini-state amid Lebanese society, and pursues a foreign agenda separate from that of Beirut, particularly with Iran, Syria, and Palestinian militants. Its strength is its worst failing in a country where a sectarian political balance is the usual way of averting conflict.

It has given the Shia a sense of confidence after decades of neglect, but the template of Shia marginalisation is increasingly dated. Lebanon's other religious communities will not long stand idle in the face of a party that manipulates Shia alienation to defend itself and its weaponry; and prevents the State regaining its full sovereignty from Syria after the latter's withdrawal in 2005, for fear that this will mean the end for Hezbollah's armed struggle against Israel.

Nasrallah's charisma derives from meaning what he says. The statements here show how methodical his thinking is. In 1992, after taking control of Hezbollah, he defined its long-term strategy as "fighting against Israel and liberating Jerusalem, as well as Imam Khomeini's proposal – namely ending Israel as a state".

More recently, Nasrallah has been vague about whether Hezbollah would give up its weapons once Israel vacated the Lebanese land that it still occupies. He has, however, never contradicted that

earlier statement. For Nasrallah, Israel poses an existential threat but one that can be eliminated.

In 2000 he told an Egyptian newspaper: "Israel does not have the necessary means of survival in the region for more than a few decades . . ."

Nasrallah rarely asks whether most Lebanese share his ambition of contributing to Israel's demise. Given the devastation that Israel wrought there last summer, one might doubt it. Yet when the secretary-general affirmed in 1992 that "we shall . . . work to turn the whole of Lebanon into a state of resistance", he was saying only what he did before the war last year, when he tried to persuade his Lebanese rivals to adopt a "defence strategy" against Israel that would have integrated the State into Hezbollah's armed struggle, not the other way round.

His contempt for the State was plain in 1996. He observed then: "We believe that if the resistance depended on the political authority of the State, there would be no resistance on the ground at all . . . [it would be] resistance in name only, staged for publicity purposes, rather than genuine, serious, effective." That statement was astonishing for its presumption that resistance should be the yardstick to judge the Government's worth.

Nasrallah's totemisation of resistance accompanied his disdain not only for state authority but also for Lebanon's sectarian order which, for all its flaws, has made the country democratic. Will Nasrallah accept that he is in a dilemma? If Hezbollah doesn't disarm, tensions may lead to a civil war that destroys the party. If he agrees to disarm and integrate Hezbollah into the system, a party that thrives off permanent conflict will lose its reason for existing. Noe's book shows a superior and systematic mind at work, but also that of a man leading his flock into a labyrinth without exits.

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Michael Young is opinion editor of the Daily Star newspaper in Lebanon

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