

BOOK REVIEWS

Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*

(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009, 1st paperback printing), 199 pp. ISBN: 978-0691141077. US\$9.66

Christoph Marcinkowski *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia*

The case of Lebanon, where Twelver Shi'ites constitute the largest single religious community, is crucial when discussing perspectives for peace and stability in the Middle East and the role that Shi'ite Muslims can play within this setting.

Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon and its fight against Hezbollah (*Ḥizb-Allāh*) have not resulted in a victory for the Jewish state. For the first time since the existence of Israel, its armed forces have not achieved their target – the destruction of their enemy's forces. Hezbollah has emerged stronger than before and the war against it has cost Israel dearly. Moreover, in international public opinion, Israel's invasion of Lebanon has resulted in a humanitarian tragedy that has to be considered rare even in the context of the history of war-shattered Middle East. Israel's actions have been widely seen as 'disproportional'.

Perhaps more significant, in the Arab as well as wider Muslim world, is that the victory of Hezbollah over the once considered invincible Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has created a certain optimism, and even euphoria, that Israel can be overcome on the battlefield. This is something which the *conventional* armies of the Arab states, including those of the quasi-state Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), had been unable to do so since 1948, the year of the establishment of Israel as a state. In particular, the crushing defeat in 1967, during the Six Day War, had created a paralysing trauma in the Arab mind. This trauma has now vanished. There exists now a shaky United Nations-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah that has been violated several times so far. At any rate, the 2006 war has brought no conclusive results for Israel, as Hezbollah had not been defeated on the battlefield.

It goes without saying that Hezbollah's success against the IDF is also significant to Iran, whose missiles brought about this 'success' in the first place, and to the majority-Shi'ites in Iraq. This success may cause a certain uneasiness among some of the more conservative regimes in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. However, as I have argued elsewhere,¹ playing the 'Shi'ite card' is only *one* aspect of the current Iranian foreign policy. More significant are Iran's national and

quasi 'imperial' ambitions, which are deeply rooted in the country's past as one of the world's most ancient civilisations.

Moreover, Hezbollah's unassailable political role as *the* major political (and military) force in Lebanon became clear in the 2008 conflict, which was sparked by a government move to shut down Hezbollah's telecommunications network. The result was the worst violence in Beirut since the country's 1975–90 civil war. In bloody street-battles, Hezbollah-led fighters seized control of several West Beirut neighbourhoods from militiamen loyal to the government. What is more, in early January 2011, Lebanon's national unity government collapsed after all ten opposition ministers (most of them belonging to Hezbollah) and one presidential appointee resigned due to tensions stemming from the 'Special tribunal for Lebanon', which was expected to indict Hezbollah members in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Ḥarīrī. The collapse plunged Lebanon into its worst political crisis since the 2008 fighting and indicates further political gains for the Hezbollah-led opposition.

In the light of that setting, Norton argues throughout his narrative that Hezbollah ought to be considered a *social* movement rather than a terrorist organisation. Thus, no 'surgical strikes' would be successful in rooting it out from its southern and eastern strongholds – a circumstance which was painfully experienced by the IDF in the 2006 conflict. Hezbollah enjoys a firm footing among the local population in the Lebanese South, and Norton, too, sees Hezbollah as an integral part of the reality of the South. They are no aliens there – unlike the PLO during the horrifying 1982 Israeli invasion of the country. At that time, the PLO had been quite disliked by the local Shi'ites, the Amal Movement in particular,² as their presence in the country used to provoke Israeli military actions in the South. This 'dislike' culminated into what was known as the 'War of the Camps', a sort of sub-conflict within the Lebanese Civil War in which Palestinian refugee camps were besieged by the Shi'ite Amal militia.

Norton is currently a professor of international relations and anthropology at Boston University. He is best known for his writing on Middle East politics and as an occasional commentator on US policy in that region. His career differs somewhat from that of other academic writers on Middle East issues: Norton served two combat tours in Vietnam as an airborne infantry officer and was later an unarmed United Nations observer with UNTSO in southern Lebanon. In 1981, he joined the United States Military Academy at West Point where he became a professor of political science and taught West Point's only anthropology course. He retired in 1993 with the rank of Colonel in order to join Boston University. In 2006, he was an advisor to the 'Iraq Study Group', also known as the 'Baker-Hamilton Commission'.³ Norton has also written, co-authored or edited more than ten books, and contributed to leading newspapers and magazines. His books include *Amal and*

the Shi'a: The Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1987) and *Civil Society in the Middle East* (ed., 2 vols; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

When talking about *policy recommendations*, the 2006 war and its aftermath, as well as the currently prevailing internal crisis in Lebanon, have clearly shown that the country needs a *holistic* solution. Not one forced upon the country from outside, but rather from within. This 'holistic solution' would be the change of its antiquated constitutional and electoral system based on disproportional communalism, a system that is in no way representative of the actual situation in the country.

In closing, the key of the issue is thus the reform of the Lebanese state and constitution – a heritage of French colonial rule – which favours the rights of minorities, to the disadvantage of the Shi'ite relative majority. Featuring six chapters and a conclusion and which follows recent events up to August 2008, this slim but comprehensive latest updated paperback version of Norton's *Hezbollah: A Short History* is very helpful when it comes to look for solutions and to understand the role of Hezbollah within that setting. It is hoped that another updated edition will appear soon, as recent events in Lebanon warrant further evaluation. Norton would be particularly well-suited to do so.

Notes

1. See Christoph Marcinkowski, *Shi'ite Identities: Community and Culture in Changing Social Contexts*, Freiburg Studies in Social Anthropology 27 (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010), 81ff.
2. The Amal Movement (*Harakat Amal*) is the more moderate predecessor of Hezbollah. Similar to Amal in the late 1970s and early 1980s, its somewhat more belligerent quasi-successor Hezbollah can well be considered as the *current* representative of Lebanon's Shi'ites at large, which form about 40 percent of the population.
3. See on the 'Baker-Hamilton Commission', Marcinkowski, *Shi'ite Identities*, 131.

Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* ['Germany does away with itself: How we are gambling with our country']

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Christoph Marcinkowski *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia*

Perhaps *the* event on the German book market in 2010 was the publication of *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, a book which went into several printings in that year alone. Its author, Dr Thilo Sarrazin (b. 1945), is a serious critic of *unchecked* immigration, a German politician (Social