

## Joseph Daher. *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God*.

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### Reviewed by Richard C. Dietrich

In his conclusion to the section on Hezbollah in *A High Price: The Triumphs & Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*, Daniel Byman writes:

Perhaps more than any other group discussed in this book, the label *terrorist* doesn't do justice to Hizballah. The label is not wrong: the group has done many terrorist attacks in the past, and even today some of its activities fall under the rubric of terrorism. But for Israel, Hizballah's military capabilities are a more serious concern, while for Lebanese and U.S. policy in Lebanon, the organization's political influence is of most concern. When combating Hizballah, its broader dimensions must always be taken into account.[1]

Joseph Daher's work, *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God*, is a masterful study of those broader dimensions. In the Introduction (p. 3) Daher states that his objective is "to understand Hezbollah through a historical and materialist understanding of Political Islam, tracking the evolution of the organization's structures and relationship within the wider political system, and locating this evolution within the changing class and state formation in Lebanon." He justifies his historical materialist approach, which focuses on understanding an organization by examining its underlying economic base, by stating (p. 4) that Hezbollah's "... actual practices can best be understood as harmonious with – and reflective of – the nature of the capitalist environment in which it operates." By concentrating less on the organization's military wing, operations, and ideology, but rather on Hezbollah's evolving place in and relations with Lebanon's society and economy, as well as the organization's responses to the Arab spring, Daher presents a far more nuanced depiction of Hezbollah than is found in most other works.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each with a clearly defined topic. Chapter 1 provides the historical context for Hezbollah's emergence, covering events from the French Mandate to the end of the Civil War (1920-1990). In particular, it focuses on the origins of sectarianism in Lebanon and its influence on Lebanese politics and society. The effects of the Civil War on Lebanon's Shi'a population is another area of emphasis, since Hezbollah's emergence in 1985 occurred in the context of the Civil War (1975-1990).

Chapter 2 covers the period from 1990 to 2016, with emphasis on developments in Lebanon's political economy in general, and the Shi'a population in particular. Daher describes how neoliberal policies, specifically (p. 70) "attracting financial flows from outside with a focus on urban reconstruction as a main sectoral pivot of economic growth", exacerbated the pre-existing economic inequality and regional disparity found in Lebanon, and he examines Hezbollah's stance on the sectarian political system and economic policy. He argues that Hezbollah consistently supports such policies, even when doing so negatively affects the poor.

In the next chapter, Daher traces the effects of those neoliberal policies described in the second chapter on the Shi'a. He follows the emergence of a new Shi'a bourgeoisie, but also shows that not all Shi'a benefitted from Lebanon's economic policies. He examines the relationship between the Shi'a bourgeoisie and Hezbollah and the changes in Hezbollah's base of support among the Shi'a.

Chapter 4 focuses on the growth of Hezbollah, and the means by which it gained dominance among the Shi'a. Daher focuses on the party's organization and network of social services, particularly those related to social support, religious institutions, media and culture, and education and youth.

In chapter 5, Daher examines the relationship between Hezbollah and Lebanese labor unions. After tracing the history of trade unions in Lebanon, he provides examples of Hezbollah's attitude towards labor

movements to illustrate the party's problems in attempting to be a representative of both poor Shi'a and the more affluent Shi'a who constitute an increasingly important part of Hezbollah's social base.

Chapter 6 discusses Hezbollah's armed wing and military activities. This chapter is understandably short since the author's focus is on Hezbollah's economic and political activities, and not the organization's armed capabilities. Nonetheless, the chapter does examine Hezbollah's activities against Israel, as well as Hezbollah's use of its military against other groups in Lebanon, and to ensure its security in the region. Although Hezbollah's capacity for conducting various types of violent operations is not the author's primary area of interest, Daher's failure to mention, even in passing, Hezbollah's role in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005, and its suspected role in the deaths of prominent witnesses and investigators, such as police captain Wissam Eid, is a rather glaring omission.[2]

The final chapter, Chapter 7, Daher devotes to Hezbollah's responses to the Arab Spring, which began in December 2010 and January 2011, and then subsequent developments in the Arab world up to 2016. In particular, this chapter examines the repercussions of Hezbollah's continued deepening involvement in Syria on sectarian tensions in Lebanon, and on Hezbollah's relations with Iran and Hamas.

What Daher has done is document Hezbollah's continuing transformation from being the champion of Lebanon's Shi'a population and a political outsider to being, in many ways, a political actor much like other political parties and interest groups in Lebanon. While Hezbollah's organization in general, and its military wing in particular, make it distinctive from more typical political parties, this book provides a well-documented picture of Hezbollah as an organization that has become an important part of Lebanon's economy and sectarian political system. This is a perspective on Hezbollah that is generally missing from works that tend to concentrate on its armed activities.

Joseph Daher's work is a pleasure to read as well as being immensely informative. His prose is clear and flowing, and his arguments are logically organized and well supported. In fact, the reference section is one of the particularly outstanding features of this book. Clearly, Daher has not only thoroughly researched his topic, but he has done so utilizing sources in English, French and Arabic, providing an especially broad perspective. *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God* is essential reading for anyone interested in gaining a more complete understanding of Hezbollah, or present day Lebanese politics.

**About the Reviewer:** Richard Dietrich, Ph.D., is a lecturer at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.

## Notes

[1] Daniel Byman, *A High Price: The Triumphs & Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.265.

[2] For more information see Ronen Bergman, "The Hezbollah Connection", *The New York Times* (15 February 2015) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/the-hezbollah-connection.html> (accessed 2 August 2017)