

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Eyewitness Lebanon: In the land of the Blind

**Hezbollah-Worship, Slavish Anti-Imperialism and
the Need for a Real Alternative**

Michael Schmidt

Michael Schmidt
Eyewitness Lebanon: In the land of the Blind
Hezbollah-Worship, Slavish Anti-Imperialism and the Need
for a Real Alternative
September 3, 2006

Retrieved on 5th August 2021 from anarkismo.net

theanarchistlibrary.org

September 3, 2006

Contents

SOCIALISM AND THE HEZBOLLAH RESISTANCE	7
A PYRRHIC VICTORY FOR BOTH SIDES	9
DRESSING UP CLERICO-POPULISTS AS NA- TIONAL LIBERATORS	11
A NON-NATIONALIST LIBERATION STRUGGLE? .	13
THE ANARCHIST ROOTS OF LEBANESE RADI- CALISM	15
OPPOSING THE ELITES OF ISRAEL, SYRIA AND LEBANON	17
CHALLENGES FOR ANARCHIST COMMUNISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST	19

roots and by an anarkismo.net helper for raising”not a single NO (among all the NOs included) to the Israeli Zionist fascist clique.”

So much for anarchist analysis – but is there a real anarchist communist option for Lebanon? As the most socially liberal country in the Arab world, there is a great chance for a real politics of liberation to take root. If, as Price argues, “*only the anarchist programme can*” “*liberate Lebanon and other countries from imperialism,*” such a programme at least requires pragmatic solidarity and a functional network of councillist, left communist and anarchist communist organisations in the region. Only these, working within broader working class formations – such as the Lebanese General Union of Workers or the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq or whatever progressive social forces exist – can begin to build a counterpower that not only resists imperialism, but also the seductive lure of “radical, anti-imperialist” Islam.

www.sundaytimes.co.za

capacity problem common to small “Third World” anarchist organisations such as my own. In response to this criticism, he asked those making it to get in touch with al-Badil in order to establish a dialogue. Later addition (5 Sept). Specifically he says “I know that to be small organisation is not a wrong. But the problem it is that there are not many anarchists in Lebanon. We will go down more and more on the ground. The comrades of France perhaps will organize a money collection to help lebanese after this war; they have another project on the level of the SIL to finance us precise projects to reinforce us. We continue to estimate that the theoretical level is important and not only to take part in demonstrations. We have the project to ask to the SIL to finance us the publication of other delivers on anarchism.”

Regarding this year's war, the ACT said: *"This attack must be analyzed as part of a wider scenario. In our opinion, it arises in the context of the American plan for a Great Middle East. George W. Bush wants to create a large area that would be favourable to him and which would include Arabic countries and Israel, leading to the end, in one way or another, of conflict in the Near East. Iran and Syria are opposed to this project, which is obviously a good thing. But the bad thing is that Syria and Iran, who support Hezbollah and who fight against the plans of Bush and the Israeli government, are clearly totally reactionary countries, from all aspects."*

Hezbollah was described as *"a party that, despite all it has done in order to drive Israel from Southern Lebanon and despite the large number of martyrs sent to carry out their religious duty, a one-way ticket to a paradise of honey and houris, has not satisfied Lebanese expectations for many years. The 'Party of God', under Iranian control, is clearly and obstinately anti-freedom... Once a party of resistance and sacrifice, the 'Party of God' has become unbearable..."*

"We say NO to Hezbollah as a reactionary, religious, pro-Iran party; NO to Bush, Blair and Chirac, who consider these disproportionate attacks (the destruction of Lebanon to obtain the release of some soldiers) as a legitimate form of self-defence by Israel; NO to the UN Security Council's timid and ambiguous behaviour; NO to the Lebanese government which is incapable, weak and contradictory, wasting its time begging for help, counting the casualties and placing its hope in international tribunals." This comment has, however, been criticised by other anarchists in Lebanon¹⁹ as coming from a group out of touch with the grass-

¹⁹ A member of RASH filed a comment to anarkismo.net criticising the al-Badil statement on the war (note 15 below), saying it "does not represent in any way the tendency of [the] Lebanese autonomous or anarchist movement. [T]his writer should be ashamed of himself and could do better by showing up in protests rather than just writing nonsense propaganda." Saad admitted to me when I was in Baabda that al-Badil was not as active as it could be, a

[NB: I'm an anarchist communist journalist and wrote this piece specifically for anarkismo.net. I entered Lebanon via Syria, from the north during the second half of the war, on the last access road not yet bombed by the Israelis (yet a plantation I travelled through was flattened an hour after I passed). I travelled mainly in Beirut and in its bombed southern suburbs, and in Sidon in the south as far south-east as the target of Ghazieh, leaving on the first military transport flight out after the ceasefire came into effect. The experience of war narrows one's focus very sharply: in other words, being on the ground gives one a unique insight into local conditions, but deprives one of a wider perspective. For example, coming within 1.5km of being on the receiving end of an Israeli airstrike made a deep impression on me in terms of the Lebanese cost — but it was impossible for me to assess the Israeli cost from that position].

Even for conservative capitalist journals such as *The Economist*, bearded, smiling Hezbollah chieftain Hassan Nasrallah is the face of the recent Israeli-Lebanese War — but for me, the face that defined the war will always be that of two-year-old Malak Jubeily, lying dead in a morgue in the southern port city of Sidon.

Malak lived in the predominantly Shi'ite suburb of Ghazieh, south-east of Sidon. Tall for her age, she had just complained to her father Ali Mohammed Jubeily, 31, that she was hungry, when an Israeli rocket slammed into the tiny cemetery next door to her house on August 8. Shrapnel from the rocket — targeted at a funeral being held for the entire families of a pharmacist named Khalifeh and a fisherman named Badran, killed in the Israeli bombing of the central square of Ghazieh the previous day — cut open Malak's belly and sliced through her left thigh.

Malak bled to death.

Now she is merely a statistic¹, listed among the 1,261 Lebanese dead (60 of them non-combatant soldiers, and perhaps 100 of them combatant Hezbollah guerrillas) and 159 Israeli dead (116 of them combatant soldiers). And yet, in the inevitable capitalist logic, a victor had to be declared in this, yet another illegitimate imperialist war waged against a civilian population in the Middle East by US proxy Israel.

So, The Economist boldly proclaimed on its front page Nasrallah wins the war², arguing that the surprisingly sustained Hezbollah rocket attacks against Israel fostered “*the old illusion that Palestine can be liberated by force*” among other Islamist forces including the Hamas government of the Palestinian territories.

A debate has been raging in anarchist communist circles (see comments on anarkismo.net articles on the war) about where the emphasis should lie in our analysis of the war. It is clear that for people living in Northern and Western countries, the strategic objectives of the US/Israeli powers in pursuing this imperialist war — weakening Lebanon presumably in order to pave the way for the conquest of Syria and Iran in the manner of the Iraqi invasion and occupation — need to be underlined. However, for many people living in the South and East — including both Lebanese and South African anarchist communists — the question of US/Israeli imperialism is patently obvious, and so our analysis shifts rather to Hezbollah which is being upheld by the left for its “legitimate defence” against attack.

¹ The reasons I name Malak are firstly, that she represents 27% of those killed on the Lebanese side: children under 15 who are clearly not legitimate military targets. And secondly, because humanity needs to be injected into these debates, not for reasons of sentiment, but because if we are waging a battle for the heart of society, we have to care about actual people.

² Editorial, The Economist, Nasrallah wins the war, August 19–25, 2006.

*control and nostalgics of Lebanon’s dark past*¹⁷. The behaviour of the Lebanese Communist Party is nothing short of scandalous. Together with a few others, most of whom nostalgic for Arab Nasserism, it makes up a very weak third camp with little or nothing to offer [so it backs Hezbollah]. There has, however, been a split within it (Communist Intifada), which Al-Badil is close to.”

CHALLENGES FOR ANARCHIST COMMUNISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The condition of anarchist communism in Lebanon is nevertheless very weak, notably ACT’s failure to establish relations with the Israeli/Palestinian organisation Anarchists Against The Wall (AATW) — the “apartheid” wall that divides their territory — and its lack of contact with anarchists and left communists in countries such as Egypt, Turkey (Anarchist Communist Initiative), Iran and Iraq in particular (the councilist Workers’ Communist Parties in the latter two) that would allow a far clearer regional anarchist communist analysis and jointly co-ordinated approach to the problems of the Middle East to be developed¹⁸.

¹⁷ The 2005 “Cedar Revolution” that forced the withdrawal of Syrian forces was precipitated by a mass demonstration on March 14 of that year, but this force is really a very broad front of mixed political orientation including many Hariri supporters, leading to criticism by some Lebanese anarchists about working within or alongside it. Nevertheless, anarchists have to work within the working class and poor, not outside them. This is a real challenge in the conditions of Lebanon where non-party social movements appear to be virtually non-existent and party-based patronage and exclusion dominates social life, from getting a job to where you live.

¹⁸ This weakness is sadly common to many anarchist organisations: they tend to relate to organisations with a common language, which divides the anarchist world into Anglophone, Lusophone, Francophone etc blocs. So, a key strength of the anarkismo project is its rapid translation of anarchist analysis from around the world into a range of different languages (similar to the a-infos project’s work relating to anarchist news).

“There is little to say about the Lebanese left — much of it is identical to the petit-bourgeois parties, more interested in getting a bigger slice of the cake than with real change. Its members actually support the liberal economic policies of the government — it is strange to sometimes hear the old Maoists quoting Marx to justify their ‘provisional return’ to capitalism.”

But, following the Lebanese General Union of Workers standing up to state military suppression of a demonstration in 1994, Bassan said, *“the radical communist left is starting to regroup. It is made up of many political strands, but it is noticeable that even the nationalists are becoming more influenced by libertarianism, even anarcho-syndicalism. There is, then, a glimmer of hope, providing everyone learns the bitter lessons of experience. If we can work together in our areas of agreement, we may be able to regain the good years of 1970–75, before the war overtook the radical left.”*

In its statement on the war this year, ACT said¹⁶ that this radical communist left had since consolidated: *“Since Syria’s humiliating retreat from Lebanon, two large political trends have developed: the 14th of March current (the date of the huge demonstration that took place after the assassination of ex-Prime minister Rafik Hariri), and the pro-Syrian 8th of March current, which has been joined by the Christian supporters of [retired pro-Hezbollah] General [Michel] Aoun, since he was promised the presidency of the Republic. We believe that the 14th of March camp constitutes a relatively ‘revolutionary’ current, in comparison with the 8th of March current which comprises corrupt elements under Syrian*

¹⁶ However, an unyielding atheist position may prove problematic in that if anarchist communists slam the door on Muslim youth looking for a radical path, it could simply drive them into the arms of the likes of Hezbollah or even al-Qaeda. So far, this debate has primarily been held in the West where Muslims are in the minority — but is of far greater interest to Middle Eastern and North African anarchist movements where mainstream society is dominated by Islam. On the other hand, anarchists cannot, like much of the left, align themselves with right-wing imams on the spurious grounds that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”.

This does not in any way mean we equate the nuclear rogue state of Israel with massive conventional forces on its side — surely a greater danger to Middle Eastern and world peace than Iran with its uranium enrichment programme — with the ill-armed, marginal, sub-state guerrilla forces of Hezbollah. And it’s not merely a question of a military imbalance, but a political imbalance between a people, many of them extremely poor, who for so long have been pawns in the geo-politics of the region, and a relatively wealthy people propped up by the world’s single-most aggressive super-power.

SOCIALISM AND THE HEZBOLLAH RESISTANCE

The socialist press, from which one would expect a different take to that of The Economist, trumpeted a similar theme, albeit for different reasons. Socialist Worker, the British paper whose photographer Guy Smallman I met briefly in Beirut, proclaimed US empire is rocked by Israel’s defeat³, stating that *“the resistance across the region has been strengthened”*, thwarting American designs on following up the invasion of Iraq with that of Hezbollah’s alma mater, Iran. Certainly, Israel threw more than enough ordnance at Lebanon in pursuit of objectives that clearly had nothing to do with the recapture of two of its kidnapped soldiers, having been worked out months in advance. Its cluster-bombs (apparently made by the US) continue to maim people returning to the devastated areas who stumble across them, while several others have died since the official cease-fire in further Israeli incursions into Lebanon. Israel’s imperialist campaign against Lebanon is far from over and any multinational “peace-keeping force” is likely to prop up Israel against its neighbour.

³ Joseph Choonara, Socialist Worker, US empire is rocked by Israel’s defeat, www.socialistworker.co.uk

Socialist Worker's Simon Assaf said⁴ that Hezbollah's victory was assured because of a massive return of displacees into south Lebanon on the last day before the cease-fire of August 14, in defiance of continued Israeli bombing and that the Israeli forces were compelled to retreat by this human wave; that it was "freedom from below". That seems a little unconvincing to me, because whatever the left may wish, "the people" in this context usually means Nasrallah's armed choirboys.

Of course, Israel and the right, naturally also claim victory, in having significantly damaged Hezbollah's main base of operations south of the Litani River, in the southern Shi'ite suburbs of Beirut and in the Bekaa Valley, that traditional hideout of every radical organisation from the nearly-defunct Japanese Red Army to the now-moderate Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Militarily, as Kenneth Besig said in the Jerusalem Post⁵, the "victory" may well be Hezbollah's: *"Fewer than 5,000 poorly-armed Hezbollah terrorists stood off the mighty IDF [Israeli Defence Force] for over a month. An Islamic terrorist gang with no tanks, no artillery, no fighter jets, no attack helicopters, and just a few RPG's and rifles held to a standstill nearly 30,000 crack IDF troops with the finest tanks, the best artillery, the fastest and most advanced fighter-jets and attack helicopters in the world. And they can still empty our northern communities with their rockets whenever they want. If that is not a victory, then the word has no meaning."*

In military terms, of course, this was an asymmetrical war, with Israeli might overwhelmingly targeting civilians and civil infrastructure with precision bombing (and many "mistakes" resulting from such precision including the Qana Massacre and the shooting up of a United Nations-protected displacee

⁴ Simon Assaf, Socialist Worker, Lebanon: freedom from below, www.socialistworker.co.uk

⁵ Kenneth Besig, Jerusalem Post, quoted in Mike Whitney, Restarting the 34-day War, Counterpunch, www.counterpunch.org

syndicalist guerrilla force in the 1970s). This is history that the ACT, according to Saad, was unaware of and what this rootlessness means in a Middle Eastern country with far more liberal than libertarian socialist tradition.

OPPOSING THE ELITES OF ISRAEL, SYRIA AND LEBANON

This is tough territory for the left to operate in, after all: pro-Syrian former LCP leader George Hawi was among those assassinated in a series of bombings last year. Saad said that ACT is a staunchly atheistic organisation, a hard sell in Lebanon perhaps, but one which could enable it to cross the religious sectarianism exploited by imperialist powers such as the US/Israel and Iran/Syria/Libya during the Civil War. As ACT's Basina Bassan said in a 1995 statement (when the organisation's name was simply Libertarian Alternative)¹⁴, *"the underlying cause of the war — the religious divide — has not really been addressed, and so the situation remains explosive"*. Lebanese society remained deeply divided along confessional lines¹⁵.

"Lebanon is a land of unrestrained capitalism," Bassan continued, *"with a government in favour of economic liberalism and privatisation — this in a country with little electricity, few telephones, and little clean drinking water. The wages of the most impoverished continue to fall, while the rich avoid paying their taxes, and what money there is the government spends on luxuries for its ministers."*

¹⁴ Ilham Khuri-Makdissi, *Levantine Trajectories: The Formulation and Dissemination of Radical Ideas in and between Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria 1860–1914*, Harvard University, 2003.

¹⁵ Basina Bassan, *Al-Badil al-Taharurri, Alternative Libertaire* (English translation), 1996, *News from the Land of the Cedars*, www.zabalaza.net

which is opposed to Syrian meddling in Lebanese affairs — in opposition to a Syrian revanchist faction (Syria and Lebanon were one state under French mandate from 1918–1946).

Syria/Lebanon’s anarchist history is slender, but a groundbreaking study by Ilham Khuri-Makdisi¹³ shows that from about 1904, a group of Syrian/Lebanese radicals grouped around the figure of Daud Muja’is began disseminating socialist thought, and established night schools and reading rooms in Beirut and in Mount Lebanon (then a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire). This network interacted with other revolutionary networks in the region, notably the multi-ethnic network in Alexandria and Cairo that established the Free Popular University in Egypt in 1901, and the International League of Cigarette Workers and Millers of Cairo in 1908 (Egypt had been represented by Errico Malatesta in the Black International as far back as 1881 and by 1895, the first Arabic anarchist translations appeared).

The Muja’is network held what appears to be the Middle East’s first celebration of May Day near Beirut in 1907. After the Young Turk ‘revolution’ of 1908/9 overthrew Sultan Abdulhamid II, and the Turkish nationalists — who had initially been drawn to insurgent anarchism — showed their true colours, the Muja’is network and its papers *al Nar* of Beirut and *al Hurriyya* of Alexandria took a distinctly anarchist turn and in 1909 staged a wildly popular play about the anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer, murdered that year by the Spanish state.

However, the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and the rise of Arab nationalism after the 1918 collapse of the Ottoman Empire put paid to the Syrian/Lebanese anarchist movement — until, as far as is known, the founding of ACT after the end of the Civil War (details have been lost on the Palestinians who trained Argentine’s *Resistencia Libertaria* anarcho-

¹³ James Miller (killed by Israeli fire during the filming) & Saira Shah, *Death in Gaza*, 2004, www.imdb.com

convoy). Nose-cones, shrapnel and fins of powerful missiles, allegedly US-made smart-bombs and bunker-busters, were found in the rubble of flattened neighbourhoods, leading to widespread suspicions that the US was using Lebanon as a bombing test-range in the same way as the Nazis used Spain.

I certainly witnessed chilling evidence of a bomb that takes buildings down soundlessly, apparently sucking them into an intense vacuum, whereas other bombs and rockets were exceptionally. Ranged against this, Hezbollah tried to hit who knew what (civilian or military targets) with low-yield guidance-less World War II-era Katyusha rockets. I did not personally see any evidence of Hezbollah firing missiles from residential areas — but I was shooed away by security men, presumably Hezbollah, in their stronghold of Ghazieh, who wanted to prevent me seeing some relatively small items being removed from the garage of a bombed house into the boot of a black Mercedes. These may well have been mortars, or some such small ordnance, but I have no proof. Nevertheless, the imbalance of power neither makes this a “conflict” instead of a war, as some analysts argued, nor means that anarchists should uncritically back the underdog.

A PYRRHIC VICTORY FOR BOTH SIDES

But, in political terms, both sides’ claims of victory are wrong — and not only the dead testify to that. Israel clearly failed not only to comprehensively crush Hezbollah, but united, rather than divided the Lebanese population along its traditional religious fault-lines that were so painfully in evidence during the 1975–1991 Civil War (this divide-and-rule strategy was alleged by some Lebanese I spoke to to be Israel’s objective: keep Lebanon disunited and weak in order to install a puppet regime in Beirut).

Israel is also back in south Lebanon, where I doubt it actually wants to be, having withdrawn in 2000 in what was a positive move towards alleviating tensions in the region. Its war has pushed the inevitable negotiations with Hamas (with the bonus of the moderating gentrification that being in power brings) to a more remote date, making full withdrawal from the unwanted Gaza Strip and unmanageable West Bank impossible.

On the other hand, Hezbollah's "victory" is just as Pyrrhic. The Arab world, in disarray ever since Israel's stunning pre-emptive Six-Day War in 1967 and increasingly lured by Western patronage in the absence of a Soviet option, is nowhere near as united behind a Hezbollah-style project as the rhetoric issuing from capitals such as Damascus makes it seem.

Egypt and Jordan have signed peace deals with Israel, effectively giving up on the dream of pushing Israel into the sea (significant in Egypt because Cairo was once the capital of para-fascist "Nasser-socialism"⁶, and in Jordan because it is a de facto Palestinian state, yet one with a stable, employed, integrated Palestinian majority).

Libya and Syria no longer intervene directly in Lebanese affairs, with Syria having withdrawn its military forces last year (and, contrary to "Axis of Evil" propaganda, Syria keeps it Palestinians under strict control)⁷. Iraq is wrapped up in

⁶ For the Nazi origins of Gamal Abdel Nasser's "Arab socialism" read Martin A. Lee's seminal account of the post-war survival of the fascist idea in *The Beast Reawakens: Fascism's Resurgence from Hitler's Spymasters to Today's Neo-Nazi Groups and Right-Wing Extremists*, Little Brown & Co., 1997. Lee's arguments, it must be noted, are often deeply unpopular with the left which tries to divine a liberatory project in such state centralism — but an Arabist "third position" has certainly proven influential among certain neo-fascist factions. From amazon.com: [www.amazon.com &n=283155](http://www.amazon.com/?tag=283155)

⁷ Apart from a yellow-and-green Hezbollah flag flying from a statue of Salah ad-Din — the conquerer of the Crusaders — in downtown Damascus, and several on roadside stalls near the Lebanese border, I saw very little obvious Syrian support for Hezbollah.

The poverty in the camps and the lack of a future make their inhabitants prime fodder in being trained up in the death-cults espoused by groups such as Hezbollah. This is identical to the warped ethic under which young boys depicted in films such as *Death in Gaza*¹² are trained by their cynical "elder brothers" to seek martyrdom. Malak's father told me without a trace of regret: "*We offer up our children as a sacrifice to Allah*" — though her mother Khadija, 24, choked in pain when she heard his callous words. This martyrology is a national mental disease in Lebanon, with public displays running the gamut from street-light posters of "martyred" children in Ghazieh to the bullet-holed Martyr's Monument in downtown Beirut, one statue of which has ironically lost an arm.

THE ANARCHIST ROOTS OF LEBANESE RADICALISM

In the land of the blind, the one-eyed is king. But who is king in Lebanon, in the sense of who has vision? Is it the nascent anarchist movement, al-Badil al-Chouii al-Taharruri (ACT, Libertarian Communist Alternative: www.albadilaltaharrouri.com/)? As an anarchist-communist, I would like to think so, but in order to assess this, I met with ACT militant and academic Georges Saad in Baabda, south-east of Beirut and from his balcony, watched Israeli warplanes and warships flatten entire city blocks in the neighbouring suburb of An outgrowth of Alternative Libertaine (AL) of France, but consisting primarily of Arabic-speaking Lebanese members, ACT is a small organisation in a country with 3-million people. It associates closely with Communist Intifada, a radical faction within the declining Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), and work together within a broader social formation called the 14th of March Movement

¹² James Miller (killed by Israeli fire during the filming) & Saira Shah, *Death in Gaza*, 2004, www.imdb.com

against each other, so the question of who started the war is irrelevant. But though anarchists instinctively back the underdog, for us to be “*on the side of the people of the oppressed nation, supporting them against attacks from their oppressors,*” as Price put it, could imply being on the side of Hezbollah, simply because it was doing most of the (defensive and offensive) fighting on the Lebanese side.

Price argues convincingly that anarchists should support “*national liberation (here meaning the same as national self-determination: the right of a people to determine its own fate).*” And he also rightly points to the Makhnovist model of “*a national liberation struggle being waged with a non-nationalist program*”. But the problem here, in real terms, is: whose “*national struggle*” (Karadjis’ phrase) is this anyway? The Palestinians? The Lebanese? The Iranians? And at the moment, there simply is as yet no Lebanese mass organisation with a clearly non-nationalist programme for anarchists to support.

On the other hand, Hezbollah has become inextricably linked with Lebanon, and has developed a wide range of social functions (a key feature of populist movements), stepping into the vacuum created by both the weakness of the Lebanese state and the Syrian withdrawal to become what some have called a “state within the state” (a clear source of its power).

But clearly, this Lebanese patriotism has been forced on Hezbollah simply because it is a fish out of water in any other context. It certainly would not be at home in either Syria or Iran or, even, arguably, the Palestinian territories: with a membership drawn primarily from among third- and fourth-generation Lebanese, they are naturalised Lebanese and no longer Palestinian. Though its recruiting-grounds are the impoverished camps established after the 1948 Israeli land-grab, many poor non-Palestinian Lebanese also live in these camps simply because rents and food are subsidised, further diluting the “Palestinian” nature of Hezbollah and, thus, to a degree, the validity of its claims against Israel.

its own bloody insurgency — while the Arabian Peninsula oil-states bask in the glamour of huge tourist-oriented building projects.

The Palestinian cause that Hezbollah champions is an article of faith that few Arabs care to get their hands dirty over. For distant, non-Arab Iran, Hezbollah is an expendable pawn of use only so long as it can drum up Islamist support. But what is the true nature of Hezbollah, the self-proclaimed Party of God? It is at the same time a guerrilla force, a Shi’ite religious movement, a social organisation — and a conventional Lebanese parliamentary political party.

DRESSING UP CLERICO-POPULISTS AS NATIONAL LIBERATORS

Nasrallah himself has mutated his image, from the close-cropped beard, modern glasses, sports jacket and open-necked shirt of a Mediterranean businessman to the black-turban, grey abaya, and bushy beard of a fundamentalist patriarch whose acolytes chant “Allah! Nasrullah!” as if he is a new prophet.

Most commentators note that Hezbollah sprang up in 1985 among Shi’ites in the Palestinian refugee camps of southern Lebanon — three years after the last major Israeli invasion — as a new generation of radicals tired of the compromises struck by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation under the late Yassir Arafat and Fatah. The right unsurprisingly sees Hezbollah as an outright terrorist organisation publicly dedicated to the obliteration of Israel. The left, however, is not at all sure how to deal with Hezbollah, especially given the fact that it appeared to be the only force that resisted the Israeli invasion. Marxist-Leninist journalists such as Michael Karadjis of Australia’s Green Left Weekly⁸ claim it as a “a

⁸ Michael Karadjis, Green Left Weekly, Lebanon: Hezbollah: its origins and aims, August 9, 2006, www.greenleft.org.au

national liberation movement, rather than an ‘Islamist’ or ‘terrorist’ organisation” that has managed remain non-sectarian and avoid the pitfalls of both Islamic fundamentalism (being hostile to a marginal Al Qaeda presence in Lebanon) and of opposing Jews for their faith instead of Zionism for its imperialism. But however “non-sectarian” it is, it is hardly in favour of free thought – as the martial tone of its propaganda videos on al-Manar TV show⁹.

Is Hezbollah “Islamofascist” as the European, American and Israeli right claims? The Lebanese people should be able to tell, having direct experience of home-grown fascism thanks to the Khataeb (Falangist) party, founded along Spanish Falangist lines in 1936 and responsible for the Israeli-sanctioned Sabra and Shatilla massacre of Palestinian refugees in southern Beirut in 1982. Certainly Hezbollah is a theocratic right-wing organisation built on conservative social grounds and an obscene leadership cult – and I suspect its adoption of the goose-step and the Nazi salute is far from accidental. The most visible faction of the Lebanese anarchist movement¹⁰ characterizes Hezbollah as “reactionary”. I’d prefer the term clerico-populist.

Karadjis writes: *“Hezbollah is a nationalist, not a socialist, organisation, and socialists have many differences with Hezbollah’s ideology and many of its tactics. However, recognising that it is a national liberation movement rather than a ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘terrorist’ organisation is important in understanding the kinds of allies that are necessary in national struggle. Moreover,*

⁹ Clips from these Hezbollah propaganda adverts can be viewed online at: www.sundaytimes.co.za

¹⁰ I heard of, but did not encounter, student anarchists at the American University of Beirut. A (presumably Lebanese) group from international anti-fascist organisation Red and Anarchist Skin-Heads (RASH) working in Europe reported that they had returned to Lebanon to provide direct mutual aid to villages in the south of Lebanon deemed unreachable by aid workers. Interview with anarchist militants in Lebanon, Infoshop, 23 August 2006, www.infoshop.org

it is not necessary to romanticise Hezbollah in order to recognise that its actual political evolution and many of its tactical decisions make it a far better vehicle for the national struggle than many other organisations in the region with roots in ‘political Islam’, such as al Qaeda.”

He must have been watching a different Hezbollah propaganda broadcast to me. Hezbollah could easily be viewed as Iranian proxy force in much the same way as many national communist parties of the Cold War were little more than proxys for Soviet foreign policy. Established as a strike-breaking force of thugs in Iran by the Ayatollah Khomeini’s clerical counter-revolution in 1979 (apparently deemed a genuine revolution by Karadjis), its Lebanese offshoot is still used to play a plausibly-deniable long-range game by financiers and armourers in far-off Iran and elsewhere. But despite Iran’s boast of having armed Hezbollah, this should not be seen as an endorsement of US aims to tar-and-feather Iran with Hezbollah’s brush – which is according to many analysts the real strategic objective behind the Israeli-Lebanese War: to prop up the “War on Terror” after the outright failure of the invasion of Iraq to either find weapons of mass destruction or to stop Iraqi resistance to Coalition/proxy rule.

A NON-NATIONALIST LIBERATION STRUGGLE?

Anarchists such as Wayne Price of the North-Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC) have argued¹¹ that it is an error to “*equate the two sides*” – Israel and Hezbollah – which naturally leads to a failure to support the oppressed against the oppressors. Clearly both sides have antique grudges

¹¹ Wayne Price, North-Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists, Lessons for the anarchist movement of the Israeli-Lebanese war, written for anarkismo.net, 2006, www.anarkismo.net