

# Hezbollah: Is this still really resistance?

Commentary by **Riccardo Dugulin** – 15 January 2012



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The term ‘resistant’ provides the person it describes with an almost immediate moral high ground. Regardless of the historical time and place, once put into a conflict situation the resistant is an individual that willingly decides to make disproportionate sacrifices and to take above than average risks to defend his values and homeland. From the *Hashashiyyin* Shiite rebels resisting Sunni Saljuq rule in Persia between 1092 and 1265 to the armed Algerian factions freeing their territory from French occupation in the 1950’s; resistance movements always face a large and organized foreign army with elements of indirect and asymmetric warfare. Beyond the concrete operational techniques such armed groups decide to use to protect and free their homeland, the resistant is the beneficiary of almost complete moral superiority.

It is so because warfare is not considered its primary function and as a civilian taking up arms to rid his motherland from an aggressor, his or her actions enshrine a truly romantic sense of courage and devotion to a higher cause. In postwar Europe, ex-members of militias which participated in freeing the continent from Nazi occupation quickly became top-tier figures in politics and the civil society, their operational pasts rarely being questioned.

A constant variable in the last fifty years has been, for the Arab states, a more or less determinable belligerence of the installed regimes against the State of Israel. As the Arab world is going through tectonic changes, durable peace and acceptance of the Jewish State by local politicians and societies remains hubris of Western commentators and wishful thinkers. Nevertheless, if this animosity is deeply rooted in the current Arab world, only few actors perceive themselves as actively resisting Israel.

The twenty first century’s self-proclaimed Arab *mouqawimin* (resistance fighters) are by excellence the Al-Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon (and by extension Ahmadinejad’s authoritarian regime in Iran). Syria, under Assad’s current repression is quickly becoming a pariah state internationally and regionally, consequently disarming it from its former foreign policy

attributes. In effect, Bashar Al-Assad is no longer regarded ideologically as a resistance symbol against Israel and the protector of the rights of the oppressed. In Lebanon, and since the fall of Saad Hariri's government in January 2011, the party of God has never had a tighter grip on Lebanese internal and external policies than it has today.

In a turbulent period for Arab politics, the idea of 'resistance' has become openly questionable. As entire portions of the Syrian population are rising against a long lasting authoritarian regime while Hezbollah strongmen keep gaining grounds in Lebanon, resistance movements appear to be less focused on their rhetorical struggle against the Jewish State than they are concerning their control of their own State institutions. Since the 2006 war, Hezbollah has targeted its actions on achieving political supremacy in Lebanon, with the possibility of war with Israel being used as a pretext and as a means for the movement's final purpose, and not an objective per se.

### ***2006: forcing the resistance***

On August 14<sup>th</sup> 2006, United Nations Security Council resolution 1701 put an official end to hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah. Over little more than a month of war, more than 1100 Lebanese civilians, and some 100 Israelis lost their lives in the conflict. Still today, while driving through the streets of Dahieh, Beirut's southern impoverished suburbs and Hezbollah's stronghold in Lebanon, one will see signs celebrating the 2006 'divine victory'. Although Hezbollah disputes this, the conflict, according to many reports, was initiated unilaterally by Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's forces. The conflict caused severe damage to the already weak Lebanese national infrastructure. The abduction of two IDF soldier along with the killing of three others near the border village of Za'rit led to a conflict from which the only beneficiary was Hezbollah.

Claims that war against the Jewish State remains justified, as Israeli forces are still occupying the Shebaa farms and Ghajar village, did not echo in the party of God actions as they endangered the whole Lebanese territory. In fact, one may say that the year 2000, following the liberation of the south by Hezbollah, marked a shift in the party's active operational resistance to foreign occupation of Lebanese territory. Attacks by the movement have not been focused ever since on hard Israeli targets in contested areas (ie: Shebaa and Ghajar) as they were prior to 2000 in South Lebanon. Following the withdrawal of remaining IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) units in the Southern regions of Lebanon, Hezbollah has been staging demonstrative actions rather than strategically planned offensives. This serves its leaders as a political leverage against the Lebanese National Army. From the 2006 war, Hezbollah virtually emerged as the only Arab actor since 1948 able to self-title itself as victorious against the State of Israel. In this process, the Lebanese government and the Lebanese people further lost political sovereignty over the control of their State.

### ***2008: turning guns on the Lebanese people***

A government move to shut down Hezbollah's communication network and remove Wafic Shkeir, Beirut's international airport security chief, pushed Sayyed Nasrallah's movement to take control of

the country's capital and commence a military offensive against the Lebanese state and its governing parties which put the country on the brink of civil war. Between May 7<sup>th</sup> and May 14<sup>th</sup>, Hezbollah's militia and their allies invaded West Beirut attacking and killing many civilians, which included an offensive on former Prime Minister Saad Hariri's residence in Qoreitem and an attack on Walid Jumblatt's Druze stronghold in the Shouf. The fighting resulted in the death of around 160 people. The May 2008 events highlighted Hezbollah's willingness to take up arms and violently act against any Lebanese party trying to reduce its influence over the country.

These seven days also underlined the party's military capabilities, as it was effectively able to block and isolate the country it is said to defend in less than 48 hours. The argument of Hezbollah being a resistant movement at the service of the Lebanese people acting against an ever-present Israeli threat, was difficult to uphold once the party of God actively participated in fighting its political adversaries inside Lebanon. Battles such as those that took place in several localities in Mount Lebanon and in Mount Barook indicate that large portions of the Lebanese population, of all confessional backgrounds, Shiites included, oppose the virtual take over of the country by Hezbollah's armed militia.

### ***The Special Tribunal for Lebanon: is Hezbollah above the law?***

February 14, is a recurrent date in Arab history, and in the year 2005 it marked the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The bombing which killed Mr. Hariri along with other 21 other persons shocked Lebanon and led to massive demonstrations. Through the Cedar Revolution, the Lebanese people called for the departure of Syrian occupying forces in Lebanon. The UNSC resolution 1757 of March 7, 2007 led to the creation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, a UN appointed independent tribunal with the task to find the truth about the brutal killing of Mr. Hariri. The Syrian government was at first considered as implicated in the bombing but investigations proved otherwise.

On June 30<sup>th</sup> 2011, indictments were issued by the STL. Senior Hezbollah members Mustafa Badreddine, Salim al-Ayyash, Assaad Sabra and Hassan Oneisi were recognized as having allegedly participated in the planning and execution of the bombing. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, and Hezbollah supporters, dismissed the allegations made by the STL as mere attempts made by the United States and Israel to discredit the movement. Hezbollah's leader publicly stated that no one, under his watch, would arrest any person indicted by the STL investigations. To support his conspiracy theories, the Sayyed provided the Lebanese public with mediocre counteracts that were meant to prove the Israeli involvement in the killing of former premier Hariri. To this day, no suspect has been arrested and Hezbollah continues to regard itself as being above international and Lebanese law.

***“Are they all spies?”***

Lately, the campaign to rid the political and social scene of Hezbollah's opponents has stepped up a notch. In fact, in late January a trial will be held against two Shiite clerics, Sayyed Mohammad Ali al-Hussein and Sheikh Hassan Mchaymech. Both men left Hezbollah in the late 1990s and entered into active opposition against the movement. Unconfirmed reports indicate that both religious figures have been arrested, detained and questioned by Syrian authorities. Once the Syrian security forces realized they were acting outside their jurisdiction both men were returned to Lebanese authorities and further detained.

Charges against them consist in treason and contact with Israeli intelligence services. The families of both men strongly reject such claims. Al Hussein is the founder of a small anti-Israel group called Arab Islamic resistance. While both men agree with waging armed resistance against Israel they are opposed to Iran's role in Lebanon's internal politics. Al Hussein has been arrested after having been in contact with *Moujahidi Khalq*, an Iranian opposition group. If these two cases may not reveal unquestionably a general tendency of Hezbollah's internal repressive machine, they do nevertheless serve the purpose of underlying the limited freedom enjoyed by Lebanese people (in this case Shiite Clerics) with regard to direct opposition to Hezbollah's hegemony over the country's politics.

### ***Hezbollah and Lebanon***

Having being one of the few Arab actors providing overt and active support to the Syrian regime's repression against its own people, Hezbollah is also working to effectively limit the liberties of the Lebanese people. While turning a blind eye on attacks against liquor stores and hotels in Tyre, Sidon, and other southern villages, the Party of God is increasing its military arsenal to further outbalance the Lebanese armed forces claiming that it is preparing for a future conflict with the State of Israel.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that during the 2006 conflict initiated by Hezbollah, its militants systematically used Lebanese civilians to operate reconnaissance missions in areas controlled by Israeli Defense Forces, putting the life of unarmed personnel in great danger. Since then, the take-over of Beirut in 2008, the refusal to cooperate with international justice and the reactionary stance adopted toward the Syrian revolution is indicative of a movement that is today less interested in waging a military resistance to free the Shebaa farms and the Ghajar area from Israeli military occupation. Rather, Hezbollah appears to be taking effective political and military control of the Lebanese territory. Such a perspective would further deteriorate the Lebanese peoples' chance of an independent future and increasingly make the country an Iranian proxy in the Near East.