

# Hezbollah scouts welcome pope in Beirut

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BEIRUT — Arriving in Beirut International Airport Friday, among the first groups to welcome Pope Benedict XVI were rows of hundreds of child and teen members of the Hezbollah scouts, alongside black chador-clad Shia Muslim women waving the Lebanese flags.

Some 1,000 boys and girls — all members of the Mahdi scouts — line up on the road out from the airport dressed in well-pressed shirts, blue or military green depending on their ages.

Beirut's airport lays in the heart of the Lebanese capital's mostly Shia southern suburbs, where support for Hezbollah is widespread.

Many of the children carry the Lebanese flag, but some also wave the flag of the Vatican. All wear badges showing the Lebanese flag alongside the logo of their scouts team.

Under the scorching late summer sun, the elder children wait patiently, while the younger ones play, enjoying their day off from school to the maximum.

"The pope is here! The pope is here!" cries a 10-year-old boy, as he leans out and holds his Lebanese flag over a fence on the airport road.

"I'm so happy he's coming," says Fatima, a 12-year-old girl scout, who wears a blue Islamic headscarf. "He has made us all happy, and we just want to celebrate."

Yellow and white flags and balloons fly over the international airport as the pope's convoy drives by. They are the colours of the Vatican, but also of the Hezbollah flag and many of the young scouts' neck-scarves.

Asked whether she minds that the pope is a Christian religious figure rather than a Muslim one, Fatima says: "I just think it's good we all get to be happy for a day."

Also filled with anticipation is 14-year-old Hassan, who says "in Lebanon we are all one hand."

And if historic religious rifts in Lebanon between Christians and Muslims seem to have become a thing of the past now, Hassan touches on a more recent faultline. "I have Sunni Muslim friends, not just Shias," he says.

The Mahdi scouts, whose members are Shia, are the only scouts of all the Lebanese to have organised to welcome the pope in Beirut on Friday, says a scout leader.

"We've never welcomed an international figure of this stature. It's a challenge, the children are very excited, and it's difficult to organise them," he tells AFP.

The Mahdi scouts' marching band plays drums and trumpets too, to welcome the pope's convoy. Though the elder children have some idea of the significance of the visit, many of the younger ones are ignorant.

"I don't know where the pope is coming from, but I am happy to be here," says nine-year-old girl scout Zahraa. "It's more fun than being at school."

The Mahdi scouts are a Hezbollah-organised scout group that mainly includes children from the southern outskirts of Beirut as well as south and eastern Lebanon, where the majority of the country's Shiites live.

The scouts leaders focus on teaching young children about religion, though many current

Hezbollah fighters were once Mahdi scouts.

Nearby is a group of Shia women, dressed in black from top to bottom, who too have come to the airport to welcome the pope.

One woman, Juliette Nayef from the eastern city of Baalbek, has travelled all the way to Beirut, in a bus whose expenses were covered by Hezbollah.

“This is a historic visit, I feel the pope will help bring peace to Lebanon,” says Nayef, who wears a black headscarf. “I want to thank the pope, but I also want to thank (Hezbollah Secretary-General) Hassan Nasrallah, for helping bring peace to Lebanon. The secret to peace is coexistence.”

Just as excited is school teacher Iman Faris, who lives in the southern suburbs of Beirut, battered by aerial bombardment in 2006 during a war between Israel and Hezbollah.

“Those who say there are differences between Muslims and Christians just want to ruin our country,” says Faris. “After all, the first woman to wear a headscarf was Mary.”