Hezbollah: Between Islam and Political Society
Popular Mobilization and Social Entrepreneurship in Lebanon

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Foreword

It's been over a decade since political Islam in itself is no longer the major issue in Middle East politics. Welfare, democratization and a vivid debate on civil society are. Islamists’ credibility as political actors hinge upon the concrete alternatives they present to authoritarian, corrupt or sometimes absent governments with their skewed distribution of wealth and resources. In this regard, each country in the region presents a unique configuration of Islamic forces and opinions.

While civil society has a plethora of definitions, the London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society offers a useful working definition:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, and family though in practice the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

In addition to the LSE definition of civil society, it is appropriate in our context to define the concept of “political society” as it was conceptualized by Partha Chatterjee. According to Chatterjee political society is a domain of institutions and activities where several mediations are carried out. Thus, “the politics of democratization must therefore be carried out not in the classical transactions between state and civil society but in the much less well defined, legally ambiguous, contextually and strategically demarcated terrain of political society.” The idea of political society is potentially radical in identifying that the populations which make up this alternative site are neither agents of the state nor civil society. They are often excluded in the process of political participation: “for the sake of survival and livelihood, they have to negotiate with both state and civil society or public sphere, domains often led and occupied by the middle-class bourgeois subjects and social elites.” I find Chatterjee’s definition of political society more persuasive and more consonant within the Middle Eastern context while “civil society” of citizens represents more of a Western model of politics. Furthermore, in most Middle Eastern countries the communal and corporate groups within the population relate to political parties via continuous bargaining and deals and exchanging electoral support for welfare provisions directly delivered to that specific group. This is certainly the case in Lebanon, where state personnel or the ruling party strikes mutually beneficial deals with patrons, notables and chiefs representing particular interests.

In this context the usage of “political” Islam is most appropriate as it defines programs for social, economic and government reform, as well as attempts to form and mobilize constituencies on that basis. This political society references Islam for general ethical and legal guidance, rather than aiming for an Islamic state or deriving strict rules from sacred sources. Additionally, it combines a whole range of strategic actions adopted by subalterns as part of this much less well defined domain of political activity. It is less ideological in differentiating between political movements.
organized around alternative (to both state and civil society) democratic and radical principles, and the strategic and contextually defined “politics of the possible.” In fact, it combines them together to include a seamless domain of negotiation and survival.\(^{(vi)}\)

Another aspect to clarify is the intersection between economy and civil society. A renowned civil society theoretician, John Keane, disagrees with the exclusion of the realm of the economy from that of civil society. He argues that satisfaction with the material conditions of life cannot be separated from the realm of civil society.\(^{(vii)}\) This is particularly true if we take into consideration the extremely poor economic conditions of the Lebanese Shi’a in the 60’s and how the greatest majority of Shiites in those years were politically and economically unrepresented. Shiites’ population growth and urban migration began in Lebanon during the 60’s and culminated during the civil war in the mid-70’s. This population boom placed a heavy pressure on urban social services.

The collapse of the state during the Lebanese civil war caused community mobilization in the Muslim south, where its institutions continue to this day. Thousands from the south moved to the southern suburb of Beirut, building illegal settlements that until the early 2000’s made up 40 percent of the homes in the area.\(^{(viii)}\) Where a state is absent or defunct, organized self-help fills the vacuum; when states become more vulnerable enduring and large-scale mobilization develops.

Understanding the relationship between the state and civil society organizations, including politico-religious social welfare providers, requires an understanding of who or what constitutes the state. There is no single state in Lebanon. Rather, each confessional group is either a mini-state within a state or at least controls part of the state apparatus.\(^{(ix)}\)

The Harakat al Mahrumeen, founded by Imam Musa al-Sadr (hereafter harakat-Amal) and Hezbollah’s law-enforcement apparatus, fell somewhere between a social movement and a quasi-state with a proper infrastructure of social development. Currently, the Hezbollah and harakat-Amal movements control the suburban municipalities of South Beirut with an impressive welfare apparatus consisting of schools, hospitals, education centers, family associations, etc. Over the last fifteen years the Hezbollah has transformed itself from an extremist group rejecting participation in Lebanese politics to a party with considerable autonomy and political power.

The “Hezbollah model” has become synonymous with a militarily successful, politically astute, and strategically flexible organization. It has managed to garner wide popular support in the Arab world, and is respected for most of its actions and social services. Given its staying power and influence, Hezbollah has been heralded as an exemplary model for others to emulate. How has this social movement turned political party managed to survive and evolve into one of the most influential Islamic organizations over the years? \(^{(x)}\)

This reaches to broader questions. What are the mechanisms through which politico-religious social welfare provision garners support for providers, who may cater to a circumscribed portion of the population? Do their actions cement sectarian identities and undercut national state-building efforts or, alternatively, complement and coexist with national identities and institutions? \(^{(x)}\)

In societies ostensibly divided along ethnic, religious or other identity-based lines, a shared experience of citizenship is especially critical.

Hezbollah is misrepresented by simplistic stereotypes which typically inform depictions of the organization in the global media. This paper will offer an alternative, more balanced and nuanced
account of this complex organization.

Musa al Sadr: The Voice of the Unspoken Shi’a

Musa al Sadr was born in Qum, Iran, in 1928. The son of an important religious leader he pursued an education in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). Initially he studied at a madrasa in Qum but, one year after his father’s death, he moved to Najaf, Iraq. He first visited Lebanon, which he considered his ancestral home, in 1957. Musa al Sadr was a man of great intelligence and charm at the time of his arrival in Lebanon. He started attracting a wide array of supporters, ranging from middle class Shi’i merchants to disenfranchised youths.

What Musa al Sadr did bring to Lebanon, in addition to his considerable attributes, was the ability to lead and unify a fragmented and victimized community. He reminded his followers that their deprivation need not be fatalistically accepted because, so long as they could speak out through their religion, they could overcome their condition. As he once observed, “Whenever the poor involve themselves in a social revolution it is a confirmation that injustice is not predestined.” The Shiites resented the fact that although Muslim sects appeared to have surpassed Christian population growth, they had not received the proportionate share of political influence required by Lebanon’s confessional formula. They also decried the disproportionately advanced socio-economic development of the Christian sectors of the capital while Shiite sectors remained neglected.

Imam Musa al Sadr soon transformed religious commemoration into vehicles for building communal solidarity and political consciousness. One of his first significant social acts was to establish a vocational institute in the southern town of Burj al Shimali. As individuals and political parties have done for many years in Lebanon, al-Sadr established charitable organizations through which he could provide services to the Shi’a which the government did not and, at the same time, established him as a benefactor of his community. He did this by expanding existing charitable organizations and by establishing new institutions such as al-Muu’assasa al-Ijtima’iyya (Social Institute) which provided shelter for Tyre’s orphans and destitute. His growing influence through the movement he founded – Harakat al Mahrumeen and its Amal militia – prior to the civil war, gave direction to the political and social awakening of the Shi’a. In addition to giving a voice to the socially and politically alienated population, Musa al Sadr’s success radically reduced the authority and influence of the traditional Shi’i elites.

Previously, clan-based leadership amongst Lebanese Shi’a was the oldest form of community political organization. It emphasized familial loyalty clientelism as the primary means of social ordering. Musa al Sadr represented the beginning of an institutionalized political and social consciousness that addressed issues beyond the immediate purview of traditional Shi’a familial leadership. Musa al Sadr understood extremely well the complexities of the sectarian Lebanese political system and consequently chose the most appropriate means to alter the political and social status quo that so disadvantaged Lebanese Shi’a.

In August 1978 imam Musa al Sadr flew from Beirut to Tripoli to attend ceremonies commemorating the ascent of Muhammar Qaddafi to power in 1969. Soon after his arrival, al Sadr vanished under
circumstances that remain mysterious. Most Amal leaders as well as many historians and analysts believe that the Libyan leader Qaddafi is responsible for his disappearance. While the mystery of Musa al Sadr’s fate remains, his disappearance has been of enormous symbolic importance to Harakat Amal and his persona has been elevated to that of a national martyr for many of Lebanon’s Shi’a. More than thirty years after his disappearance, Musa al Sadr’s pictures still adorn the streets of many Lebanese towns and villages. His success stems from his keen understanding of the importance of the spoken word to motivate the masses, combined with an ability to create institutional framework that would give him (and successive leaders) formal influence in the Lebanese political system.

Along with Musa al Sadr’s disappearance, Israel’s 1978 Israeli’s invasion of Lebanon and the Iranian Revolution greatly contributed to Amal’s renewed popularity. The Khomeinist Revolution not only proved to be an exemplary model for action but also a precise pattern for emulation. The Litani Operation resulted in a mass exodus of Shiites to the suburbs of Beirut, swelling the ranks of impoverished young people around the capital. This exodus generated what Rosemary Sayigh called the hizm al bu’us (“the misery belt”) around Beirut.

Under the leadership of Nabih Berri – imam Musa al Sadr’s less charismatic successor – Amal expanded from an adjunct militia to the Movement of the Deprived: a political reform movement. After the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Syrian government, which lacked the means to fight a conventional war against Israel in Lebanon, encouraged the most uncompromising elements in the Shiite community to spearhead a counter-offensive against the new status-quo. Syria encouraged the deployment of several hundred Iranian pasdars in the Beqaa Valley which it controlled, enabling the Islamic Republic to participate directly in Lebanon’s politics. During the same period, an internal split occurred inside Amal’s ranks and, in the second half of 1982, Ayatollah Mohtashemi – the Islamic Republic’s ambassador to Damascus – brought together various Shiite groups and clerics under the single banner of an organization which was named Hezbollah (party of God).

An analytical account on the formation and first years of Hezbollah and its politics is beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, it should be noted that throughout the 80’s and early 90’s the party of God operated as an agent for the growing radicalization of the Shiite community and as a tool for the Iranian policy. What is strictly pertinent to say is that – with the devastations of the civil war and the Israeli war – within the community, a major charitable program was set in motion with the general logistical and financial support of Tehran (whereas Amal was economically supported by Syria). Aid was distributed to the young urban poor through a network of religious clerics affiliated with Hezbollah, blending the social needs of the disenfranchised with the political interests of Syria and Iran on Lebanon.

Today, Amal is still a rather powerful party which provides various services to its supporters including schools, clinics and hospitals. However, in general, it has much less impact on Lebanese society than Hezbollah. While Amal lacks a benefactor such as Iran, Nabih Berri, a well placed member of the Lebanese political system, is an important source of ‘government’ funds. Amal is losing ground in the Shi’a community because it is perceived as corrupt and as having adapted to the Lebanese clientelist system. While Amal’s social activities are perceived to be top-down forms of political patronage, Hezbollah has a reputation for being an exception. The party not only
has an anti-clientelist and anti-sectarian program on paper\textsuperscript{xxxi}, but also emerges as a model of active citizenship and voluntarism in practice.

**Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah: Oracle and Legacy**

During Lebanon’s civil war another important figure, the prominent Shiite marja Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah (1935-2010) emerged. He spoke about the necessity of creating a dawlat al-insan, or “human state,” that would provide the resources for people to help themselves and one another. Coming from a Lebanese family, but born in Najaf (Iraq), Fadlallah returned to Lebanon in 1952. Over the following decades, in addition to intense academic activity, Fadlallah also founded several Islamic religious schools and established the Jam‘iyyat al Mabarrat al Khairiyah\textsuperscript{xiii}(The Society for the Benevolent Charity), a public library, and a women’s cultural center. In addition to the Mabarrat Association, at the heart of Fadlallah’s infrastructure were also al-Ma’had al Shar‘i al Islami (The Islamic Legal Institute) and the Usrat al Ta'akh (The Fraternal Society). The Society re-established its husainiyya\textsuperscript{xiv}, opened a religious book-store and a medical clinic.\textsuperscript{xv}

Fadlallah’s concept has inspired the emergence of many private social-service associations, most of which serve the Shiite community. Some are linked directly to Fadlallah or to other leading sayyids, institutions, and parties, notably including the Musa al Sadr Foundation, the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council, the Amal movement, and Hezbollah. Sometimes these associations are built by families. However, more commonly, they are funded by municipalities or benevolent trusts (awqaf) which are often important centers for associational life; in smaller villages they are often the only site for social assistance.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Fadlallah’s philanthropy coexisted with his extensive intellectual and political activities. Besides its affiliated mosque, the Society, thanks to its orphanage and boarding school, provided for the pressing needs of some of the most underprivileged and vulnerable segments of society. During the establishment of the charitable society, Lebanon also witnessed the formation of al Ittihad al Lubnani lil Talibah al Muslimeen (The Lebanese Federation of Muslim Students). The Student Federation employed a variety of means to disseminate its ideas, ranging from the organization of periodical conferences and seminars to weekly lecture series and regular discussion circles at the federation’s headquarters.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Fadlallah’s rich complex of institutions today includes gas stations, a publishing house, a photocopy store, book-stores, gadget-stores, libraries, many orphanages, a restaurant, a leisure center, a factory for halal foods, and a computer store. Individual donations include: alms (zakat) such as gifts of food for the poor; Ramadan gifts, khums (a fifth of one yearly income after meeting living expenses), half of which is paid to one’s marja or wakil and the other half to a descendant of the prophet or sayyid; and ad hoc donations by the faithful (sadaqat). Respected jam‘iyya are often authorized by several marjai‘is to collect donations on their behalf. It is not unusual for as much as two million dollars to be collected on a single night during Ramadan.\textsuperscript{xviii}

Even though Fadlallah always rejected the media’s claims that he was the oracle and spiritual leader of Hezbollah, after his death the party’s television channel al Manar\textsuperscript{xxxix} reported that he
had at least “inspired the leaders” of the group. It added that “from the pulpit of the Imam Rida
mosque in the Bir al-Abd neighborhood, Fadlallah’s sermons gave shape to the political currents
among mainly the Muslim Shiite sect of Lebanon, from the latter half of the 1980’s till the last
days of his life.” Even though Hezbollah’s official spiritual guide had always been imam Khomeini,
Fadlallah’s opinions were very much taken into consideration by the party of God.

Hezbollah as Welfare Organization

Why is Lebanon an appropriate case for studying how private social welfare provision affects
national integration in divided societies? First, politico-religious providers from a wide variety of
religious communities are well established in Lebanon because of the historical development
of sectarianism under the Ottomans. Additionally, Lebanon has a long-history of laissez faire
capitalism, which hindered the rise of a developed national social welfare system. Finally, Lebanon’s
multiple civil wars created a deeply divided society. During the ostensibly sectarian civil wars,
which lasted from 1975 to 1990, many domestic sectarian organizations emerged or stepped in
to provide basic social services. These organizations have lasting legacies for post-conflict social
welfare provision. Even in developed welfare states, religious and ethnic organizations play an
important role in social service provision. However, what is the linkage between social welfare
and ethnic politics in a divided society with “weak” state institutions? A quick glance at the previous
chapter partially answers this question, but - interestingly for Lebanon -what makes Hezbollah
unique is the scope and range of the social and public services that it provides compared to other
parties in Lebanon and religious-based organizations in the region.

As a result of the administrative and service gaps created by fierce fighting during the civil war,
militia leaders had to create mini-public administrations in areas under their control. These
handled essential tasks such as electricity, road repairs as well as the provision of educational
and health services. The factors which determined the shape and expansion of these mini-
administrations were the strategic location of areas as well as the extent of the human resources
available. Hezbollah’s very first welfare provisions were mainly aimed at supporting the needs
of the mujahiddeen fighting the Israeli army in the south and their families. Gradually those
services expanded and extended to all needy civilians in areas under the party of God’s influence.
But what differentiated Hezbollah from its Christian, Druze and Shiite’s counterpart militia Amal
was the way the party of God was able to fund the welfare services it provided. Whereas the other
groups had to rely mainly on government resources, Hezbollah’s incomes came directly from Iran,
namely from Iranian institutions called bunyads – foundations run by the clergy, whose funds are
used to finance Iran’s charitable activities abroad. The reason why Hezbollah’s social services
differed so evidently from those supplied by the other militias is because the needs of the Shi’a
community exceeded that of other Lebanese communities. Shiites in Lebanon were historically
neglected in terms of basic infrastructures, organizations and institutions such as schools and
hospitals. The civil war, two Israeli invasions, the intra-Shiite conflict between Hezbollah and its
counterpart Amal further destroyed already heavily deteriorated infrastructures. At the end of the
Civil War, Hezbollah leaders found themselves responsible for the half million or so inhabitants
living in destroyed neighborhoods without electricity or water and a serious social service
crisis; as thousands of displaced families were migrating towards Beirut’s suburbs.
The spatial dimensions of Hezbollah's political action are important to understand, as they reveal the strategies which the party of God uses to inscribe itself within the social and cultural environment from which it stems.\(^{(xlvii)}\) For the greatest majority of Lebanese Shi'a, resistance is not only military but also social and cultural. In the Dahiyeh, the religious discourse takes a physical and spatial form: it becomes apolitical and identity-based territory, a place where society, space and politics are intertwined, negotiated and produced. \(^{(xlvi)}\)

**Hezbollah’s Makeover in Dahiyeh**

Following the signature of the Ta’if agreement, Hezbollah underwent major changes, despite significant rivalries within the party. Its leadership decided to integrate into the national political system and run in the 1992 political elections. The party of God became “Lebanonized,” and slowly opened up to others, increasingly tolerating diversity that it had previously repressed. \(^{(lix)}\) Yet, unlike any of the other Islamic movements in the Middle East, Hezbollah uses its good works as a means of underlining and enhancing its legitimacy as a bona fide Lebanese political party rather than as a means of challenging Lebanon’s pluralist system. \(^{(l)}\)

Hezbollah was responsible for controlling the severe health hazard that threatened the Dahiyeh area in the late 1980’s. Daily collectors started removing mountains of garbage, replacing a basic governmental function in several municipalities. This went on for five years until the Lebanese Sanitation Department started functioning again. However, it is important to point out that Hezbollah still trucks out some 300 tons of garbage a day from Dahiyeh and treats it with insecticides to supplement the government’s lack of adequate service. \(^{(li)}\) With 110 water tanks distributed across Beirut’s southern suburbs, the party also makes drinking water available to areas not endowed with such a public service. Three hundred thousand liters of water, available daily via mobile cisterns, reach 15,000 families. This service has been running free of charge since March 1990.

Hezbollah also concerned itself with agricultural activities through provision of agricultural credit, distribution of tractors, fertilizers, herbicides, transfer of knowledge for honey production and other cultivation, and setup of guidance and piloting centers. As Hezbollah insider Naim Qassem points out: “attention was also directed at vocational training, providing villages with water, electricity and sewage utilities, working towards the creation of educational institutions, cultural clubs, mosques and homes for needy families or martyrs’ relations.” \(^{(lii)}\)

Nonetheless, Hezbollah’s Dahiyeh is not a place of exclusivity. People go to the Dahiyeh to buy food, visit family and friends, go to a doctor, and to purchase clothing and furniture. These people usually perceive the area as a rather ordinary neighborhood, similar to any other heavily populated area in Beirut. They do not see it as “Hezbollah’s land,” but as a more diverse, albeit chaotic, place. Furthermore, Dahiyeh is not necessarily synonymous of integralism and backwardness. Veiled women walk hand in hand with their unveiled counterparts and a rather visible Christian church lies within a few miles of M. H. Fadlallah’s offices and the mosque where the cleric used to deliver his sermons each Friday. Yet, for most, the southern suburb is simply a place one enters to meet Hezbollah’s members. Space is décor, background. \(^{(liii)}\)
Hezbollah’s Social Activities: Religious Ethos and Political Resources

Many of Hezbollah’s social organizations are directly linked to the party’s formal leadership. The party exercises its authority on these organizations by appointing directors and managers, recruiting social workers\(^{[iv]}\) or by simply imposing the associations’ direction. An example of these associations is the Philanthropic and Social Martyrs’ Institution (Shahid Association) which takes care of 1,384 families of martyrs from the Israeli invasions. It attends to 684 spouses, 1,215 children and 1,596 parents. A program of joint social responsibility ensures the availability of housing, education, clothing, health services and various other needs in addition to active participation in job placement once children complete their education. The association also monitored and assisted the families of 276 prisoners of war. It founded the Greatest Prophet Hospital as well as the Shaheed Educational Forum.\(^{[iv]}\)

Even though Naim Qassem describes these organizations as being financially, operationally and managerially independent from the party, Hezbollah’s promotions documents present these organizations as supplementary to their service institutions (mu’assasat al-khidma). The same organizations support the party by adorning their leaflets with Imam Khomeini’s image and displaying posters portraying the martyr’s pictures on the association’s walls.\(^{[iv]}\) Mona Fawaz counted about 15 such associations in southern Beirut. They are regularly registered at Widharat al-Dakhiliyah (Home Office) as “charitable NGOs.” These organizations are strictly interdependent and their administrators alternate their work within those NGOs and the Jihad al-Bina Development Association, the al-Manar Hezbollah’s TV channel and the Martyr’s Association.

As we have already pointed out, the Lebanese state does not provide enough social services to its citizens and each community in Lebanon has developed its own system of social safety nets. Hezbollah’s social institutions, however, are the most respected and efficient and stand out both quantitatively and qualitatively with respect to those organized by other communitarian parties or movements. Even though Hezbollah’s array of social services tends to be located in predominantly Shi’a areas, they are open to anyone requesting help regardless of their political views or religion. Many of Hezbollah’s social institutions were initially funded by Iran or are Lebanese branches of Iranian organizations. This is true of the Martyrs Association, which was created in 1982 by Khomeini and operates as a sister organization to an Iranian organization with the same name. The Islamic Charity Emdad (ICEC) was created in 1987 with Iranian financial support but today depends heavily on volunteer labor.\(^{[vii]}\) The Jihad al-Bina Development Organization, which was created by Hezbollah, has rebuilt large areas and repaired much of the damage caused by Lebanon’s wars. Obviously, all these are an important tool for social and political mobilization.

Along with the Shaheed Association, Hezbollah started the Emdad Committee for Islamic Charity to alleviate social hardship caused by the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. In only a few years, it was active throughout all of Lebanon. It established 9 branches, 5 schools and two care centers for handicapped children. The major objective of this association is to support and help families with no supporter or breadwinner. These families include those with a father who died, is detained, missing or suffers from a chronic disease. Families with social problems (divorce, physically handicapped or impoverished) can benefit from its services. The main condition to be included in its support program is the lack of any type of financial support. During times of war
and displacement, all families will be helped regardless of their religious or political status.\(^{(lviii)}\) The association provides services in the following domains: Financial aid, donations in kind,\(^{(lix)}\) health care, education, recreation, and income generating programs. The social welfare and guidance program of the Emdad Committee Association also provides a social custody program to care for the families of prisoners and drug addicts. This program is looking after 40 children from such families. It provides for their education as well as their psychological and social support.\(^{(lx)}\)

The Jihad al Bina (“Effort for the Reconstruction”) Developmental Association is an umbrella organization encompassing numerous sub-committees and organizations engaged in a variety of activities aimed at developing infrastructure in areas of southern Lebanon. Officially established in 1988, Jihad al Bina initially sought to facilitate reconstruction amid the devastation of the sixteen-year Lebanese civil war. \(^{(li)}\) Also known as the Relief Committee (RC), Jihad al Bina currently administers and funds a variety of social welfare and charitable activities. It displays a high degree of institutional development: in the Dahiyeh district the infrastructural and social welfare capabilities rival those provided by the Lebanese state. Additionally, Jihad al Bina encompasses numerous organizations devoted to improving medical services. Jihad al Bina also administers and funds primary, secondary and vocational schools in addition to participating in financial sectors such as financing micro-loans aimed at increasing agricultural development in those regions devastated by the civil war. Following the 2006 conflict with Israel, with nearly twenty years of experience in disaster management, Jihad al Bina was busy preparing for post-conflict relief even as Hezbollah’s military wing continued to battle Israeli forces in south Lebanon. The speed with which Jihad al Bina began assessing war damage and distributing funds spurred something of an “aid race.” \(^{(lxii)}\)

During the July 2006 war with Israel, when there was no running water in Beirut, Hezbollah was providing supplies around the city. People in south Beirut see Hezbollah as a political movement and a social service provider as much as it is a militia.

Hezbollah’s Islamic Health Committee \(^{(lxiii)}\) is another organ directly affiliated with the social services network. The Islamic Health Organization (IHO) manages nine health centers, sixteen fixed and three mobile infirmaries catering to fifty-one villages. Three centers alone have treated 111,077 cases since 2001, provided free medication and free health services to eighty-eight schools, and continue to provide regular vaccinations, in addition to launching promotions against smoking and disease-prevention awareness campaigns. \(^{(lxiv)}\) Provision of health services is heavily dependent on religious communities and political organizations. Most providers are either major institutions affiliated with medical schools or religious groups, most of which have hospitals or clinics. Over 100 hospitals exist in Lebanon, the majority of which are owned by physicians and are for-profit entities. \(^{(lxv)}\) Additionally, because of the indirect method of public financing of healthcare system, the population generally does not recognize the importance of state contributions to the operation of the healthcare system. State spending on health has increased since the war. At the same time, government financing reinforces rather than displaces private organizations. \(^{(lxvi)}\) As such, the impetus for the creation of community-based health centers comes from local districts, municipalities and, especially, non-governmental organizations and politico-religious organizations. The Rasul al A’zzam Hospital located in Bourj al Barajneh in the southern suburbs of Beirut was established in the 1980s with financial assistance from Iran’s Martyr’s Foundation (Bonyad-I Shahid). Because funding from Iran has been greatly reduced, hospital administrator Hajj Mohammad Hijazi told “RFE/RL Iran Report” \(^{(lxvii)}\) that the hospital must rely on earned income and assistance from the
local al-Shaheed Organization. According to Hijazi, the hospital provides outpatient care for 5,000 people per month and emergency services for another 3,000 per month. He said patients of all faiths – Shi’a, Sunni, or Christian – are attracted by the low cost of care (about $10 per clinic visit).

This brings us to the question of whom do politico-religious providers target. A rather simplistic assumption is that such institutions target primarily the needy, lower middle-class and the underprivileged. Not to mention the dominant perception that politico-religious social welfare institutions only serve members of their own faith or political group. Yet, evidence seems to be a bit more complicated and it is common to see confessional and political groups service providers contend with the opposing groups’ offer.

As for those who benefit from medical services from politico-religious organizations such as those offered by Hezbollah, my personal twelve-year intermittent experience in Lebanon leads me to believe that religious organizations cater to beneficiaries inside and outside of the same religious group. Even though sectarian providers tend to locate their facilities in areas with large concentrations of co-religionists (who constitute their primary clientele) and even though Hezbollah targets Lebanese Shiites, doctors at Rasul al A’zzam hospital are more than willing to offer their services to non-Shi’a as well.

The directors of politico-religious social welfare institutions in Lebanon almost universally deny that they pursue political goals through social welfare activities. However, in reality, political and religious messages are prevalent in institutions run by all the major politico-religious organizations in the form of religious symbols or photos of the leaders of sectarian groups and political parties. This is the case of Hezbollah/Amal-run or affiliated organizations; images of imam Khomeini, Musa al Sadr, Hasan Nasrallah and other Shi’a symbolic figures are overtly displayed in their hospitals, shops, schools, offices etc. Likewise, Rafiq Hariri and his son Saad adorn many Sunni-related institutions and the Farah Social Foundation – a self-proclaimed indigenous development NGO – has photographs of Walid Jumblatt throughout the waiting room and administrative offices.

On the subject of health-care related associations, the Hezbollah-run al Jarha (Wounded) Association needs to be mentioned. Established in 1989, the organization is located in Beirut’s southern suburbs and cares for over 3,000 men, women and children. Eighty percent of the men the association assists were resistance fighters. The rest were wounded during the civil war or by Israeli attacks in the South. Once a fighter or civilian is hurt, the association steps in and pays all medical bills, including trips abroad for any needed surgery or therapy.

For those who need homes, the association purchases, furnishes and equips apartments. At times, a nurse or maid is employed. Each wounded person receives a monthly stipend from the association. The cash comes from a charity in Iran and individual contributions and mostly from the khoms.

Hezbollah also education to the needy, through ‘educational mobilization’, which has provided educational support to thousands of students (part of which was in the form of books and stationary, in addition to assisting with the school fees, scholarships and grants).
Institutionally very similar to al Rasul al A’zzam is the al Mahdi School. It was established by Hezbollah but is now funded and managed by another non-governmental organization, the Islamic Institution for Education and Teaching. The school is one of nine al Mahdi institutions in Lebanon. There also is one in Qom, Iran. Some of the schools, such as the two in Beirut, are private while those in the south and in the Beqaa Valley are funded partly by the government and partly with fees paid by students. Lebanese public education is scarce and abysmal in terms of quality. Therefore, parents and students are increasingly looking to private, sectarian institutions like the school in Dahiyeh, where the overall quality of education at the elementary and secondary levels exceeds that in the public school system. In some schools, academic quality increases with religious and political influence. For example, the al Mahdi School in Baalbek, opened in 1985 for kindergarten through third grade with fewer than 200 students enrolled at the time. It has since expanded to include all levels through grade 12, with total enrollment now exceeding 1,700 students. There are currently five kindergarten classes, with a sixth being added in the upcoming school year. Religion is a big part in these schools.

The imam al Mahdi Scouts are a Hezbollah youth movement which was established in May 1985 after the IDF withdrew from the security zone in south Lebanon. It has branches in the Shi’ite communities of Beirut, the Beqaa Valley and south Lebanon. It received a permit for its activities from the Lebanese ministry of education in September 1992, and is currently associated with the Federation of Lebanese Scouts. There are approximately 42,000 male and female imam al Mahdi scouts between the ages of 8-16 organized into 499 groups.

How does Hezbollah intertwine religious ethos and political mobilization in contemporary Lebanon? When analyzing Hezbollah, it is always necessary to consider the complex deployment of forces and services which are inextricably related to what the party of God represents; a political party with a military wing. The social, military and political resistance discourse plays a central role in providing legitimacy to Hezbollah. Nevertheless, it is important to contextualize these dynamics in the context of Lebanese neoliberalism; the notion of public good is poorly supported by a fragile State. In other words, Hezbollah’s social history is largely a product of Lebanon’s economic background and heritage. A long history of social insecurity created consolidated forms of clientelism. As a result, Hezbollah’s social activities feature consolidated forms of patronage: they create concrete job opportunities, they consolidate the beneficiaries’ gratitude towards the party and they generate in their supporters the belief that they are carrying out an ethical, political and social mission.
Lebanon is a case study for examining how politico-religious social welfare provision affects national integration in divided societies. In such contexts, mobilization of supporters outside of electoral competition may be an important means of demonstrating political influence and pressing political demands. When multiple parties and organizations compete for supporters in a given community, political groups have even more incentive to cater to the welfare needs of potential core supporters⁷⁷. In Lebanon, two explicitly political organizations, Hezbollah and Amal, vie for representation and leadership of Lebanese Shiites. However, other groups, including the Mabarrat organization linked to Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, the Imam Musa Al-Sadr Foundation and, to some degree, the Shi’a Higher Council, focus on social activities with no apparent political goals. In exchange for services, politico-religious providers expect political support from beneficiaries through voting, volunteering in political parties or organizations, or generating community support for political organizations and parties affiliated with service providers.⁷⁸

However, services offered by a politico-religious organization such as Hezbollah are not necessarily available only to Shi’a beneficiaries. In this way, and a number of others, Hezbollah is very different from similar political organizations. The first peculiarity of Hezbollah is its early awareness of the need to accommodate a pluralistic society. The second is that Hezbollah benefits from the political and material support of Iran, and also from the rich intellectual background of contemporary revolutionary Shi’ism. The third difference is that, as it is first and foremost a nationalist resistance movement, Hezbollah finds support from a broader non-Islamist and, non-Shi’a constituency.⁷⁹

From the early Musa al-Sadr social movement – al Harakat-al Mahrumeen – to the emergence of Amal and then Hezbollah in the 1980’s, the party of God transformed itself from a radical movement into a political party with representation in the Lebanese government and a massive welfare system. Hezbollah has been a major provider of social services, education, hospitals, and agricultural services for thousands of Lebanese. It also operates an environmental department, a television channel, services which help refugees to find shelters during crises and an extensive social assistance program. Medical care is also cheaper than in most of the country’s private hospitals and free for Hezbollah members. The party of God is filling the service-vacuum created by Lebanon’s weak central governmental and together with Amal is busily working to gain exclusivity for the Shiite leadership.

I expect this short analysis of the grassroots appeal of Hezbollah to partially attack the stereotype of Lebanese Shi’a as a religiously obsessed group with low socio-economic status and a strong political isolation. Results partially suggest that Hezbollah is not exclusively the vehicle of radical Shiites. Rather, other factors underlie its organizational expansion which have enhanced its influence on the population and which will have important implications for its growth and future direction.
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End Notes

i. “Centre for Civil Society,” London School of Economics. http://www2.lse.ac.uk/CCS/home.aspx


xi. National and religious, regional or other non-national identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Lisa Wedeen, Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power and Performance in Yemen, [London: University of Chicago Press, 2010]).


xiii. Ibid.


xv. As a result of a census taken in 1932, the 1943 National Pact gave the Maronite Christians the permanent presidency of the Republic and the Sunni Muslim the presidency of the Council of Ministers. The Shiites had to be content with the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies.


xxiv. Nabih Berri was elected in 1979.


xxxiii. Non-profit Islamic organization, providing academic and vocational education mainly for orphans, deaf and blind, orphanages, schools, institutions, medical centers, and other activities (http://www.mabarrat.org.lb/).

xxxiv. Congregation hall for Shi’a ritual ceremonies, especially those associated with the remembrance of Muharram. The name comes from Husayn ibn ‘Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. Hussain was killed by Yazid I in Karbala (Iraq) over 1,300 years ago. Shi’a still mourn the death of Hussain every year on the day of ‘Ashura in husainyyas all over the world. A husainiyya is different from a mosque in that it is made mainly for gatherings for Muharram in the mourning of Hussain ibn ‘Ali, and may not necessarily hold prayer in jumaa’at or Friday Prayer unless there is a gathering at the same time, where they would make a jumaa’at at the time of prayer.


xxxvii. Sankari (2005), 167.

xxxviii. Ibid


xlv. J. Harik (2005), 82.

xlvi. Ibid. 83.


xlviii. Ibid.

xlix. Ibid. 15.


li. Ibid. 83.


lvi. Ibid. 447.

lvii. In 2006 only 90 employees of Emdad were paid out of a total of 440. Lara Deeb, An Enchanted Modern:


lix. 60 Food assistance according to a yearly plan (3 to 4 times per year), household necessities (carpets, refrigerator, kitchen utensils, blankets, mattresses, etc.), clothes for children according to needs, medicines and other necessary medical products, orthopedics for handicapped, stationary and school books.


lxiv. N. Qassem (2005), 84.


lxvi. Ibid


lxix. Many sources claim that the hospital services and facilities are provided totally free of charge to the people directly affiliated with Hezbollah.

lxxi. Ibid
lxxiii. N. Qassem (2005), 84.
lxxvii. Ibid. 12.
lxxviii. Ibid.
lxxix. D. Pioppi (2010), 70.