

Hezbollah Seeks to Marshal the Piety of the Young

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Generation Faithful

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RIYQA, Lebanon — On a Bekaa Valley playing field gilded by late-afternoon sun, hundreds of young men wearing Boy Scout-style uniforms and kerchiefs stand rigidly at attention as a military band plays, its marchers bearing aloft the distinctive yellow banner of Hezbollah, the militant Shiite movement.

They are adolescents — 17 or 18 years old — but they have the stern faces of adult men, lightly bearded, some of them with dark spots in the center of their foreheads from bowing down in prayer. Each of them wears a tiny picture of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shiite cleric who led the Iranian revolution, on his chest.

“You are our leader!” the boys chant in unison, as a Hezbollah official walks to a podium and addresses them with a Koranic invocation. “We are your men!”

This is the vanguard of Hezbollah’s youth movement, the Mahdi Scouts. Some of the graduates gathered at this ceremony will go on to join Hezbollah’s guerrilla army, fighting Israel in the hills of southern Lebanon. Others will work in the party’s bureaucracy. The rest will probably join the fast-growing and passionately loyal base of support that has made Hezbollah the most powerful political, military and social force in Lebanon.

At a time of religious revival across the Islamic world, intense piety among the young is nothing unusual. But in Lebanon, Hezbollah — the name means the party of God — has marshaled these ambient energies for a highly political project: educating a younger generation to continue its military struggle against Israel. Hezbollah’s battlefield resilience has made it a model for other militant groups across the Middle East, including Hamas. And that success is due, in no small measure, to the party’s extraordinarily comprehensive array of religion-themed youth and recruitment programs.

There is a network of schools — some of them run by Hezbollah, others affiliated with or controlled by it — largely shielded from outsiders. There is a nationwide network of clerics who provide weekly religious lessons to young people on a neighborhood basis. There is a group for students at unaffiliated schools and colleges that presents Hezbollah to a wider audience. The party organizes non-Scout-related summer camps and field trips, and during Muslim religious holidays it arranges events to encourage young people to express their devotion in public and to perform charity work.

“It’s like a complete system, from primary school to university,” said Talal Atrissi, a political analyst at Lebanese University who has been studying Hezbollah for decades. “The goal is to prepare a generation that has deep religious faith and is also close to Hezbollah.”

Much of this activity is fueled by a broader Shiite religious resurgence in Lebanon that began after the Iranian revolution in 1979. But Hezbollah has gone further than any other organization in mobilizing this force, both to build its own support base and to immunize Shiite youths from the temptations of Lebanon’s diverse and mostly secular society.

Hezbollah’s influence on Lebanese youth is very difficult to quantify because of the party’s extreme secrecy and the general absence of reliable statistics in the country. It is clear that the Shiite religious schools, in which Hezbollah exercises a dominant influence, have grown over the past two decades from a mere handful into a major national network. Other, less visible avenues may be equally important, like the growing number of clerics associated with the movement.

Hezbollah and its allies have also adapted and expanded religious rituals involving children, starting at ever-earlier ages. Women, who play a more prominent role in Hezbollah than they do in most other radical Islamic groups, are especially important in creating what is often called “the jihad atmosphere” among children.

“This Is Women’s Jihad”

As night fell in the southern Lebanese town of Jibchit, a lone woman in a black gown strode purposefully into the

spotlight on a makeshift stage. Before her sat hundreds of Mahdi Scout parents, who had come to watch one of the central events of their young daughters' lives.

"Welcome, welcome," their host said. "We appreciate your presence here tonight. Your daughters are now putting on this angelic costume for the first time."

Munira Halawi, a slim, 23-year-old Hezbollah member with the direct gaze and passionate manner of an evangelist, was the master of ceremonies at a ritual known as a Takleef Shara'ee, or the holy responsibility, in which some 300 female scouts ages 8 or 9 formally donned the hijab, or Islamic head scarf.

For the girls, the ritual was a moment of tremendous symbolic significance, marking the start of a deeper religious commitment and the approach of adulthood. These ceremonies, once rare, have become common in recent years.

It was a milestone as well for Ms. Halawi, who had been practicing with the girls for weeks: she was now a qa'ida, a young female leader who helps supervise the education of younger girls.

Born in 1985, Ms. Halawi is in some ways typical of the younger generation of female Hezbollah members. She grew up after Hezbollah and its allies had begun establishing what they called the hala islamiyya, or Islamic atmosphere, in Shiite Lebanon. She quickly became far more devout than her parents, who had grown up during an era when secular ideologies like pan-Arabism and Communism were popular in Lebanon. She married early and had the first of her two children before turning 17.

As Ms. Halawi finished her introduction, the girls began walking up the aisle toward the stage, dressed in silky white gowns with furry hoods. Bubbles descended from the wings. White smoke drifted up from a fog machine. A sound system played Hezbollah anthems — deep male voices booming to a marching band's rhythm. The parents applauded wildly, the mothers ululating.

The two-and-a-half hour ceremony that followed — in which the girls performed a play about the meaning of the hijab and a bearded Hezbollah cleric delivered a long political speech — was a concentrated dose of Hezbollah ideology, seamlessly blending millenarian Shiite doctrine with furious diatribes against Israel.

Again and again, the girls were told that the hijab was an all-important emblem of Islamic virtue and that it was the secret power that allowed Hezbollah to liberate southern Lebanon. The struggle with Israel, they were told, is the same as the struggle of Shiite Islam's founding figures, Ali and Hussein, against unjust rulers in their time.

Through it all, Ms. Halawi was the presiding figure on the stage, introducing each section of the evening and reciting Koranic verses and her own poetic homages to the veil.

"Our veil is a jewel-encrusted crown, dignified and lofty, that God made to make us blossom," she said at one point, gazing out into the darkness with a look of passionate intensity. "He opened the door of obedience and contentment for us."

A few days later, relaxing over tea at her sister's house, Ms. Halawi, still dressed in a black abaya, an Islamic gown, expanded on the theme of the ceremony. Religious education now begins much earlier than it did in her parents' time, she explained. Islamic schools, some run by Hezbollah, begin Koranic lessons at the age of 4, and it is common for girls to start fasting and wearing a hijab at 8. In all this, the mother's guidance is the key.

"This is women's jihad," Ms. Halawi said.

Camp, With a Moral Portion

From a distance, it resembles any other Boy Scout camp in the world. Two rows of canvas tents face each other on the banks of the Litani River, the powder-blue stream that runs across southern Lebanon not far from the Israeli border. A hand-built wooden jungle gym stands near the camp entrance, where pine trees sway in the breeze and dry, brown hills are visible in the distance.

Then, planted on sticks in the river, two huge posters bearing the faces of Ayatollah Khomeini and Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, come into view.

"Since 1985 we have managed to raise a good generation," said Muhammad al-Akhdar, 25, a scout leader, as he showed a visitor around the grounds. "We had 850 kids here this summer, ages 9 to 15."

This camp is called Tyr fil Say, one of the sites in south Lebanon where the Mahdi Scouts train. Much of what they do is similar to the activities of scouts the world over: learning to swim, to build campfires, to tie knots and to play sports. Mr. Akhdar described some of the games the young scouts play, including one where they divide into two teams —

Americans and the Resistance — and try to throw one another into the river.

The Mahdi Scouts also get visits from Hezbollah fighters, wearing camouflage and toting AK-47s, who talk about fighting Israel.

Mr. Akhdar led a visitor around the tents, where boys had been spelling out Koranic phrases like “the promise” and “the owner of time” using stones. There was also a meticulously arranged grave, complete with lettering and decoration. In place of the headstone was a small photograph of Imad Mugnyyah, the Hezbollah commander who was killed in February and who was widely viewed in the West as the mastermind of decades of bombings, kidnappings and hijackings.

The Mahdi Scouts were founded in 1985, shortly after Hezbollah itself. Officially, the group is like any of the other 29 different scout groups in Lebanon, many of which belong to political parties and serve as feeders for them.

But the Mahdi Scouts are different. They are much larger; with an estimated 60,000 children and Scout leaders, they are six times the size of any other Lebanese scout group. Even their marching movements are more militaristic than the others, according to Mustafa Muhammad Abdel Rasoul, the head of the Lebanese Scouts’ Union. While the Mahdi Scouts fall under the umbrella of the Lebanese union, they have no direct affiliation with the international scouting body based in Switzerland. Because of the Scouts’ reputation as a feeder for Hezbollah’s armed force, the party has become extremely protective and rarely grants outsiders access to them.

Still, Hezbollah officials often casually mention the link between the Scouts and the guerrilla force.

“After age 16 the boys mostly go to resistance or military activities,” said Bilal Naim, who served as Hezbollah’s director for the Mahdi Scouts until last year.

Another difference from most scout groups lies in the program. Religious and moral instruction — rather than physical activity — occupy the vast bulk of the Mahdi Scouts’ curriculum, and the scout leaders adhere strictly to lessons outlined in books for each age group.

Those books, copies of which were provided to this reporter by a Hezbollah official, show an extraordinary focus on religious themes and a full-time preoccupation with Hezbollah’s military struggle against Israel. The chapter titles, for the 12- to 14-year-old age group, include “Love and Hate in God,” “Know Your Enemy,” “Loyalty to the Leader” and “Facts About Jews.” Jews are described as cruel, corrupt, cowardly and deceitful, and they are called the killers of prophets. The chapter on Jews states that “their Talmud says those outside the Jewish religion are animals.”

In every chapter, the children are required to write down or recite Koranic verses that illustrate the theme in question. They are taught to venerate Ayatollah Khomeini — Iran has been a longtime supporter of Hezbollah, providing it with money, weapons and training — and the leaders of Hezbollah. They are told to hate Israel and to avoid people who are not devout. Questions at the ends of chapters encourage the children to “watch your heart” and “assess your heart” to check wrong impulses and encourage virtuous ones. One note to the instructors reminds them that young scouts are in a sensitive phase of development that should be considered “a launching toward commitment.”

Secular Influences

In the West, the image of Hezbollah is often that of its bearded, young guerrilla fighters, dressed in military camouflage and clutching AK-47s. But Hezbollah’s inner core of fighters and employees — its full-time members — is a far smaller group than its supporters. This broader category, covering the better part of Lebanon’s roughly one million Shiites, includes reservists, who will fight if needed; doctors and engineers, who contribute their skills; and mere sympathizers.

In that sense, a more representative figure of the party’s young following might be someone like Ali al-Sayyed. A quiet, clean-cut 24-year-old, Mr. Sayyed grew up in south Lebanon and now works as an accountant in Beirut. Hezbollah has offered him jobs, but he prefers to maintain his independence.

But his entire life has been lived in the shadow of Hezbollah. He attended a Mustafa high school, one of a national network of schools affiliated with the party, where he spent at least five class hours every week studying religion and listening to his teachers pray for Hezbollah’s fighters and Ayatollah Khomeini. After school and during the summers, he was with the Mahdi Scouts. Later he became a Scout leader.

He is extremely devout — he will not shake hands with women — and mentions his willingness to fight and die for Hezbollah as though it were a matter of course.

“They made us, so of course I would sacrifice my life for them,” he said as he sat gazing through the glass wall of a Beirut cafe on an autumn evening. “Before, the Shiites were in a wretched condition.”

Yet Mr. Sayyed’s generation is also in many ways more exposed to the temptations of Lebanon’s secular and often decadent society than its predecessors.

That shift is apparent even in the Dahiya, or Suburb, the vast enclave on the southern edge of Beirut where most of Lebanon’s Shiites live and where Hezbollah has its headquarters.

Once an austere ghetto where bearded men would chastise women who dared to appear in public without an Islamic head scarf, the Dahiya is now a far more open place. There are Internet cafes, music and DVD shops, Chinese restaurants and an amusement park called Fantasy World. There is no public consumption of alcohol, but the streets are thick with satellite dishes and open-air television sets. Lingerie shops display posters of scantily-clad models in their windows, and young women walk past in tight jeans, their hair uncovered.

The cafe where Mr. Sayyed was sitting, on the outskirts of Dahiya, was typical. Hezbollah banners were visible on the street outside, but on the inside young people sat at aluminum tables sipping cappuccinos, eating doughnuts and listening to their iPods.

“Hezbollah tries to keep the youth living in a religious atmosphere, but they can’t force them,” he said, gazing uneasily at the street outside.

Mr. Sayyed mentioned Rami Olaik, a former Hezbollah firebrand who left the party and this year published a book about his indoctrination and gradual disenchantment. The book recounts Mr. Olaik’s struggle to reconcile his sexual yearnings with the party’s discipline, and his disgust at the way party members manipulated religious doctrine to justify their encounters with prostitutes. Some unmarried Hezbollah members engage in “temporary marriage” to have sexual relationships, an arrangement allowed by some Shiite religious authorities.

Hezbollah officials say they cannot coerce young people, because it would only create rebels like Mr. Olaik. Instead, they leave them largely free in Lebanon’s pluralistic maze, trusting in the power of their religious training.

But there is a limit to Hezbollah’s flexibility. All young members and supporters are encouraged to develop a hiss amni, or security sense, and are warned to beware of curious outsiders, who may be spies.

After Mr. Sayyed had been talking to a foreign journalist in the coffee shop for more than an hour, a hard-looking young man at a neighboring table began staring at him. Suddenly looking nervous, Mr. Sayyed agreed to continue the conversation on the cafe’s second floor. But he seemed agitated, and later he repeatedly postponed another meeting planned for the next week.

Finally, he sent an apologetic e-mail message explaining that he would not be able to meet again.

“As you know, we live in a war with Israel and America,” he wrote in stumbling English, “and they want to war us (destroy) in all the way.”

Hwaida Saad contributed reporting from Beirut, Lebanon.

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Hezbollah Marshals the Young via Scout Troops &st=cse