

'Ayatollah, we will do our best' - Lebanon's scout masters drill shock troops of Hezbollah jihad

Contributed by Robert F Worth in Riyaq, Lebanon, The Scotsman
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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 Shi'ite 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 centre of their foreheads from bowing down in prayer. Each of them wears a tiny picture of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shi'ite 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 Hezbollah – the name means the party of God – has marshalled the 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 programmes.

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 neighbourhood basis. There is a group for students at unaffiliated schools and colleges that presents Hezbollah to a wider audience. The party organises 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. "The goal is to prepare a generation that has deep religious faith and is also close to Hezbollah."

Much of this activity is fuelled by a broader Shi'ite religious resurgence in Lebanon that began after the Iranian revolution in 1979.

Hezbollah's influence on Lebanese youth is difficult to quantify because of the party's secrecy and the general absence of reliable statistics in the country. It is clear that the Shi'ite religious schools, in which Hezbollah exercises a dominant influence, have grown over the past two decades from a handful into a national network.

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.

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, 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 nine 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. 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.

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 Mugnyah, 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 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.

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 programme. 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 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 the 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".

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