

## For Hezbollah, Lebanon is an afterthought

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Two things were unsurprising about Hezbollah's political document, unveiled on November 30 by the party's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, namely its content and characterization in the media. The document reaffirmed the party's determination to defend its parallel state while simultaneously forcing its priorities on Lebanon's state and society, without abandoning its ideological principles or strategic objectives.

A closer look at the document shows that what has been hailed as a "new" platform is in fact a point-by-point expansion of the principles laid out in Hezbollah's founding document, the so-called Open Letter, of 1985. And what is not explicitly laid out in the document, Nasrallah clarified in his press conference, as did other Hezbollah officials in media outlets.

First and foremost, the party remains as determined as ever to safeguard its autonomous armed status in an open-ended way, reaffirming the "duality" between itself on the one hand and the rest of Lebanon on the other. In fact, as Nasrallah himself remarked to the assembled journalists, the "Resistance" (by which he meant Hezbollah's autonomous armed status), "still holds first place." The document's section on Lebanon outlines Hezbollah's conception of the country as being directly intertwined, both thematically and structurally, with the Resistance. In other words, there is no Lebanon without the Resistance. As Nasrallah's deputy, Naim Qassem, put it in 2007, Hezbollah's objective is to integrate the rest of society into the Resistance, not vice versa, as some are claiming.

A key statement in that regard was the section on the so-called "defense strategy" for Lebanon. Here Nasrallah reiterated Hezbollah's long-held position on a "twinning" of a "popular resistance" with a "nationalist army," in a "complementary" security regime. In that perilous scheme, the Lebanese state and its official decision-making institutions and processes are completely omitted. Nor was it surprising that the document failed to mention United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 as well as the Taif Accord — two key documents today affecting the Lebanese polity.

Nasrallah's aims more closely resemble what he imposed through the disastrous April Understanding of 1996. In a book he authored in 2002 titled "Hezbollah: The Program, the Experience, the Future," Naim Qassem described the understanding as having been "tailored to the demands of the Resistance," especially in how it bestowed "legitimacy on the Resistance." The April Understanding, in Hezbollah's eyes, enshrined in writing its operational autonomy vis-à-vis an emasculated Lebanese state, under the direct supervision of Iran and Syria.

Hezbollah and its regional patrons have been consistently striving to empty Resolution 1701 of its substance in order to return to the framework of the April Understanding. It is safe to assume that this is the reading that Nasrallah wants to impose on the new Lebanese government as well. Not only did he time the unveiling of Hezbollah's document to coincide with the agreement on the ministerial statement, the terminology he used was intended to codify Hezbollah's interpretation of that statement. Hence Nasrallah's repetition of the formula mentioning "the Resistance, a loyal people, and the nationalist army," echoing that of the cabinet statement that Hezbollah imposed by force after the 2008 Doha Accord.

Meanwhile, some of those who commented on the party document argued that it somehow represented a departure from the old platform, instead highlighting Hezbollah's "evolution" toward "Lebanonization." This interpretation displays a woeful misunderstanding of what Hezbollah is about. One tenet of this approach is that the party, as Augustus Richard Norton once put it, is "preparing for life after the Resistance."

Norton's theory is wrong. As the new document shows, Hezbollah's conceptual universe is tied in with the idea of "resistance," elevated into a comprehensive worldview, or what Qassem once referred to as "the project of [Jihad in] the Path of God." Not coincidentally, the two Quranic verses that lead Hezbollah's document are about Jihad in the Path of God.

Those who underline that Hezbollah is becoming more of a Lebanese party also tend to play down its global reach and organic ties to Iran. Instead, those advocating this view play up the party's involvement in Lebanon-related issues. However, this has repeatedly been undermined by events, not least the group's cells in Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iraq and South America; and now by the text of Hezbollah's latest document.

The document repeats Hezbollah's intent to eradicate Israel, adding that the liberation of Jerusalem and all of Palestine is a religious duty. Support for the Palestinians, the document adds, is Iranian policy under the leadership of Iran's supreme guide, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the "Ruling Jurisconsult". In this way, Nasrallah reaffirmed Hezbollah's subservience to Khamenei, stressing that this attitude was an "ideological, doctrinal and religious position, and not a political one subject to revision."

Through this trans-national ideological vision released in sync with the launching of the new cabinet, Hezbollah openly reaffirmed that in its conceptual universe, Lebanon was but an operational base in a broader war that it will force on the Lebanese whether they liked it or not. The party official and parliamentarian Nawwaf Moussawi expressed this plainly in an interview with Al-Jazeera, noting that Hezbollah was not bound by Lebanon's geographic boundaries: "[W]e crossed the border [in 2006] ... out of our belief that the battle is one and the same."

So much for Hezbollah's "Lebanonization";

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