



The Birth of Hezbollah

Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Dr. Shimon Shapira

January 19, 2023

Overview¹



Ali Akbar Mohtashami, founder of Hezbollah (Wikipedia)

- ▶ The majority of studies conducted over the past four decades on Hezbollah, the radical Lebanese Shi'ite movement, and particularly on the factors leading to its inception, have concluded it was motivated by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.
- ▶ To a great extent, that thesis, which became accepted as fact, was based on a comment made by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who said, "When we entered Lebanon Hezbollah didn't exist, we were welcomed with flowers and rice. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah."
- ▶ It became an important aspect of research into Hezbollah's history, and one of its foremost proponents was Prof. Augustus Richard Norton. Norton taught international relations and anthropology at Boston University and served as an American military observer with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the UN force in south Lebanon in the early 1980s, and made his academic career around research into Shi'a in Lebanon.

The facts paint a different reality

¹ The article was published for the first time in IICC perspectives No. 92, September 2022, page 15.

- ▶ The historical truth is different. The decision to establish Hezbollah was made in Tehran three years before Israel invaded Lebanon. During the first months of Khomeini's rule in Iran, his Council of the Islamic Revolution made the decision to export the revolution to the Arab world and found Islamic movements based on Iranian Islamic ideology. To implement the program he appointed Ayatollah Ali Akhbar Montazeri, whom at the time he regarded as his eventual successor. Montazeri established an extensive organizational network to construct and support "Islamic liberation movements" in the Arab world: Hezbollah Hijaz in Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah in Bahrain, Hezbollah in Kuwait and Hezbollah in Lebanon.
- ▶ In August 1981 Ali Akhbar Mohtashami, one of Khomeini's close allies, was dispatched to Syria as the Iranian ambassador to Damascus. One of his missions was to found a new Shi'ite movement in Lebanon as an alternative to Amal. The Amal movement had been founded in 1974 by two Iranians, Musa al-Sadr and Dr. Mostafa Chamran, who was later appointed as the Iranian Republic's first minister of defense. Iran needed a new movement because Amal inadvertently found itself in the middle of an internal Iranian power struggle and lost its supporters in Tehran to the radical clerics. They regarded Amal as a secular movement, refusing to recognize the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) and loyal to the government in Lebanon, which Amal viewed as its true homeland.
- ▶ Arriving in Damascus in 1981, barely a year before Israel invaded Lebanon, Mohtashami began forming the new Shi'ite movement, Hezbollah. Working from the Iranian embassy he established and operated Hezbollah, set up its Shura Council, which was called the Council of Lebanon and whose members were essentially the Hezbollah leadership, and chaired it until his ambassadorship ended in 1986.



Emblem of Hezbollah

- ▶ He was replaced by Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, who also replaced him as head of the Council of Lebanon and Hezbollah. When Khomeini died in 1989, Subhi al-Tufayli was

appointed Hezbollah's first secretary general, and sat with the Iranian ambassadors to Damascus and Beirut in Hezbollah's leadership council.

► In effect, Mohtashami was Hezbollah's architect. The movement passed its formative stages under his stewardship: Iranian channels of support were determined and activated, and its military force was constructed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. The Corps took control of the Sheikh Abdallah camp, expelled the Lebanese army, set up its headquarters and renamed it the Imam Ali camp. The Corps provided military training in camps in Baalbek in the Beqa'a Valley, sent fighters to Iran for additional training and brought in weapons. They also constructed auxiliary civilian facilities, including kindergartens, elementary and high schools, Shi'ite seminaries, a youth movement called the Mahdi Scouts, clinics and hospitals, supermarkets and financial institutions, all funded by Iran.

Israel's Invasion of Lebanon Catalyzed Hezbollah's Growth

► Without a doubt, Israel's military presence for 18 years greased the wheels of the revolution Iran had exported to Lebanon and acted as a catalyst to spur the growth of Hezbollah's power. It provided justification for Hezbollah's existence and made it easier to enlist Shi'ites for a jihad against Israel. Na'im Qassem, Hassan Nasrallah's second in command, described the situation perfectly when he said, "the founding of Hezbollah was connected to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, but the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was not the reason Hezbollah was founded."

► The Hezbollah leadership's loyalty to Iran has been total. The fundamental condition for joining Hezbollah is recognizing the Iranian Supreme Leader as the *veli-e faqih* and source of authority. Iran still determines and dispenses Hezbollah's budget and for all intents and purposes funds it completely. Throughout Hezbollah's forty-year history, and especially in times of financial crisis in Iran and Lebanon, Iran has never once stopped funding Hezbollah, even at the height of the sanctions imposed by the United States and EU. When the Lebanese economy collapsed, Hassan Nasrallah remarked that as long as Iran had money, Hezbollah would have money. In Tehran's perception, Hezbollah is an integral part of the Iranian state, and Hezbollah's military force is at Iran's disposal when summoned by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Qods Force. When asked to send forces to Iraq and Syria and instructors to Yemen, Hezbollah promptly responded as required, clearly not the characteristic of a national movement which purports to be the "shield of Lebanon."

► Iran has constructed an array of long-range missiles for Hezbollah, which have become more accurate and sophisticated over the years and whose primary purpose is to deter Israel from

attacking Iran's nuclear reactors. Iran has instructed Nasrallah to use them to attack Israel as soon as Israel attacks Iranian nuclear facilities. Should that occur, Nasrallah will have no say in the matter, as he pretended when he said that if Israel attacked Iran, Hezbollah would "deliberate" its response. That was idle chatter. He knows full well that his powers as the "shield of Lebanon" are limited and do not extend to "deliberating" matters of Iranian strategic interests, which far outweigh any Lebanese considerations. Nasrallah did in fact develop strong personal relations with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who has shown him understanding and close friendship. Those relations go back to when Khamenei was elected president and Khomeini appointed him responsible for Hezbollah and Lebanon, when Nasrallah took his first steps towards leading Hezbollah.

► However, it would be a mistake to think that Khamenei's fondness for Nasrallah and his understanding of Lebanon's special needs would not disappear the instant Nasrallah stopped serving Iranian interests. Nasrallah is fully aware of the situation, as he was party to the decision of Qassem Soleimani, Qods Force commander, to have Mustafa Bader al-Din, the leader of Hezbollah in Syria, killed for not following Iran's orders.