

Expanding the “Jihad”: Hizb’allah’s Sunni Islamist Network

Bilal Y. Saab and Bruce O. Riedel
The Brookings Institution
February 2007

Iraq’s descent into civil war and Iran’s growing influence in the Middle East have dominated discussions throughout Washington’s foreign policy community. Many have viewed and interpreted these developments from the prism of a growing divide between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims. In fact, this notion of a factional rift within the Middle East – bolstered by the sectarian bloodletting in Iraq; the lack of support by Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia for Hizb’allah in its fight with Israel last summer; and the perception among Sunni Arab leaders that an Iran-led “Shi’ite Crescent” has descended across the region – has been so prevalent in Washington that many have looked at events in Lebanon through that same prism.

The crisis in Lebanon is perceived from the outside to be a sectarian clash pitting a Sunni-led governing coalition under the direction of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and backed by the United States and France, against a Shi’ite-led oppositionist alliance under the command of Hizb’allah and supported by Iran and Syria. To see the Lebanese crisis as that between Sunnis and Shi’ites is to misunderstand a Lebanese conflict that is rooted in historical trends of great complexity. Knowing the multiconfessional nature of inter-communal relations and political alliances Lebanon has enjoyed throughout its history, a basic breakdown of the two competing coalitions unsurprisingly reveals that they not only include supporters from all sects and political walks of life but also essentially rely on their communal heterogeneity to survive and pursue their end goals.

In Lebanon, no actor has challenged and actively undermined the notion of a Sunni-Shi’ite schism more than Hizb’allah. It primarily does so by seeking to portray itself as the leader of a broad based Muslim resistance movement against the United States and its allies not only in Lebanon but throughout the Middle East. Hizb’allah’s successes in last summer’s war with Israel have fed both its ambitions and its image as the preminent source of defiance to the United States and Israel.

To effectively deal with the challenge posed by Hizb’allah, the United States will need to recognize that the “Party of God” is more than a Shi’ite socio-political organization with considerable military and terrorist potential. Indeed, Washington needs to craft a new policy designed to undermine Hizb’allah’s projected image and counter, using diplomatic tools, its project of “leading the resistance in the Middle East to both the United States and Israel.”

Hizb’allah: The Shi’ite “Janus-Faced” Organization

Hizb’allah possesses a complex organizational structure that allows it to comfortably function as several entities: one, as a political party that is legitimately engaged and represented in the Lebanese body-politic; two, as a social actor that has seats in Lebanese municipal councils and that provides social services to Lebanon’s Shi’ite community; and three, as a paramilitary organization that is determined to both liberate

lost Lebanese territories still under Israeli occupation and deter perceived foreign aggression. Within the latter, it also maintains a capability to conduct terrorist operations – in coordination with the Iranian foreign intelligence services – in the region and outside if it feels threatened.

Far from being a one-dimensional actor, Hizb'allah is a “janus-faced” organization which, in response to crisis conditions it perceives, oscillates between extremist-violent and pragmatist-peaceful tactics to ensure its survival. The several parts and organs of Hizb'allah uniformly function in order to sustain it, to keep its essential processes going and ultimately to enable it to reproduce.

Yet, despite its apparent adaptability and multifaceted nature, Hizb'allah is essentially a Shi'ite Islamist movement that follows and practices the Iranian ideology of the velayat-e faqih (or rule of the Jurisconsult). Conceived by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the mid-1960s while in exile in Iraq and applied in 1979 (and still imposed by current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), velayat-e faqih is effectively the nerve centre of Hizb'allah's combined politico-religious functions. The words of Hizb'allah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, as documented by veteran Hizb'allah scholar and researcher Nizar Hamzeh, illustrate the Shi'ite party's relationship with velayat-e faqih: “the spinal cord of Hizb'allah is velayat-e faqih. Take out wilayat al-faqih and Hizb'allah becomes a dead body, even a divided one.”

Hizb'allah's *raison d'être* is and will always be to seek the consensual establishment of an Islamic order in Lebanon. While it long ago acquiesced to the realities of a secular and multi-confessional Lebanon by softening its revolutionary strategy, Hizb'allah has never abandoned its desire, at least on paper, to see Lebanon ruled in accordance with Islamic precepts. Hizb'allah's worldview remains firmly rooted in revolutionary Shi'ite theology and principles as created by Khomeini, and its constituency base is primarily (though not exclusively) Shi'ite.

Hizb'allah's complete allegiance to velayat-e faqih (a theory inimical to Sunni Islam) has not prevented it from forming alliances with Sunni Islamist movements however. Hamas and Islamic Jihad of Palestine are two noteworthy examples of such movements. Both have received increasing support – both in propaganda and practical terms – from Hizb'allah in the last decade.

While one could claim that these two movements' strategic alliance with Iran made it easier for Hizb'allah to partner with them, the “Party of God” has actually been successful in reaching out to other Sunni Islamist groups in Lebanon that not only fundamentally reject velayat-e faqih but also have diametrically opposed beliefs and worldviews. Who are these Lebanese Sunni Islamist movements and how did Hizb'allah manage to form bonds with them? What are the implications of Hizb'allah's Sunni Islamist connections for US policy?

Hizb'allah's Sunni Islamist Appeal

Hizb'allah's military accomplishments against Israel since 1982, its opposition to “US-Zionist” ambitions in the Middle East, and its reputation as an incorrupt political party and social justice seeker at home have allowed it to project a supranational image of both a defender of the ummah and a champion of the deprived masses around the world.

This strong, clean, and righteous image, as projected by Hizb'allah, generally appeals to an Arab world whose majority, according to credible opinion polls, are vehemently opposed to America's policies and role in the Middle East (with anti-American sentiment in the aftermath of the Iraq war in 2003 on the rise), discontented with poor socio-political conditions they enjoy in their respective countries, humiliated by Israel's apparent hegemonic status and real military superiority in the region, and hopeful of change and a shared sense of offended pride and honor.

But apart from its staunch defiance of the United States and Israel, it is Hizb'allah's view and handling of the question of Palestine in general and Jerusalem in particular that has particularly won it the hearts and minds of Sunnis and Sunni Islamist movements. Hizb'allah's emotional and practical support to the Palestinian cause, an issue of colossal magnitude to all Muslims, has helped it tone down the centuries-old doctrinal rift between Sunnis and Shi'ites.

Emotionally, Hizb'allah's appeal for Jerusalem every year (which usually translates into marches and military parades by Hizb'allah in the southern suburbs of Beirut) is similar to that of Sunni Islamist movements. Yawm al Quds al 'Alami (or International Day of Jerusalem) has indeed helped create a common bond between Hizb'allah and Arab Sunnis over Jerusalem. Sunni Islamist movements such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad of Palestine have been involved with Hizb'allah in the processions of the Yawm al Quds al 'Alami (the occasion was first suggested by Khomeini. In Iran, it is held each Islamic year on the last Friday before the last day of Ramadan).

On a practical level, there exists an independent body of information that attests to Hizb'allah's concrete involvement in the Palestinian arena. Examples of such involvement include Hizb'allah's training and financing (using money coming from Iranian bonyads, or charitable organizations managed by Khamenei's office) of militant Palestinian organizations, and its infiltration into and recruitment of agents inside Israel for operational and intelligence purposes. These activities have largely aimed at preserving and enhancing Hizb'allah's deterrence posture vis à vis Israel while also aiding the Palestinian struggle to defeat Israel.

At home, Hizb'allah's self proclaimed victory over Israel in the Summer 2006 war and its determination to defeat a perceived US-French plan to create a "new Middle East" (which in Hizb'allah's eyes serves Israeli-Western interests and denies Arab-Muslim rights) has encouraged Lebanese Sunni Islamist movements to knock on the Shi'ite party's door. In the aftermath of the war, two rigidly polarizing visions of Lebanon, as seen by the antagonists, grew. For Hizb'allah, there is the "culture of defeat and accommodation" (endorsed by the ruling March 14 coalition and identified as a willingness to both capitulate to Israel and bow to a US-dominated international system) and that of a "culture of resistance and dignity" (spearheaded by the Shi'ite party and defined through confrontation with Israel both to defend Lebanon and the Palestinian cause and to reject US "imperial ambitions").

Forced to make a choice between such competing perspectives, powerful Sunni Islamist movements in Lebanon opted for the second vision. That these movements already had a "resistance history" against Israel and that the post-war internal political landscape left very little room for an independent "third way" made it easier for them to choose partnership with Hizb'allah.

Hizb'allah's Operational Outreach

To practically reinforce their political and Islamist appeal and to effectively reach out to their Islamist counterparts, Hizb'allah added an organ to its organizational structure in the early 1980s called al-Tayyar al-Islami (or the Islamic Current). Initially discovered by Nizar Hamzeh, al-Tayyar al-Islami represents a loosely structured coordination network that is designed to attract supporters and sympathizers who share Hizb'allah's political goals and its "culture of resistance and dignity".

Through al-Tayyar al-Islami, Hizb'allah provides its supporters and co-religionists with a decentralized framework of unity that keeps their ideological particularity independent from the Shi'ite party. Without meddling in their ideological or organizational details, Hizb'allah has been able to attract (and coordinate with) Sunni Islamist supporters and umbrella organizations that either have nothing to do with the doctrine of velayat-e faqih, or reject it outright.

Topping the list of such supporters in Palestine are the Islamic Jihad of Palestine and Hamas. In Lebanon, Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami (or Islamic Action Front), a Sunni Islamist umbrella organization formed and led by Fathi Yakan, is today the most relevant Sunni Islamist actor that enjoys good and working relations with Hizb'allah.

Hizb'allah's Relationship with Lebanese Sunni Islamists

Fathi Yakan is a 73 year-old veteran Islamist scholar and da'iah (preacher) from the northern city of Tripoli, Lebanon's second capital. A disciple of radical Egyptian Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb, a believer in the revolutionary writings of Rousseau, Voltaire and Marx/Engels, and an admirer of the philosophical teachings of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (although he totally opposes their militant strategies), Yakan is a charismatic, influential, and well respected Islamist figure in Lebanon and the region. Wrongly attributed to being the founder of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah (a fundamentalist Sunni Islamist group established in 1964 by young members of 'Ibad al-Rahman, or the Worshipers of the Merciful), he is, however, its grandfather and main ideologue. He opposes secularist and communist ideology and considers Islam to be the basis of the socio-political order.

In the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Yakan joined Sa'eed Hawwa of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood to advocate jihad against the West and Israel. Along with fellow member Judge Faysal al-Mawlawi, he co-led al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah (or The Islamic Association) during the Lebanese civil war and fought on the side of the leftist-Islamic coalition in Tripoli.

In 1992, he broke with al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah's leadership because of doctrinal differences and entered the first post-war Lebanese Parliament. Throughout the 1990s, he devoted himself to political and parliamentary life, leading a bloc of three Islamist deputies inside the Lebanese Parliament. From 2000 to 2005, Yakan mostly kept a low profile, trying to both reconnect with his old Islamist friends and develop his relations with a number of Islamist movements across the region, most important of which are the Syrian and Turkish Muslim Brotherhoods. Today, he is considered to be the Syrian regime's independent link to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (or "go-to-guy" whenever

Damascus wishes to indirectly negotiate with the Brotherhood), enjoying not only good relations with Damascus but also excellent ones with Tehran and Ankara.

In August 2006, he formed Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami, an umbrella organization which brings together major Lebanese Sunni groups and organizations from all parts of the country aiming to "fill an existing gap" and "create an authoritative body for the Sunnis in Lebanon" that will "work in cooperation with the other authoritative bodies". Of those groups are Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami (or Islamic Unity Movement), led by secretary general Sheikh Bilal Sha'ban and command council chief Sheikh Hashim Minkara; Majmou'at Islam Bila Houdoud (or Islam Without Borders Organization), led by Ramzi Dayshum; in addition to several members of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah, like Abdallah al-Tiryaki, who broke with the leadership and opted to join ranks with Fathi Yakan.

Yakan summed up the ultimate reason for the creation of his Front in a conference in Beirut in August 2006: "It is with God's will that the Islamic Action Front be born in unprecedented circumstances, amid a malicious and ferocious US-Zionist onslaught on Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. This situation prompts the front to bear exceptional and unprecedented responsibility and tasks in its performance, role and readiness, so that it may be a distinctive front with a jihadist character.... We regard ourselves as having taken a practical step in the jihadist and field action, away from the media. We operate in coordination with the brothers concerned in all spheres, especially in jihadist action."

The bodies that make up Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami are the biggest and most influential Sunni Islamist actors in the Lebanese political scene. Founded in 1982 by Sheikh Sa'eed Sha'ban, a former member of al Jama'a al Islamiyyah, Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami is the most important Islamic movement in northern Lebanon. Following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Sha'ban, a strong believer in shari'a (or Islamic Law), was able to assert his power over the city of Tripoli at the expense of Syrian influence. Three years later, the Syrian army entered Tripoli to halt the spread of Islamist militancy and crushed Sha'ban's militia. Today, the re-armed movement is headed by Sha'ban's son, Bilal Sha'ban.

Hizb'allah enjoys good relations with Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami. In fact, the Shi'ite party's relationship with these Sunni Islamist actors dates back to the civil war and later to Israel's 1982 invasion and subsequent occupation of Lebanon. During that period, several Sunni militias, including those of Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami and al Jama'a al Islamiyyah, fought alongside Hizb'allah against the rightist Christian militias and Israeli occupying forces. The Sunni fighters did not belong to Hizb'allah's organizational structure, yet they managed to logistically and militarily coordinate with their Shi'ite counterparts through Hizb'allah's decentralized unit, al-Tayyar al-Islami.

More recently, Sheikh Faysal al-Mawlawi and Ibrahim al-Masri, the secretary general and deputy head of al Jama'a al Islamiyyah respectively, claimed that their movement had participated in the Summer 2006 war between Hizb'allah and Israel by "standing shoulder to shoulder" fighting with the former in the Sheb'a farms region. Hizb'allah confirmed the statements of al-Mawlawi and al-Masri a week after they separately issued them by stating: "we have Sunni fighting groups, if we were to reveal them, it would shock you all."

Hizb'allah has had two high level meetings with Yakan since the formation of the Front (along with several other meetings between the Shi'ite party and leaders of Harakat al-

Tawhid al-Islami and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah). In the second week of January 2007, Hizb'allah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah, who has privately called the Front a "ray of light", sat down with Fathi Yakan for four hours in Dahiah (the southern suburbs of Beirut and Hizb'allah's headquarters) and agreed with him on two crucial issues: the need to enhance their cooperation in their united oppositionist front against the government of Fouad Siniora, and their moral duty to undermine Sunni-Shi'ite tensions in Lebanon in order to foil the "US-Zionist project of turning Lebanon into Iraq". Yakan also shared Nasrallah's strong conviction that the United States is today "in a state of disarray and weakness in the region".

On February 3, Nasrallah and Yakan met again, away from public eyes, to delve deeper into the nature of their cooperative enterprise. The goal was to set the foundations for a united front against internal as well as external enemies that could serve as "a model for other resistance forces that operate from Iraq to Palestine and from Egypt to Syria." "The time to unite is now", the two men affirmed, "it no longer is a dream, it is a reality."

Whether such united front will eventually translate into a formal politico-military alliance remains to be seen. Talks of military training and financing of Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami by Hizb'allah have already been discussed. So far, Yakan, a proud Islamist who has long cherished and fought for his autonomy (he has refused money from the Syrian regime and Hizb'allah), has only accepted financial assistance from his Islamist friends in the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood.

Implications for US Policy

Today, the challenge Hizb'allah poses to US interests in Lebanon and the Levant is multidimensional. The organization has achieved a measure of success and support in Lebanon and throughout the region that make it a power to be reckoned with. It cannot be wished away, nor confined to being dealt with purely as an organization with considerable military and terrorist capabilities. Furthermore, it cannot be seen simply as a tool of Iran against the West in a regional game.

Hizb'allah's determination to reach across the Sunni-Shi'ite divide is consistent with its ambitions and those of Iran. Hizb'allah and Iran do not strive to be purely Shi'ite revolutions as this would marginalize their message in the Middle East and around the world. Instead, they have always aspired to be the authentic voice of Islamic revolutionism against the West and Israel.

In the Khomeini revolution, the satanic enemy was the United States, Israel, and the Soviet Union. Khomeini's appeal may have been strongest among Shi'ites in Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia's eastern province, but his example also resonated in the Sunni world. It is no accident that within months of the success of the Iranian revolution, Sunni Islamists sought to topple former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in Cairo. While Sadat's assassination was not Iranian directed in any way, it is illuminating that Khomeini's Iran renamed in 1981 a major boulevard in Tehran after the assassin, Khaled Islambouli, in his honor. Nor is it surprising that Iran would rename the street Intifada Street in 2001 when it was a barrier to the restoration of Egyptian-Iranian diplomatic relations at a time when Iran was still seeking approval in the broader Sunni world.

Last year, in the wake of Hizb'allah's successes against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), both Iran and Hizb'allah rode the wave of popularity that was brought by the battlefield. A poll by the Ibn Khaldun Center in Egypt showed that in that bastion of Sunni Islam, Hassan Nassrallah (82% approval rate) and Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (73%) were the two most popular figures in the world for Egyptians, outpolling Damascus-based Hamas leader Khaled Mesh'al (60%) and al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (52%). No Arab Sunni political leader even made the top ten.

Trying to divide the region into Sunni and Shi'ite camps is wrong for many reasons. For a start, this strategy will only fuel the sectarian hatreds that have already taken the region to the "gates of hell" as Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa has recently described it. Pushing the divide further will unquestionably bring about additional sectarian violence in the region. This will also play into the hands of the most extreme members of al-Qaeda, the heirs of late emir Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who significantly helped animate the sectarian violence in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi slammed the Shi'ites for their collaboration with the Americans in post-Saddam Iraq. For him and his supporters, the Shi'ites are also *rawafidh*, the lowest of the low and agents of the return of the great Iranian Safavid empire. Al-Zarqawi's successor in Iraq, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, has already welcomed the prospect of an American nuclear strike on Iran as the best way to get the two enemies of al-Qaeda to kill each other.

This however will not move all Sunni extremists to fight Iran. Some will prefer their ideological and strategic ally to their sectarian affiliation. The evidence from Tripoli, Majdal Anjar, Arqoub, Qarun, Sidon, and Beirut in Lebanon suggests this will not be a tiny minority, rather some important parts of the Lebanese Sunni community who will fight shoulder to shoulder with their Shi'ite brothers. America would be courting a perfect storm, alienating even more Muslims against it.

A more balanced approach that understands the complexity of Hizb'allah in all its dimensions would better serve the US national interest. Such an approach can only start by talking to Iran and Syria, Hizb'allah's strategic allies and the two state actors that have considerably helped the Shi'ite party become the power it is today.

Bilal Y. Saab is a Research Assistant at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Bruce O. Riedel is a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.