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Hezbollah's Resistance

Jihad's Relationship to Resistance

Jay Heidekat

Within Islamic belief, the call to jihad can be extrapolated to mean many things; however, conceptual common ground can be found in the classification of jihad as a struggle to improve one's society or self. Within marginalized social groups that are seeking to better their situation, this struggle can manifest itself in the form of violent resistance or civil disobedience. Resistance movements, like Hezbollah, are interested in influencing their own government or ejecting the physical or indirect presence of what the movement perceives to be imperialist hegemony. Depending on the context from which the notion of jihad is propagated, it may require something as simple as boycotting American goods. On the other hand, jihad can be implemented to legitimize the use of violent resistance or even to glorify and encourage suicide bombers—who are remembered as martyrs and used to fuel the cause. To answer the questions of how resistance leaders within Hezbollah justify these sometimes-violent actions, we must examine the influential rhetoric of the Shiite cleric Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah.

Fadlallah clearly links the concept of jihad to resistance and describes it as a most righteous and necessary struggle. In interviews he does not attempt to separate the often-conflicting notions of nationalism and religion or violence and virtue. In true dynamic, Islamist fashion, Fadlallah explains: "Concerning violence, *jihad* in Islam is a defensive movement and a deterrent. When God spoke to us about war, He said we should fight on behalf of the weak, 'And fight them on until there is no more persecution' [*Al-Baqara*: 193]. Fight for the helpless, fight those who fight you."¹ In this statement, Fadlallah attempts to describe, in broad terms, when violence should be used. The important message is that jihad must be viewed as a defensive measure with a religious backing. There is, however, flexibility built into the idea of "defending the helpless" or "those who fight you" as will be seen later.

In general terms, Fadlallah promotes a stance of resistance towards outside forces that provide obstacles to the Muslim world's self-determination and development. The cleric warns of the malignant influences from abroad and preaches that, in the Middle East, there is a "situation where the foreign powers, the great arrogant states, impose conditions on the people of these parts of the world, like placing an iron necklace around their necks in terms of economy, politics, knowledge...."² Fadlallah is producing a discourse that appeals to the post-colonized, marginalized people of the world while providing jihad as a legitimate and justified form of action against an unfavorable situation. In theory, the idea of resistance makes sense, but what form should

¹ Fadlallah, *Islamic Unity*, 63.

² Strindberg, *Realities of Resistance*, 32.

the resistance take? Under which circumstances does jihad constitute armed resistance as opposed to civil disobedience?

In a recent essay, political sociologist Rola el-Husseini describes the limits and uses of various forms of jihad as defined by Fadlallah and his fellow cleric, Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din. She quotes Shams al-Din's writing concerning the versatility and focus of violent resistance: "Armed political violence, violent political discourse and violent behavior vis-à-vis a foreign invader or occupier is not simple political violence. Its legitimate *defensive jihad*.... It is also a duty for the entire nation... Whether this jihad takes the form of a regular war or that of a public or secret resistance or guerrilla warfare does not impinge on its legitimacy."³ El-Husseini describes Shams al-Din's take on resistance as a violent struggle against an imposing force. She goes on to deem his preaching to be a nationalistic discussion steeped in the language of Islam.

This explanation describes the logic behind jihad, but in practice the resistance can take two forms. The first is a struggle against an occupier, which is known as a "defensive jihad." This is a violent resistance that manifests in skirmishes between two armed factions or the destructive martyrdom operations of suicide bombers. This side of resistance is often what Westerners perceive as jihad, or a holy war. The other form of resistance is a more passive endeavor known as *sumud*—or steadfastness. It might literally mean to occupy and hold a portion of land that had been previously liberated by the defensive jihad, but it also can refer to sit-ins, protest, boycotts and other forms civil disobedience.⁴ As the concept of resistance is fleshed out, it becomes clear that it has the possibility be employed in many contexts to great effect. As motives and opponents for a resistance movement may change over time, the focus and form that the resistance takes may too transform, allowing jihad to remain as a constant call to action and legitimizing mechanism.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 introduced a world of new possibilities to resistance groups in the Middle East. The lesson gleaned from the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini was that the Islamist paradigm could work in the face authoritarian regimes and imperialist powers. Hezbollah itself was forged in response to the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon of 1982. The movement began as an armed resistance group formed to drive the Israeli presence from their country and to provide support to the displaced and affected Shiites of South Lebanon and the suburbs of Beirut. Hezbollah offered jobs, food, medicine and other services to the marginalized Shiite population, who had been dislodged from their homes and forced to live in the slums of Beirut. By providing needed services where the Lebanese government had fallen short, Hezbollah gained the loyalty of the Shiite masses. According to Martin Kramer, "Hizbullah's strength resided in its ability to harness a hundred grievances to

³ Husseini, *Civilian Jihad*, 420.

⁴ Ibid.

one sublime purpose and to persuade its downtrodden adherents of their own hidden strength....”⁵ Increasingly, it became clear that Hezbollah would only see its goals of an Islamic state realized through resistance to Israeli occupation.

In February of 1985, the group released a formal statement that explained that the world is divided between the oppressed and the oppressors. The United States was labeled the main oppressive actor because of its use of Israel to bring suffering upon Lebanese Muslims. It goes without saying that because of Israel’s encroachment upon Lebanese land, what came to be known as “the Zionist state,” served as the primary outlet for continued, violent resistance by Hezbollah. Clandestine military operations like car bombs and suicide bombings against Israeli military installments as well as political targets like the U.S. embassy in Lebanon became classified as terrorist activity by much of the Western media. Conversely, many Lebanese viewed this violence as defensive and warranted. The words of Fadlallah attempt to classify defensive jihad as a perfectly viable approach, when used last a resort. He considers “the call to *jihad* to be a call to protect the basic issues affecting human destiny from those who are committing aggression against us. If someone fires a rocket at me, I cannot respond by offering him a rose. From an Islamic perspective, we compare violence to surgery: One only turns to it as a last resort.”⁶ It can be taken from this quote that Hezbollah’s jihad is not about compromise; it is about taking back what was taken away, by any means necessary.

This philosophy has produced a long series of violence between Israeli forces and Hezbollah over the years. Between 1992 and 2000, the war of attrition in Southern Lebanon embodied many examples of defensive jihad, including suicide bombings of Israeli military installments in occupied Lebanon. One specific string of tit-for-tat violence between the two countries began in 1996 when Hezbollah launched waves of rockets at northern Israel in response to the deaths of Lebanese civilians. Israel’s next move was a counter-attack—Operation Grapes of Wrath. What ultimately came from this was the Qana massacre, in which, Israeli forces in the South of Lebanon slaughtered Palestinian refugees. This event galvanized a more unified oppositional stance towards Israel among Lebanese Muslims as well as Christians.⁷

In this instance, as will be shown in others, the back and forth between Lebanese resistance and Israeli aggression and vice-versa worked favorably into Hezbollah’s discourse surrounding resistance. Any violent aggression perpetrated upon the Israelis occupying Lebanon was seen a contribution to the cause of Islam and to the defense of the oppressed. At the same time, violence towards the Lebanese or Palestinians by Israelis simply

⁵ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 28.

⁶ Fadlallah, *Islamic Unity*, 64.

⁷ Hussein, *Civilian Jihad*, 421.

created more venerated martyrs and fueled the fires of resistance. Ultimately, both increased the support of Hezbollah and further demonized Israel in the eyes of the Lebanese. Thus, there appears what I will call a *cycle of resistance*, where opposition to Israeli domination, even when it results in deaths on of the resistance side, can be used constructively to encourage unity and fervor among the “oppressed.” In addition, any individuals killed become “blessed martyrs” and symbols of further resistance. Hezbollah continues to use this strategy in their rhetoric.

In 2008, a car explosion in Damascus resulted in the death of a Hezbollah operative named Imad Mughniyah. Hezbollah’s authorities identified the operative as a leader in the resistance against the Israeli occupation forces in South Lebanon. After establishing this, the representative of Hezbollah made a call for Lebanese national unity in the face of “Lebanon’s main enemy, represented by Israel, which is accused of carrying out this treacherous operation.”⁸ The death of Mughniyah was divisively used as an opportunity to demonize Israel. In addition, Islamist authorities rallied around the assassination, by extolling Mughniyah’s “‘jihad’ and ‘sacrifices’ and [by] calling on Hezbollah’s leadership ‘to respond to this treacherous operation by dealing a painful blow to the Zionist entity.’”⁹ Fadlallah himself commented on the assassination and capitalized on this opportunity to publicize the cause of resistance in the wake of the tragedy saying, “we look forward to seeing all arenas of resistance against the occupation more determined to confront the enemy, more solid in the faces of challenges, and more committed to the Islamic jihad line that seeks to move the nation from the stage of defeats to the stage of victories.”¹⁰ The statements surrounding the death of Imad Mughniyah illustrated that Hezbollah’s clever use of the cycle of resistance continues to be profitable in terms of gaining support for the party and for condemning Israel.

Even in the group’s early history, Hezbollah was a dynamic entity. Armed resistance went hand-in-hand with civil service and the dire situation in Lebanon provided many chances for Hezbollah to reach out to the community. Focused mostly in the affected South of Lebanon and Beirut area, the movement built orphanages that provided refuge to about two thousand children. In addition, schools were built to cater to the displaced Shiite community, including schools for the blind and deaf. Hezbollah constructed cultural centers and hospitals which all created reliance and trust towards Hezbollah and its discourse of oppressed and oppressors. This community reliance, coupled with Hezbollah’s military successes made Lebanese politics the next goal for the resistance group. In a 1995 interview, when asked about

⁸ *Groups condemn Mughniya Assassination.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the group's future in the political arena or the possibility of participation in the Lebanese parliament, cleric Fadlallah said the following:

“[Hezbollah] has amassed expertise in military, security, cultural and political affairs, which greatly enhances its chances of spreading its influence in Lebanon, despite the challenge from the international American-Israeli campaign against it. It would be very difficult to terminate the role of Hizballah, because that role has strong grass-roots support and is furthermore well grounded in its structure, methodology, thought and political activities.”¹¹

Since this statement, Hezbollah has participated in all the country's legislative and municipal elections. The party won 14 seats in the national legislature in the 2005 elections. Thanks to strategic alliances with other parties, Hezbollah gained a reasonably sized voting block of 35 parliamentarians and, for the first time, a seat in the cabinet. This newfound political influence did not hinder the party's underlying discourse of resistance. The transition to politics was always perceived as being born out of the resistance as well as being an act of resistance in itself. Even in 1985, in the early stages of the movement, long before any political involvement to speak of, Fadlallah said, “the spirit driving the resistance is beginning to intensify and grow from being simply a combat state of mind into a political and ideological state of mind.”¹² The concept of resistance as a driving ideology continued to gain Hezbollah support while defining the statements and actions of the party.

Today, Hezbollah remains armed because of its refusal to comply with the UN's orders for disarmament. Hezbollah is not content with simply filling a political role and wishes to keep resistance against Israel a reality. By defying the wishes of the UN (an act of resistance in itself), Hezbollah hopes to remain Lebanon's vanguard against foreign invasion and imperialist pressure. When pressed about Hezbollah's continued armament, party leader Hassan Nasrallah clarified, “Resistance is a reaction against aggression. When the aggression ends, resistance ends.”¹³ As long as Hezbollah perceives Lebanon as a victim of foreign interference, it will remain a beacon of resistance.

As Hezbollah gains more influence in Lebanon's parliament, the importance of resistance has only grown. Approaching the elections in 2009, speaker Nabih Berri said, “Resistance, liberation and development will be the choice of the Lebanese towards a better country and better life.” Although liberation and development have been added to the agenda, resistance is still

¹¹ Fadlallah, *Islamic Unity and Political Change*, 69.

¹² Fadlallah, *The Future of the Islamic and National Resistance*, 166.

¹³ Alagha, *Hizballah after the Syrian Withdrawal*, 37.

first on the list. He went on to explain, “The choice of resistance is a vital national necessity as Israel continues to occupy a part of our land and to violate Lebanon’s airspace, boarder and territorial waters.”¹⁴ Despite Hezbollah’s drastically evolving role over the past 30 years, the primacy of resistance has remained a key aspect in the party’s speech and philosophy.

¹⁴ *Lebanese Speaker Birri announces Hezbollah-Amal election lists.*