

The Secret History of Hezbollah

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Thirty years ago last month, Hezbollah blew up the barracks of the U.S Marines and French paratroopers stationed at the Beirut airport, killing 241 U.S. servicemen and 58 Frenchmen. It wasn't Hezbollah's first terrorist operation, but this attack, the most memorable in Lebanon's vicious and chaotic 15-year-long civil war, marked the Party of God's entry onto the world stage.

Three decades later, thanks to the efforts of Israeli Hezbollah expert Shimon Shapira, we now know that one of the men responsible for the attack was an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander named Hossein Dehghan—the man Iranian president Hassan Rouhani recently tapped to be his defense minister. In other words, Hezbollah and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been joined at the hip from the very beginning, even before the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Of course, that's not the standard account of Hezbollah, the historical narrative jointly constructed and largely agreed upon by Middle East experts, journalists, some Western and Arab intelligence officials, and even Hezbollah figures themselves. This account holds that Hezbollah was founded in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in 1982 to fight, or "resist," the Israeli invasion of that year. On this reading, the belief—held by the organization's many critics, targets, and enemies—that Hezbollah is little more than an IRGC battalion on the eastern Mediterranean is simply part of a U.S.-Israeli disinformation campaign meant to smear a national resistance movement fighting for the liberation of Lebanese lands. Sure, Hezbollah was founded with some help from Iranian officials, and still receives financial assistance from Tehran, but the organization is strictly a Lebanese affair. It was engendered by Israel's 1982 invasion and subsequent occupation of Lebanon. The occupation, as one author sympathetic to the group put it, is Hezbollah's "raison d'être."

Even former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak contends that it was the Israeli occupation that gave birth to Hezbollah. “It was our stay [in Lebanon] that established [Hezbollah],” Israel’s most decorated soldier said in 2010. “Hezbollah got stronger not as a result of our exit from Lebanon but as a result of our stay in Lebanon.” Perhaps Barak was simply keen to defend his decision to withdraw Israeli troops from Lebanon in 2000, for his account is simply not true.

The big bang theory of Hezbollah that puts the Israeli occupation at the alpha point is based not in fact but in legend—it’s an Israel-centric myth that makes the Jewish state Hezbollah’s motivation and prime mover. In reality, the story of Hezbollah’s origins is a story about Iran, featuring the anti-shah revolutionaries active in Lebanon in the 1970s, years before Israel’s intervention. Thus, to uncover Hezbollah’s roots, it is necessary to mine the accounts of Iranian cadres operating in Lebanon a decade before Israel invaded.

There we find that, contrary to the common wisdom, Hezbollah didn’t arise as a resistance movement to the Israeli occupation. Rather, it was born from the struggle between Iranian revolutionary factions opposed to the shah. Lebanon was a critical front for this rivalry between Hezbollah’s Iranian progenitors and their domestic adversaries. Accordingly, an accurate understanding of this history gives us not only the true story of Hezbollah’s beginnings, but also an insight into the origins of Iran’s Islamic Revolution. Those early internal conflicts and impulses, played out in Lebanon as well as Iran, also provide a roadmap for reading the nature of the current regime in Tehran, its motivations and concerns, its strategies and gambits as it moves toward acquiring a nuclear weapon and challenging the American order in the Middle East.

For Iranian revolutionary activists, Lebanon in the early to mid 1970s was valuable ground, not because it bordered Israel, but because it was a free zone in which to pursue their anti-shah activity. Though the Lebanese government maintained relations with Iran, the weakness of the state presented opportunities unavailable elsewhere in the Middle East. The autonomy of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the most significant military outfit in Lebanon after it was pushed out of Jordan in 1970, and the military training camps it ran in Lebanon afforded the anti-shah opposition—often traveling with fake Palestinian identity papers—many benefits. There they could operate and organize freely, acquire military training and weapons, make contacts with other revolutionary organizations, form alliances, and establish networks of support for their fight against the Pahlavi regime.

Another attraction for the Iranians was Lebanon's large Shiite population, especially the influential Iranian-born cleric Musa al-Sadr, who proved helpful to many of the Iranian oppositionists. Both Sadr's network and the PLO's would continue to prove critical even after the Iranian revolution, in the ensuing power struggle between Iran's revolutionary factions.

Of the several Iranian groups operating in Lebanon in the 1970s, two main factions are of note. One comprised figures from the Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI), such as Mostafa Chamran, who served as defense minister after the fall of the shah. In Lebanon, Chamran and the LMI worked closely with Sadr, whom LMI leaders knew from his student days in Tehran, and who was the uncle of one of the group's leaders in exile.

Sadr also relied on the Palestinians for training his newly formed Amal militia. His concern wasn't fighting Israel but rather protecting his and the Shiite community's interests from other Lebanese factions with the onset of the Lebanese civil war. He and Chamran were ambivalent about the Palestinians, and in 1976, when Sadr aligned with Syrian president Hafez al-Assad and supported Syria's entry into Lebanon, the divide only widened. The PLO and its allies on the Lebanese left opposed Syria and sharply criticized Sadr. Moreover, Palestinian attacks on Israel from south Lebanon put Shiite villagers in the face of Israeli retaliation, a danger that worried both Sadr and Chamran. It wasn't long, then, before Amal came into conflict with the same Palestinian factions that had trained Sadr's men.

In contrast, the other main faction of Iranian revolutionaries operating in Lebanon maintained close relations with the PLO and mistrusted Sadr and the LMI. This faction was made up of devotees of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and after the Iranian revolution became part of the Islamic Republic party. Many of them also became top commanders in the IRGC and the Office of Liberation Movements (OLM), charged with establishing contacts with and supporting revolutionary movements abroad. In effect, the OLM was the precursor of the Quds Force, the overseas operations arm of the IRGC. It was set up under the supervision of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, a close associate of Khomeini and his heir apparent, and was headed by his son, Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Montazeri.

Others associated with the Khomeinist faction working in Lebanon included Jaleddin Farsi, a close associate of Montazeri who was the party's candidate in Iran's first presidential election after the revolution, and Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar

Mohtashami, a student of Khomeini who later became ambassador to Syria and would play a critical role in the emergence of Hezbollah. Another important figure in this camp who played a key role in forming Hezbollah was Mohammad Saleh Hosseini, a founding member of the IRGC.

Hosseini appears prominently in the primary sources, and yet he has been entirely overlooked in the scholarly literature on Hezbollah. Born to an Iranian family in 1942, Hosseini grew up in Najaf, Iraq, where he became involved in, and got arrested for, Islamic activism, and also established close relations with Iraqi-based officials from Yasser Arafat's Fatah, the dominant party in the PLO. After the 1968 Baathist coup in Iraq, Hosseini was forced to flee to Lebanon, where, in late 1970, he was given shelter by Musa al-Sadr and became the principal of one of Sadr's schools, where, thanks to his contacts with Fatah, he helped train the school's Shiite youths.

Even after he was dismissed from the school, Hosseini and the Khomeinists established connections with young Shiite militants associated with Fatah who yet balked at the Palestinian group's secular, indeed leftist, outlook. From the Khomeinists' perspective, these young fighters were ripe for recruitment, and part of Hosseini's role was to ensure that the Shiites he cultivated were, unlike those in Sadr's organization, pro-Khomeini. Those who passed inspection would come to form the nucleus of Hezbollah. The most famous of them was Imad Mughniyeh, who would become the group's military commander and mastermind of many of Hezbollah's most notorious operations. By the time of the Marine barracks bombing in 1983, Mughniyeh was already a well-known Iranian asset who, along with other like-minded Shiites, had been working closely with future senior IRGC commanders since the mid-1970s.

There were tensions between the two Iranian camps in Lebanon, and the friction between the Khomeinists and the Sadrists foreshadowed the divisions among the anti-shah activists that would be played out on the streets of Tehran after the revolution. One of the key debates among the Khomeinists was whether to use Sadr's Amal militia as the vehicle for political and military action in Lebanon. The chief problem with that idea was that Khomeini and Sadr were rivals. Or at least that's how Khomeini and his followers saw Sadr, and perhaps for good reason. The Iranian-born Sadr, who'd won a huge following in Lebanon, had established such close ties with senior LMI leaders that he might have leveraged for influence inside Iran.

It's unclear whether Sadr was as ambitious as Khomeini, or as jealous of another

cleric's reputation. Sadr never endorsed Khomeini's status as marja', or Shiite religious authority. It's worth noting that it was the religious authority of the cleric that would undergird the theory, "guardianship of the jurist" (velayat-e faqih), according to which Khomeini would justify his theocratic rule when he eventually took power. But Sadr didn't live to see it.

In August 1978, Sadr disappeared during a trip to Libya. Montazeri and his faction maintained a close relationship with the Libyans, sponsors of the PLO, and Sadr's associates in Lebanon would eventually come to accuse the Montazeri camp of complicity in Sadr's presumed death. It's hardly surprising that Khomeini failed to exert any serious efforts to discover the missing cleric's fate. He valued the alliance with Libya and the PLO—and the disposal of a potential challenger was hardly inconvenient.

Shortly after Sadr's disappearance, the countdown to the revolution picked up its pace. The shah departed in January 1979, and Khomeini returned to Iran a few weeks later in triumph. The Islamic Republic party was soon formed, bringing together Khomeini's devotees and other radical clergy who sought an Islamic republic. They began calling themselves Hezbollah. This was to distinguish themselves from their domestic rivals, the LMI and allied factions, whom they referred to as the "liberals," and who they feared would sabotage the revolution.

Those so-called liberals were not the same as those in the current regime who are often referred to as "moderates." Today's "moderates," or pragmatists, like former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, were part of the IRP. Their domestic rivals, the liberals, were typically sidelined, exiled, or liquidated in a struggle over the direction of the revolution.

By the summer of 1981, the Islamic Republic party finally rolled up its rivals and took sole control of the government, which it called "the Hezbollahi government." LMI's most influential figures met the fate of their friend Musa al-Sadr. Mostafa Chamran, for instance, was killed in mysterious circumstances in June 1981 during the war with Iraq.

But the Khomeinists also absorbed significant losses. Mohammad Montazeri was killed in a blast that targeted the IRP headquarters in Tehran in June 1981. Mohammad Saleh Hosseini, who under Khomeini became a senior IRGC official responsible for external relations, had been assassinated in Beirut two months previously. His death

had little effect on Iranian policy inside of Lebanon since the assets that he and top IRGC leadership had been cultivating since the mid-70s were now being consolidated.

Moreover, there were plenty of colleagues to pick up where Montazeri and Hosseini had left off. For instance, in 1981 Ali Akbar Mohtashami summoned Mughniyeh and Hezbollah's future secretary general, Abbas Musawi, to Iran for initial discussions about providing training for Hezbollah. As the newly appointed ambassador to Damascus, Mohtashami was well placed to facilitate the arrival of IRGC troops. And in 1982, that Iranian delegation landed in the Bekaa Valley, led by current Iranian defense minister Hossein Dehghan.

In the conventional narrative of Hezbollah's origins, it is the arrival of this contingent, the work it did there, and the men it trained that is typically said to signal the organization's birth. However, by the time Dehghan, Mohtashami, and Mughniyeh engineered the October 1983 attack that killed 241 American servicemen, the Khomeinists had already been active in Lebanon for over a decade. They wanted their own Shiite organization operating in Lebanon. The PLO was never going to be an entirely trustworthy asset, and Amal, as long as Sadr was alive, was an adversary, and even after his death would never prove pliant enough.

As Khomeini and his followers established their control over the revolution, here was an opportunity to do the same in the place where it had, arguably, first taken shape. And now it was all coming full circle as Iran's triumphant Islamic Republicans, Hezbollah, spawned their namesake in Lebanon. Three decades later, Hezbollah remains on top in both Iran and Lebanon.