

Resistance Land

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On a hilltop overlooking Israel's former occupation zone in south Lebanon, Hezbollah has built what the international press has dubbed the Shiite militia's «Disneyland.» Mleeta, Hezbollah's new «Tourist Landmark of the Resistance,» is designed to celebrate the party's long war against Israel. As it pulls in the masses, Mleeta also provides another sign that Israeli deterrence in Lebanon is disintegrating.

A former Hezbollah command center, Mleeta is located 27 miles (44 km) southeast of Beirut. Built at a reported cost of \$4 million, Mleeta attracted over 130,000 visitors in the first ten days following its opening on May 25 - the 10th anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon.

Abu Hadi, our Hezbollah guide, who employs the same nom de guerre as Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, aimed to give visitors a glimpse into the high-risk life of killing Israeli soldiers. He began our tour in «The Abyss» - a pit filled with Israeli helmets, boots, cluster bombs, and overturned military vehicles. At the center of the display is an Israeli Merkava-4 tank, with its gun turret tied in a knot. As we ascended a spiral walkway overlooking the display, I caught sight of a tombstone embossed with the Israel Defense Forces symbol, and the word «Abyss» written in big, concrete Hebrew letters.

Abu Hadi told us Mleeta was the inspiration of Imad Mughniyah, a man the United States believes was the mastermind of the 1983 U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks bombings in Beirut. The attack on the U.S. Marine Corps' barracks claimed the lives of 241 servicemen, marking the largest single-day death toll for the Marines since the Battle of Iwo Jima. Mughniyah was indicted by a U.S. court for the June 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847 and the murder of passenger and Navy diver Robert Stethem, whose body was tossed

out on the tarmac at Beirut Airport. He also played a key role in the kidnappings of Western journalists, diplomats, and academics (amongst others) in Lebanon between 1982 and 1990.

One of the world's most wanted men and reportedly a master of disguise, Hezbollah would barely mention Mughniyah's name until his mysterious February 2008 assassination by car bomb in Damascus. Now, the party brings him up at every turn. «That is Mughniyah's signature,» Abu Hadi said, pointing to a sign embossed into a tall, yellow cement monolith placed to look as if it were stopping an Israeli tank. Looking solemn and proud, he paused for a moment of silence and said a small prayer under his breath. Abu Hadi peppered his spiel with mentions of the late resistance leader, proving his influence on Hezbollah.

As we circled the walkway and proceeded down into the abyss, I lagged behind Abu Hadi to take a few photos. Mothers and fathers filled the walkways, pulling their children this way and that. By their dress and accents, many appeared to be from south Lebanon's majority Shia community. However, a significant minority also appeared to be Christian, a testament to the fact that Hezbollah's history of guerilla warfare against Israel has earned the party support that transcends Lebanon's fractious sectarian divide. Children gathered around the Mughniyah memorial, their hands outstretched to the tank as if they were trying to polish the turret. «See, only resistance will liberate Palestine from the Jews,» one mother said to her infant son as she pushed his stroller down the walkway.

«The Path,» a series of trenches and warrens reminiscent of World War I battlefields in France or Belgium, was the next stop on our tour. Abu Hadi pushed a crowd of visitors out of the way to show us the prayer nook of Abbas Moussawi, the Hezbollah co-founder and secretary general who was killed by an Israeli airstrike in 1992. Beside his prayer rug and Koran were two AK-47 assault rifles and what appeared to be a World War II-era helmet like those worn by the Marines in 1983. Among Hezbollah's older generation, Moussawi is regarded as the «father of resistance» because of the long hours he spent with fighters on the front lines.

Throughout Mleeta, exhibits aimed to instill visitors with Hezbollah's spartan military ethic. Emerging from the trench, we entered a stone path shaded by oaks, with mannequins dressed in green camouflage fatigues lining both sides of the trail. One exhibit portrayed a fighter cutting barbed wire while his compatriot provided covering fire; another display showed two fighters preparing to fire a 120mm rocket.

Every so often a teenage boy would dart out for a snapshot en scene. While the poses were always different, each wore a vacant and fearsome stare like that of country boy on the first day of hunting season.

Mleeta aims to place a halo around Hezbollah's foreign patrons. We descended into a maze of tunnels Hezbollah had carved into Mleeta's rocky hilltop, where displays showed command centers, field kitchens, and weapons caches. Photographs of Hezbollah leaders standing side by side with Iran's former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei adorned the battleship gray walls. «Our blood is the most powerful, and the demise of Israel,» read one of the signs dotting the tunnel.

The park also encourages visitors to celebrate Hezbollah's arsenal in its «rocket garden.» On display are Hezbollah's standard 107mm and 120mm Katyusha rockets, which rained down on northern Israel by the thousands during the 2006 war. But there are also a number of more advanced weapons on display, including U.S.-made TOW missiles - reportedly acquired by Hezbollah through the arms-for-hostages swaps that were later exposed in the Iran-Contra affair - RPG 29s, and a Kornet-E anti-tank guided missile, which Hezbollah used to decimate Israeli tank columns in 2006. Colorful signs outline each weapon's specifications in Arabic and English. And unlike in most museums in the Arab world, the spelling and grammar are almost perfect.

However, there was one exhibit missing from Mleeta: any description of the true horrors of war. The goriest exhibition is a Hezbollah doctor caring for a wounded fighter. This largely disaster-free version of «resistance» dovetailed nicely with Abu Hadi's repertoire of war stories, which emphasized the fighters' valor. In one story, a fighter was so brave he literally dug his own grave prior to battle. In another, two Hezbollah fighters were so well disciplined not to fire until ordered that they endured an Israeli colonel unknowingly urinating off a rock onto their heads. And because it was clear that the Hezbollah fighters fought hard, this narrative papered over the stories of when missions didn't go according to plan. Hezbollah lost an estimated 400 to 600 fighters during the 2006 war with Israel, so there must be plenty of material.

Since the end of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, Hezbollah's decision to hang back and replenish its weapons caches, aided by the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in the south, has resulted in the calmest period along the Lebanese-Israeli border in decades.

But Mleeta, and the enthusiastic Lebanese reaction to it, is only the latest sign that Israel's power of deterrence in Lebanon is rapidly deteriorating. Escalating clashes this year between UNIFIL soldiers and pro-Hezbollah villagers in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's effective veto power over the Lebanese government, combined with widespread reports Syria is sending long-range and sophisticated weapons to the Party of God, has raised tensions to all-time highs and produced a war of words between Hezbollah and Israel that could eventually lead to an actual war.

As our tour came to an end, Abu Hadi handed us over to Sheikh Ali Daher, the park's supervisor. Daher described Hezbollah's plans to construct hotels and conference centers to attract visitors from across the Arab world. Hezbollah's ambitious expansion plans, and the care with which the party looks after the ideological foundations of its power, prove that it is digging in for the long haul. When I asked Daher whether he worried that another war could lay waste to Hezbollah's construction plans, he simply shrugged. «If they bomb us, we will simply build it all again,» he said. «Resistance takes patience.»

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