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This book *The Hizbullah Phenomenon. Politics and Communication* purports to be an analysis of the Lebanese Hizbullah's political and media strategy. Three authors split the writing of its five chapters: Lina Khatib, inheritor of the post formerly held by Paul Salem as head of the Carnegie Middle East Research Center in Beirut, Dina Matar, director of the Center for Media and Film Studies at SOAS, London, and Atef Alshaer, lecturer in Postcolonial Literature at theUniversity of Kent.Admittedly, it is an ambitious project. In under two hundred pages, the book aims to furnish us with a general survey of Hizbullah's communications channels, accompanied by a definition and analysis of the political and media strategies implemented by the party since its creation in pursuit of its political and ideological objectives. It appears that advancing the core theses fell to Khatib, including those that bear on defining Hizbullah, its objectives, and its political strategy. Matar and Alshaer seem rather to act as auxiliaries in a palpable attempt to lend the book depth by including a presentation more focused on communications and the media channels deployed by Hizbullah in pursuit of its policy goals.

Unfortunately, the book leaves much to be desired. The quality of the empirical data, the sufficiency of the material used, the methodology of substantiation, rigor in using concepts and relevance of the theses – indeed, every basic principle of professional academic research – gets a terrible mauling (in a work nevertheless published by Oxford University Press!). Let us begin by positioning the book in the ocean of academic works on Hizbullah in existence today. Unsurprisingly, right from the start, on the problem of defining Hizbullah, on its reason for being, on the history of its early years, we find in this work all the ideas inherited from the "hezbollalogy" of the 1980s. As a reminder, the latter relied on Western intelligence agencies' reports that most of the early researchers, stymied by the tenacious strictures the organization, used for years to stiff-arm outside observers, picked up for want of anything better. It was the French-speaking academic world, in the second half of the years 2000, that saw the emergence of several studies, mainly doctoral theses from some of the best universities (Daher, Le Thomas, Chaib, Lefort), that set about thoroughly reworking, verifying, and rounding out the inheritance of these first years, while the English-speaking world (with the exception of Saadé) continued to rely on the original versions in large measure. *The Hizbullah Phenomenon* therefore needs correcting: No, Hizbullah was not born in 1982 as an "Islamist organization dedicated to establishing an Islamist regime in Lebanon similar to the Iranian one," and that subsequently would "transition to pragmatic institutionalism" after undergoing an "identity revolution," while maintaining its aim to reach "worldwide Islamic leadership." Hizbullah came into being between late 1983 and early 1984 to fulfill the role of a social, media, and, eventually, political buffer between its parent organization, the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon (the one to be born in 1982) and the Lebanese population – especially the Shiites. The analysis by Khatib and Matar is therefore skewed from the start, because defining and understanding Hizbullah's political strategies requires returning to the context of the party's creation, including the debates within the IRL that led to Hizbullah's birth, and the limits that were placed from the beginning on its role and mode of operation. The splitting of roles between the IRL and Hizbullah from day one has always dictated Hizbullah's practices, and, contrary to what fashionable theories assert about the "identity and political mutations" of Hizbullah, the effects of this division of labor have remained constant through the years: The IRL, the original military organization, takes on the armed struggle against the Israeli occupation; Hizbullah, the civilian organization, mobilizes on behalf of the IRL and defends its interests within society and against the constellation of powers. But to understand that this is how it all started – and that everything

still stems from this division – would also have required an in-depth knowledge of Hizbullah's sociohistorical realities.

If there is a second great reproach to level at this book, it is that it builds solely on discourse analysis. The reality is that the difficulty most observers have in acquiring "face to face" knowledge of Hizbullah's world through field work, combined with Hizbullah's discipline over the years in keeping its communications archive open to the public, has made discourse analysis the royal road for scholars with an interest in the party, especially of late. Still, anyone with a sociology degree has learned (in theory, at least) while pressing university benches that discourse analysis can only succeed under certain conditions. It must first take into account the (well understood) identity of who is speaking (*e.g.*, a Frenchman who says 'I'm liberal' is not the same as an American saying 'I'm liberal'); the context in which he expresses himself (*i.e.*, to say 'I am liberal' during the French Revolution and to say it the moment gay marriage is legalized does not signal the same thing); and it must – especially and above all – permanently be measured against *practice*: Some dictators and tyrants may well be fond of repeating that they are "men of peace," but an analyst that takes them at their word might see his or her professional credibility seriously compromised. Yet, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon* at no time confronts statements with actions. When not taking the declarations literally, without differentiating between the true, declared intention and the rhetoric or the discourse of circumstance (hence of non-existent intentional value), the chapter's author interprets such declarations in a highly idiosyncratic manner, at the evident risk of straying into highly unrealistic extrapolations.

Added to these problems of empirical unfamiliarity with the actor under study and the tendency toward literal discourse analysis are added pronounced problems with analytical rigor. For a book openly dedicated to the presentation and analysis of two types of strategies, political and media, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon* at no point makes explicit what is meant by "strategy"; despite pages and pages of attempts, the much-touted strategies are at no time actually defined or articulated. It thus appears that after reading pages of what Khatib calls political "strategy," what is presented is in fact nothing more than an empirical detail at best, and nothing like a thoughtout vision supported by a plan of action coherent with it. The same goes for the concept of "pillars," with which Matar means to give us the bases and foundations of Hizbullah's communications strategy: She only provides "definition" in the form of a fistful of heterogeneous descriptive details, which really have little to say to anyone with a more fleshed-out idea of Hizbullah's practices about what Hizbullah's *true* strategies are.

Even the chapter dedicated to Hizbullah's poetry, penned by Alshaer, leaves the reader non plussed. The author begins with the (unproved) assertion that poetry occupies "a place of great importance" in Hizbullah communications (though in reality, it is completely peripheral). But then the author goes vague in trying to define the "poetry *of* Hizbullah"(pontificating whether the poets are members of the party or simply sympathizers and whether poets are paid by the party or are simply wishing to render a personal homage). Too add insult to injury, the author wrongly interprets Nasrallah's phrase *Ya ashraf al-nas*, (*O you respectable people*): this salutation was not, as Alshaer states, addressed to "the Shiites in the South" but to all of the public sympathizing with the IRL, not just in the south but in the rest of Lebanon and was addressed just as much to the Sunnis and Christians as the Shiites. But most astonishing, certainly, is the fact that in an analysis of "the poetry of Hizbullah," spread over several dozen pages, the author's favorite example, parsed in the minutest detail, are the poems of a *Syrian author*. Meanwhile, not a single line is dedicated to the one person that is a must-mention in this context, namely Jawad Nasrallah, the son of the secretary general himself, whose poems praising the IRL and Hizbullah have been published for several years.

Everywhere, on page after page, the book suffers from inconsistencies, repetitive chapters (especially between Matar and Khatib), categorical assertions that are never backed up, echoes of received ideas that are set forth as sociological realities (and that anyone familiar with Lebanese politics is sure to recognize as having issued from fashionable Beirut pseudo-intellectual salons), along with speculations and (highly personal) interpretations of the studied actor's intentions. A source generously cited by the authors, Lisa Wedeen, has warned though many times in her writings that "nobody can get into a person's head to the point of being qualified to assert that for this or that reason people say the things they say or do the things they do." In the end, one is even entitled to become irritated at being treated to gross sophisms which seem to take the reader for an imbecile, starting with, in the introduction: "By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Hizbullah's communication strategy has developed into a constant process of strategic communication" (p. 9). Indeed.

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