



**Norton: Hezbollah: A Short History**  
by *Reviewed by Rula Abisaab*

---

Hezbollah: A Short History, by Augustus Richard Norton. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. ix + 159 pages. Glossary to p. 162. Additional reading to p. 167. Works cited to p. 171. Index to p. 183. \$16.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Rula Abisaab

Hezbollah comes out of Augustus Richard Norton's long interest and pioneering accounts of the Shi'a of Lebanon, his many research trips to Lebanon, and his close contacts with Shi'i intellectuals and political figures. The book is a dynamic and multifaceted account of one of the most important parties in the modern Middle East—namely, Hizballah.

The book examines Shi'i political history since the independence of Lebanon in 1943. Alienated by the Maronite-Sunni coalition that dominated the first Lebanese republic founded in 1943, many Shi'a turned to nationalist and leftist parties to effect a more equitable political system. Norton argues that it was not until the advent of Sayyid Musa al-Sadr that a sectarian identity started to emerge among the Shi'a. Norton, however, describes al-Sadr as "hardly a man of war" (p. 21), even though he had created the Shi'i resistance group Amal in 1975 as an armed militia and raised banners with slogans that glorified armed resistance such as "al-silah zinat al-rijal" ("arms are the ornament of men").

Norton discusses important dimensions of the sociopolitical developments in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in 1982. The invasion provided the appropriate context for the formation of Hizballah, a process expedited by the failed mission of the multinational forces. The latter were expected to end the Israeli invasion, protect the civilians (Lebanese and Palestinian), and stabilize the country. None of these goals was achieved, and the country was torn apart by sectarian leaders, each seeking to establish his sphere of control over resources and decision-making. Norton explains in a concise and nuanced narrative how Hizballah alone trod on a different path, seeking to address the needs of local Shi'a, earning the party respect and popular support along the way.

Hizballah's "manifesto," as Norton describes it, used a supra-Islamic tone, calling upon the "downtrodden in Lebanon and the world" to fight "the countries of the arrogant world," the United States and the USSR, which scrambled to dominate poorer countries. The "manifesto" rejected any reformist strategies toward these superpowers and demanded the complete liberation of Lebanese land and political will. Norton finds, however, that in the early 1990s Hizballah became more pragmatic, "retaining a fierce commitment to confront Israel's occupation in southern Lebanon while engaging in precisely the game of confessional Lebanese politics" (p. 45). A rich and stimulating section of Hezbollah is Norton's discussion of Shi'i

rituals during 'Ashura and their social and political function in the Lebanese context. Norton draws convincing parallels between the modern reinterpretation of Imam Husayn's martyrdom and Catholic liberation theology, noting that each demands "that people must not wallow in fatalism but must act to help themselves" (pp. 50–51). Norton notes how 'Ashura became an occasion to demand the liberation of South Lebanon, with Menachem Begin, the Israeli prime minister who invaded Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, symbolizing Yazid, the unjust Umayyad caliph whose army killed Imam Husayn in A.D. 680.

Norton's treatment of the relationship between Hizballah and Amal, a Shi'i political party, deserves further assessment. Norton describes Amal as a "reformist" movement, which implies that it adhered to "constitutional" or parliamentary political means—not arms—to achieve its goals. But Amal, as Norton himself notes, engaged in armed attacks on Lebanese Communists, Iraqi Ba`thists, and the PLO. I doubt that Amal's armed attacks on the Palestinian camps—which started in May 1985 in Beirut and spread to South Lebanon—were carried out simply in reaction to Hizballah's support of the Palestinian cause. Despite the military aid provided by the Syrian regime to Amal, it could not achieve a victory over the Palestinians. This owes in no small part to the condemnation by Shi'i socialists and Arab nationalists of Amal's war against the camps. Many Shi'a viewed the attacks as a Syrian attempt to suffocate any independent Palestinian decision-making. Several Amal fighters at the time left Amal to join Hizballah. Amal's popularity declined significantly because of its attacks on Palestinian civilians in the camps.

Norton vividly assesses the challenge that faced Hizballah after spokesman and secretary-general Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli was expelled from the party in 1990 mainly but not exclusively because he opposed the decision of a number of party members to participate in the Lebanese elections. The challenge was twofold: The party supported armed resistance against Israel and accommodated the open-market economic policy of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri's government. The assassination of al-Hariri in 2005 led to a political crisis in Lebanon that had a significant impact on Hizballah, which Norton explains. Finally, Norton elucidates the dimensions and repercussions of Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006 on Hizballah and the Arab-Islamic world.

Overall, Norton's book balances international political factors with the local and regional conditions that shaped the outlook and activities of Hizballah. Norton deserves praise for writing an insightful and multilayered work accessible to a wide and often uninformed readership.

Rula Abisaab is an associate professor at McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies. She is currently co-writing a book on the Twelver Shi'a of Lebanon.

Source : [Institute for Palestine Studies](http://www.palestine-studies.org/en/journals/abstract.php?id=9765)

URL : <http://www.palestine-studies.org/en/journals/abstract.php?id=9765>