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HIZBALLAH'S EVOLVING IDENTITY

Hizbullah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto, by Joseph Alagha. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011. 185 pages. Glossary to p. 194. Notes to p. 210. Index to p. 222. n.p.

Hizbullah's Identity Construction, by Joseph Alagha. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011. 190 pages. Glossary to p. 196. Additional Reading to p. 210. Notes to p. 272. Selected Bibliography to p. 288. Index to p. 308. \$29.95, paper.

Reviewed by Mouannes Hojairi

One of the notable elements missing from the literature on Hizballah's structure and military might is an in-depth analysis of the party's inner

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mechanisms of identity formation. The process of generating identity and ideology from within the party has been largely ignored in favor of analysis of the party's performance and interaction within the regional politics of the Middle East, and within the Lebanese political system.

In his books *Hizbullah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto* and *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, Joseph Alagha presents a comprehensive examination of the way the literature produced by the party not only is a product of an existing fixed identity but also acts as an agent of identity formation. Alagha examines the way in which the identity of Hizballah—as a religious group, a political party, and a military resistance movement—was formed, and how its content is claimed by those interpellated by it as a stable and fixed essence.

Alagha does not so much create a new historical narrative as examine existing accounts of Hizballah's history. He aims to provide not only a history of the party or even of its struggle, but also a history of how the party's myths of origin and core identity have been invented and perpetuated through its internal mechanisms. In his query he successfully assesses how the party's documents and declarations are among the main instruments in generating and perpetuating an ever-evolving identity and flexible political ideology. Furthermore, he elucidates how the discourse of Hizballah's leaders and cadres is a central agent of identity formation.

In *Hizbullah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto*, Alagha offers a detailed reassessment of Hizballah's discourse with regard to the changing dynamics of the party's worldview. The book opens with the mid-eighties *Open Letter* in which Hizballah underlined the constituents of the party's political ideology. Alagha then offers a chronological and thematic analysis of the party's subsequent eight conclave, as well as its 2009 manifesto. What follows is a translation of key primary documents concerning Hizballah's identity reconstruction. Selections of press conferences, election programs, accords, and declarations are presented chronologically, as a continuous

primary source for the reader to examine. Alagha's skill is in employing chronology to underline the thematic in explaining the dynamics of the party's evolving identity.

By contrast, Alagha's *Hizbullah's Identity Construction* is less archivally based. Instead, it is based primarily on the existing literature, but presents a new perspective and new conclusions on an ongoing internal debate among the party's followers and opponents in Lebanon.

The book opens with a summary of Hizballah's history, from its early beginnings to the present. Alagha then outlines his analytical framework, in which he adopts the constructivist theory of identity in order to approach identity transformation within Hizballah. Alagha adopts the assumption that "the practices of actors embedded in the social structure not only reproduce the structure but also sometimes transform it" (p. 24). Since he accepts that identity is inherently relational, his primary effort in the following part of the book is to analyze Hizballah's relational identity to its posited "others": the non-Muslim minorities in Lebanon.

As far as examining identity as an ideological device, Alagha switches his focus to the mobilizational activities of Hizballah over the years and at key moments of its history. The book is divided thematically rather than chronologically, even though it ultimately tracks a chronological transformation and evolution of Hizballah's identity. First, Alagha focuses on the doctrine of *Wilayat Al-Faqih* and its interpretations in the Lebanese context in light of the party's autonomy from Iran. Alagha then analyzes the notion of Jihad and its significance to Hizballah's constructed identity. What follows is an assessment of Hizballah's involvement in Lebanese and regional politics through the lens of integration into the confessional political system of the Lebanese state. The book ends with the future prospects for the party and the possible shifts of its identity in light of the ongoing shifts in the Middle Eastern political scene.

In *Hizbullah's Identity Construction* and in *Hizbullah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto*,

Alagha's voice can be heard through his blend of ideological and sociopolitical analysis, and his skillful integration of the chronological and the thematic. What sets his two books apart from the host of others that deal with Hizballah is that they aim at understanding the party's identity as dynamic rather than static.

Alagha successfully traces the major transformations of Hizballah's identity over the past decades by delineating its shift from a resistance identity to a project identity. This shift was gradual as Hizballah went from being a militia participating in the civil war and seeking to obtain power by military force to an officially recognized resistance movement, and from a group that aimed at top-down revolutionary change in the system to a group that seeks political control through gradual participation and integration into the sectarian-confessional democratic system of the Lebanese state. Alagha's narrative successfully captures that gradual transformation of Hizballah from a "resistance group with a resistance identity to a political party with an Islamic project identity grounded in dominant interests."

Alagha's coverage of the topic is more than adequate. The one area he seems to understate is Hizballah's projected Islamic identity in light of Sunni-Shi'i tensions on the regional level. This angle is not fully ignored, but neither is it given its due attention in light of its significance and magnitude.

What Alagha offers, however, is a comprehensive assessment of all of the identity transformations within Hizballah as a single tradition. He reveals how their interconnectedness came to constitute a tradition, and he focuses on the process of creation and proliferation of numerous identities as a whole and the way they integrate together to produce a constantly evolving and adapting identity.