Did Hezbollah achieve its objectives declared in the 1985 ‘Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World’?

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Abstract
The year of 1985 marked the official declaration of Hezbollah’s identity, principles and pivotal objectives in Lebanon through an important document entitled ‘Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World.’ Objectives stated in the open letter include the withdrawal of Israel and the US as well as submission to justice by the Lebanese Phalanges Party. Hezbollah also hinted its desire to turn Lebanon into an Islamic republic. The party managed to achieve its most important objective; the liberation of South Lebanon from Israel. Nevertheless, other objectives remain unachieved, albeit Hezbollah’s continuous struggle.

Keywords: Hezbollah, Lebanon, Israel, Manifesto, and Guerrilla Warfare

Introduction
Prior to its independence, Lebanon was under the French Mandate, where during this period, Lebanon began exercising its unique power-sharing arrangement. Unbeknown to them, this arrangement is what gave rise to a long-term consequence of political instability in the region. The implications of this condition were profound, as in April 1975 the Second Lebanese Civil War erupted and started to intensify foreign intervention in Lebanon.

Hezbollah saw the opportunity to emerge within such fragmented society as Lebanon and began to expand itself during the country’s heated civil war and was finally established as a reaction against Israel’s second invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Hezbollah promulgated its identity, view and objectives through the 1985 open letter addressed to the ‘downtrodden of Lebanon and the world.’ In this open letter, Hezbollah declared four objectives, including; 1) Israel’s final departure from Lebanon; 2) America, France and their allies’ final departure from Lebanon; 3) Bringing the
Phalange to justice; 4) Giving ‘all our people’ full freedom of choice for the governmental system.

This project seeks to explore other objectives that were achieved by Hezbollah from the year of 1985, when Hezbollah first declared its existence, until Israel’s unilateral decision to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000. This project is particularly important to the literature, as there has not been an extensive research on the topic of Hezbollah’s objectives.

Literature Review

Until now, Hezbollah’s identity is often disputed between a terrorist group and legitimate political organisation. However, Gunning and Jackson, who were critically engaged in terrorism studies included Hezbollah to their analysis on religious terrorism and argued that Hezbollah’s lethality in the 1980s should be understood in the context of the Israeli occupation of Southern. This literature shows the logic of Hezbollah’s determination to achieve its objectives because the party believes that defending the rights of the oppressed is an essential humanitarian duty. Their analysis further indicates that Hezbollah is a unique case of insurgency considering its nature as a political organisation.

While the literature offers an extensive research on Hezbollah’s identity and military performances, particularly in its effort to expel Israel from Lebanon in 2000 and 2006, this dissertation aims to focus primarily on all the party’s objectives stated in its 1985 manifesto. Furthermore, this dissertation seeks to fill a gap in the literature that are inclined to overemphasise the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war. Last, it also aims to counter balance Hebrew-language literature about the conflict in the assessed period, as there has not been extensive research regarding the 1985-2000 South Lebanon conflict in English-language literature.

Methodology

This dissertation is a qualitative research that seeks to examine the outcomes of a conflict that had happened in the past and hence it is based on historical research methods involving both primary and secondary sources. This dissertation applies four methods in gathering historical data, which are archival data or primary sources; secondary sources; documentaries; and recollections.

Discussion

First Objective

This On 26 May 2000, Hassan Nasrallah delivered Hezbollah’s victory speech over Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon, except from the Sheeba Farms area and the so-called ‘Seven Villages’, in Bint Jbeil and was enjoyed by over 100,000 audiences of both Muslims and Christians. This speech can be hailed as a milestone in
Hezbollah’s struggle against Israel and its allies for more than two decades, since its emergence.

Israel’s withdrawal and final destruction are an integral part of the first objective stated in the manifesto. The final destruction of Israel, however, should not be considered an objective in Lebanon but rather, an extended vision of Hezbollah once Israel’s withdrawal had been achieved.

Hezbollah’s priorities on its mujahedeen, civilians, military strategy and finally media engagement managed to accomplish this particular objective. Had Hezbollah not paid great attention to these small but important details, Israeli would be more likely to remain in Lebanon. Additionally, Israel would have room to manoeuvre and eventually seize the opportunity to preserve its influence in the region if Hezbollah did not carry out their methods correctly and effectively.

Second Objective

Hezbollah vowed to remain in a state of unrest until the final departure and influence of not only Israel but also countries like the US, France and other allied countries in Lebanon. This objective, however, is harder to examine because there are not many discussions about Hezbollah’s struggle against the West, both in literature or and through public statements made by the Hezbollah leaders.

Hezbollah’s struggle with the West was signalled throughout Lebanon’s civil war in 1975-90 when series of assaults targeting The Western countries, US and French military bases and US embassy in Lebanon took place. Both organised groups took responsibility.

Having done these attacks turned out to be counter-productive considering the West’s intensified pressure on the Lebanese government to disarm Hezbollah’s resistance. Hezbollah’s reluctance in supporting these attacks, even when the party has openly declared its perception of the West, manifested Hezbollah’s intention to reach a peaceful solution on this matter. After all, since the West decided to withdraw its forces in February 1984, the West’s influence on Lebanon after 1985 was primarily a political one, unlike Israel who was physically present in Lebanon’s territory. In addition, Hezbollah’s main concern of the US administration and its allies was their double standards that favoured Israel. Thus, it is logical that by intensifying its resistance activities against Israel would eventually overcome the West’s foreign policies.

Third Objective

Hezbollah has openly declared its criticism to the Phalange party for alleged crimes perpetrated by both the party and Israel. Whether or not this objective was achieved by the year of 2000, one may conclude that, from Hezbollah’s new manifesto in 2009, Hezbollah deliberately excludes the Phalange from the party’s agenda even though there is not a shred of evidence that has proven the Phalange’s submission to justice. Essentially, this paper argues that Hezbollah failed to achieve this specific end.
Many incidents that highlighted the Phalange’s cooperation with Israel had essentially strengthened Hezbollah’s resolve to punish any entities that have openly declared their support towards Israel. Consequently, the Phalange became the only local enemy to Hezbollah and the party promised to bring Kataeb Party to justice for its crimes against Muslims. Hezbollah’s manifesto does not only emphasise on the massacre, but also to one and a half million Muslims who were displaced as a result of ‘Zionist-Phalange coordination’ that had destroyed their neighbourhoods.

Despite Hezbollah’s initial viewpoint on the Phalange, Hezbollah’s leaders have addressed some flaws within its manifesto. According to Alagha, in October 1994, Nasrallah implied that the Open Letter might undergo a rewording. Nasrallah asserted that although the overall doctrines are not subjected to major adjustment, ‘...we should account for the changes and eventualities that took place in the previous years.’ Furthermore, Qassem confirmed that some of Hezbollah’s stances have changed given ‘evolving circumstances developing around us,’ especially Hezbollah’s position on the Phalange. According to Qassem, Hezbollah has then considered the Phalange as the party’s partner in dialogue.

Though there is no proof that indicates Hezbollah’s specific actions against the Phalange following the manifesto, and as Qassem confirmed in 2002, Hezbollah wished to alter a few things from its Manifesto, including the way it seeks to deal with the Phalange. More importantly, Hezbollah sought for negotiation, rather than confrontation. All in all, unlike its effort against Israel, the Phalange is a domestic entity and has initial supporters within Lebanon. Furthermore, the Kataeb Party, under the new leadership shortly after the civil war ended, had shown intention to reform itself. Finally, Hezbollah believes that dialogue with the Phalange is the only viable solution to settle issues between them.

Fourth Objective

While other objectives are to a great extent related to Hezbollah’s stance on Israel, the fourth and final objective stated in the manifesto is arguably the only goal that is motivated by Hezbollah’s own political aspiration which is rooted in the country’s deep-seated sectarian divisions. There is no doubt that this long-standing communal cleavage had brought about violence and never-ending conflict in the country.

Although there is no denying that ‘a projection of the Arab-Israeli conflict into the Lebanese political arena’ had only worsened the situation towards the outbreak of the 1975 civil war, nevertheless, without the ‘complexity of the country and the heritage of its people,’ violence could be avoided or at least could have been handled better. It is also worth considering that regardless of the PLO and Israel’s presence that aggravated the tension, one may argue that the heart of the problem was political, economic and social instability in Lebanon. For instance, ‘failure to achieve balanced socioeconomic development, political oppression, misdistribution of wealth and the disorienting
psycho-cultural impact of Westernisation’ were key problems inherent in the Lebanese system itself. Based on this, Hezbollah believes that the current power-sharing arrangement has restricted people’s freedom as it only benefits certain communities.

Despite the party’s election successes, people, especially the Christian communities remain sceptical of Hezbollah’s ideology. This is logical considering Hezbollah’s confession of its desire to apply Islamic system of government. Nonetheless, Hezbollah is aware of the shortcomings of this objective, for instance, this could strengthen public perception of Hezbollah being Iranian’s entity operating in Lebanon. More importantly, Hezbollah would not let this proclamation impede the party’s other objectives, particularly the resistance. Consequently, Hezbollah’s leaders consistently addressed that the party is not willing to implement this aspiration by force. For instance, in the party’s declaration of its purpose, Hezbollah emphasised that the party rejects any form of violence a means to gain power and the best way to ‘rectify vision and positions,’ is through dialogues with others.

More importantly, in Hezbollah’s defence, Nasrallah asserted that it is only natural for every Lebanese citizen ‘to aspire to the best project or notion that, in our opinion, would lead to the most just, prosperous, secure, and peaceful society.’

Fundamentally, regardless of Hezbollah’s participation in the Lebanese political arena and its willingness to cooperate with other political entities in Lebanon, until now, the power-sharing arrangement based on the 1943 agreement continues to exist and Lebanon has not turned into an Islamic country. In the light of this, Hezbollah was unsuccessful in realising its political aspiration during the period from 1985 to 2000. Nonetheless, even though this objective remained unachieved, Hezbollah’s participation in election indicated Hezbollah’s eagerness to end the current power-sharing arrangement in the Lebanese system. Hezbollah strived to have and maintain dialogues with all religious and political actors in Lebanon to achieve desirable Lebanon with the ultimate freedom for its people.

Conclusion

Hezbollah’s first objective seemed more straightforward and relevant to the party’s resistance agenda. Whereas the remaining objectives such as dealing with the West and Phalange as well as aiming for the freedom of all Lebanese people are rather vague and irrelevant to its resistance priority throughout this phase. Although Hezbollah declared in the manifesto that there is no alternative to confrontation to achieve these objectives, in reality, Hezbollah has shifted its policy. The party believed that the third and fourth objectives were only achievable through a formal or political channel, as evident in Hezbollah’s participation in Lebanon’s politics and its eagerness to have dialogues with other political entities.

It is worth noting that Hezbollah has clearly taken different approaches in dealing with each of these objectives. Hezbollah’s paramilitary or the Islamic resistance played
a crucial part during this period, particularly in achieving the first and the second objectives. On the contrary, due to Hezbollah’s altered strategy that no longer relies on confrontation while trying to cope with the Phalange and the Lebanese establishment, Hezbollah’s decision to join the Lebanese system, has not served its purpose.

Above all, Hezbollah only decided to change its path and transform itself from merely a resistance into a legitimate political player, in 1992. Given this timeframe, Hezbollah had only less than a decade to exercise its new strategy. In comparison to its resistance activities against Israel, Hezbollah had started its operations against Israel even prior to the manifesto. In addition, Hezbollah had admitted that the party’s most important consideration during this period concern was its resistance movement against Israel. Had the party not fully concentrated on Israel, Hezbollah would not score the victory and end the South Lebanon conflict.

Finally, directions for future research in this area include a more in-depth assessment of the viewpoints of Hezbollah’s leaders concerning the rest of the objective and analysis of more restricted archives or official documents – if possible documents in Arabic. It is also advantageous if the researcher could conduct an interview with Hezbollah or Lebanese officials regarding this matter, considering information available in English-language literature primarily focuses on the first objective only.

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