

The Women of Hezbollah

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Since the 1980s, the Shia terrorist group Hezbollah has not been given to blunt public moralizing about the need for women to wear the veil. It originally made no secret of its desire to convert Lebanon into a Shia Islamic state -- the organization's 1985 manifesto called for the establishment of "Islamic government" and the conversion of Christians to Islam -- but these efforts proved exceedingly unpopular, given Lebanon's plurality of Christian and Sunni Muslim citizens. So when its leader, Abas Musawi, was assassinated in 1992, his successor Hassan Nasrallah refrained from offering explicit support for theocracy in Lebanon -- and largely backed away from efforts to impose conservative religious traditions on Hezbollah's female constituents. But now, suddenly, the organization is again behaving in a way that evinces deep insecurity about the decorum of Shiite women.

Here's one example. Two months after Israel interdicted the Mavi Marmara, another aid flotilla is preparing to set sail toward the Hamas-controlled Palestinian territory of Gaza. This Lebanese fleet, slated to depart in the coming weeks, is led by the Miriam, a vessel manned solely by females. The idea behind this creative and progressive staffing is to raise the negative impact on Israel if it tries to enforce the blockade against a boat full of sympathetic ladies.

Yet it turns out that not all Lebanese women are welcome on the cruise. In June, the Kuwaiti daily *As Siyassa* reported that the curvaceous Lebanese diva Haifa Wehbe -- perhaps the most famous woman in all of Lebanon -- tried to sign on, but was rebuffed by Hezbollah. Why? Apparently Hezbollah was concerned that Wehbe's "immodest" attire would "harm the reputation of all the women participating in the trip."

The militia's rejection of Wehbe was remarkable. Not only would her presence have raised the profile of the voyage, it would have dramatically increased the public relations cost to Israel if it again mishandled the boarding. Moreover, Wehbe -- a Shiite Muslim from Hezbollah's home turf in south Lebanon -- is a strong supporter of the "resistance." In 2006, she praised the militia for defending Lebanon from Israel; in 2008 she declared that she was "under the command" of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Even more distinctive is the recent campaign that the militia has launched to convince women to don the veil. Females in Dahiya, a Hezbollah-controlled southern suburb of Beirut, haven't been covering up in sufficient numbers for the resistance, so Hezbollah, via its youth advertising affiliate, the Islamic Cultural Knowledge

Association, has launched a massive poster campaign targeting those who have yet to adopt the hijab. The ubiquitous bright orange posters -- on overpasses and roadside billboards -- all depict a faceless woman wearing the traditional Muslim headscarf, and a series of slogans urging the attire. One of the more popular placards reads, "Your Hijab my sister is more precious than my blood." Yet another notes that the veil "[p]rotects the position of women." Still a third describes hijab as the "[f]ortress of chastity," an adage the sign attributes to the late Iranian theocrat Ayatollah Khomeini.

The campaign is part of a "restorative propaganda effort praising the moral-religious ideal of the [organization's] elapsed beginnings," explains Lokman Slim, a longtime observer of local Shia politics. "It [is] meant to reassure those women who wear the hijab of the righteousness of their choice as much as to tell the 'loose' ones -- in a friendly way - - that they are wrong."

Why is Hezbollah engaging in these campaigns now? The timing is not coincidental. Politically and militarily, 2009 was a banner year for the militia. But, image-wise, Hezbollah's reputation for probity was tarnished when its chief local financier was arrested for perpetrating a Ponzi scheme a la Bernie Madoff -- implicating the militant Islamist organization in odious corruption. Since then, the group has been trying to remake itself, not only by issuing its first new "manifesto" since 1985, but by refocusing the organization on its religious objectives. All this appears to be part of a Hezbollah effort to rehabilitate its diminished ethical and moral standing by returning to its socially conservative roots.

These events suggest something important about the nature of Hezbollah itself. Its leaders are clearly concerned by the fact that, although the organization is exceedingly popular among Lebanese Shiites, it remains unable to convince its constituents to adhere to its conservative social mores. In other words: They are troubled that support for Hezbollah derives from its military exploits and not from its Iranian-inspired religious message.

This also means, more fundamentally, that Hezbollah's motives have not altered nearly as much as it would have us think. The organization's actions belie a wider social agenda, which seems to extend far beyond "resisting" Israeli occupation. While Hezbollah no longer articulates the long-term goal of exporting the Iranian revolution to Lebanon, the hijab campaign and the counterintuitive decision to exclude Haifa Wehbe from the Gaza aid flotilla suggest that the organization's hopes for an Islamic state in Lebanon remain alive and well.

Yet it looks as if Hezbollah will not be able to realize those goals. No doubt, the organization will continue to press its militant and religiously conservative agenda in Lebanon. It still possesses a preponderance of force in the state. But if the evidently tepid response to the hijab campaign is any indication, sectarian and political considerations will cause the militia's efforts to fail. Fortunately -- for Washington and the majority of Lebanese -- the fact that Hezbollah's constituents refuse to consent to its socio-religious agenda suggests that aside from "resisting" Israel, the organization has limited appeal.

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