



Augustus Richard Norton. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. vi + 187 pp. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13124-5.



Reviewed by Joseph Alagha (Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands)

Published on H-Levant (April, 2008)

Hezbollah: The Islamic Resistance in Lebanon

According to Augustus Richard Norton, his purpose for writing *Hezbollah: A Short History* is the presentation of an “honest” as well as “more balanced and nuanced account of this complex organization,” which Norton calls “the leading Shi’i political party in Lebanon” (pp. 8, 186). While Norton’s book offers no startling new insights, it provides a synopsis of what is known about Hizbullah in a form that is both compact and usually well written.

Nevertheless, there are many shortcomings. First, in a book tailored to the nonspecialist reader, Norton has omitted a considerable number of historical events that are crucial to understanding subsequent Lebanese history. These include the seminal Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which carved the Ottoman Empire’s Arab lands into today’s contemporary states. Furthermore, there is no discussion of the Cairo Agreement and its annulment, which are critical to any understanding of the changing relationship between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Lebanon’s Shi’a.[1]

In addition, Norton’s transliterations of Arabic and Farsi terms are quite inconsistent, a fact that often results in distortions. Furthermore, some of Norton’s translit-

erations are not simply unorthodox, but constitute serious errors. For example, Norton refers to Iran’s Supreme Leader as the *rakbar* (p. 90). Irrespective of which transliteration system one employs, *rahbar* is always spelled with an “h,” not a “k.”

And the errors do not end there. In a photograph appearing on page 64, Norton identifies the person in the foreground as Sayyid ‘Abbas al-Musawi. It is actually Shaykh Ragib Harb, Hizbullah’s most influential resistance leader in the south, who was assassinated by Israeli forces on February 16, 1984, and to whom the *Open Letter*, Hizbullah’s 1985 founding document, is primarily dedicated. Sayyid ‘Abbas al-Musawi was himself assassinated on Feb. 16, 1992 while returning from ceremonies marking the eighth anniversary of Shaykh Ragib’s assassination. Anyone researching Hizbullah should know the difference between these two men.

Such factual errors are distressingly frequent in Norton’s book. For example, Imam Musa al-Sadr did not, as Norton implies, establish Harakat al-Mahrumin (the Movement of the Deprived) on his own (p. 19). Rather, al-Sadr joined with Greek Catholic Arch-

bishop Grégoire Haddad in 1974 to found Harakat al-Mahrumin in an attempt to alleviate the suffering of Lebanon's poor regardless of their sectarian or ethnic affiliations. As such, the organization was initially open to persons from all sects. It was not until after the outbreak of the civil war that Harakat al-Mahrumin became a Shi'ite-based movement under the leadership of al-Sadr. Furthermore, the principal aim of al-Sadr's 1978 visit to Libya was not "to attend ceremonies commemorating the ascent of the Libyan leader" Muammar Qadhafi to power (p. 21). In fact, al-Sadr's trip was motivated by a desire to end the Lebanese civil war. Having been informed that Qadhafi was funding militias on both sides of the conflict, he planned to intercede with the Libyan leader to stop this practice.

Norton's statements about Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani are also replete with errors. He asserts that "as of November 2006, at least 60 percent of all Lebanese [Shi'ites] follow Sistani, with the rest following Fadlallah. Very few consider themselves 'imitators' of Khamenei." (p. 151). It is worth noting that Khamene'i is the *marja' al-taqid* (official source or authority of emulation) in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Hizbullah's official *marja'*, not *marja'i*, as Norton writes on page 100. On the same page, Norton states that Khamene'i "gave his blessings" to the party's participation in the Lebanese electoral process, thereby reducing the complexity, flexibility, and pragmatism of Shi'ite jurisprudence to individual whim. In point of fact, Hizbullah asked Khamene'i to provide a formal legal opinion (*istifta'*) on the legitimacy of contesting the 1992 elections. As soon as Khamene'i authorized and supported (*ajaza wa 'ayyada*) participation, Hizbullah embarked on drafting its election program.

Norton also fails to mention the national dialogue sessions that spanned the period between March and June of 2006. Given that the war broke out in July, it is no coincidence that the last two sessions (June 8th and 29th) were dedicated to the interrelated issues of Lebanon's defense strategy and the weaponry under Hizbullah's control.

Norton's conclusion appears to serve as a postscript, as it reads like a chronology of events that occurred subsequently to those treated in the main text. Numerous errors are found here as well. First, Norton twice refers to General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) as the "Free Political Movement" (pp. 153, 175). Norton's conclusions about the FPM are equally mistaken, asserting that "'Aounists' and the Shi'a share a profound sense

of victimization in what they see as a corrupt and unresponsive political system" (p. 153). Although the FPM and Hizbullah might share a sense of victimization and disgust with corruption, such factors are incidental. They are not central to the historic ten-point Understanding between the two groups, let alone to an alliance based on mutual interest. A more plausible explanation is that the Christian nationalists (FPM) and the Muslim nationalists (Hizbullah) signed the aforementioned Understanding addressing relations with Syria and a variety of other political, economic, administrative, and security issues after the unrest of February 5, 2006 threatened to ignite a new civil war.

Only in the final pages of his conclusion does Norton begin to offer some analytical insights, albeit far off the mark and contradictory. This applies to his insistence that "half-solutions and compromise usually prevail, just as they will likely prevail in the 2006 crisis" (pp. 157-158), as well as his forecast of the current political deadlock's resolution through "pragmatic compromises" (p. 159). It is difficult to reconcile this argument with Norton's contention that the FPM and Hizbullah are working "together to expand their share of power in significant measure at the expense of the Sunni Muslims" (p. 153). Norton's account of the crisis's unfolding is also in error: "Following the resignation of an allied Sunni member and in conjunction with these demands [veto over all government measures], all five Shi'i members of the government resigned from the cabinet" (p. 156). The five Shi'ite ministers actually resigned first, on November 11, 2006, to be followed a few days later by environment minister Jacob Sarraf, who happens to be Greek Orthodox, not Sunni Muslim. Furthermore, Sarraf is an ally of former President Émile Lahoud, and thus only indirectly allied with Hizbullah.

Finally, Norton's book sometimes reads more like a defense and justification, rather than a scholarly analysis, of Hizbullah's actions. For example, Norton seems eager to exonerate Hizbullah for several acts of terrorism, attributing these instead to Iran (p. 78). Norton also takes care in his conclusion to endorse Hizbullah's position on the July 2006 war, asserting that "it was utterly predictable that the Shi'a would emerge from the war as a mobilized, assertive, and more militant community" (p. 158).

Despite its merits, Norton's *Hezbollah: A Short History* contains numerous errors of fact, interpretation, and attribution. A prominent scholar like Norton is expected to take more care with his text. And Princeton University

Press clearly failed to exercise due diligence in the editing and peer review processes, thus failing both their author and their readers. Sadly, one can only assume that the topicality of this study's subject matter prompted a rush to publish, thus causing the imperatives of commerce to trump those of scholarship.

Note

[1]. The Cairo Agreement (CA) was signed on November 3, 1969 between Lebanon and the PLO granting the latter license to launch attacks from south Lebanon against Israel. The Lebanese parliament's annulment of the CA and all its corollaries were published in the *Official Gazette* on June 18, 1987 under law number 87/25.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant>

Citation: Joseph Alagha. Review of Norton, Augustus Richard, *Hezbollah: A Short History*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14422>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.