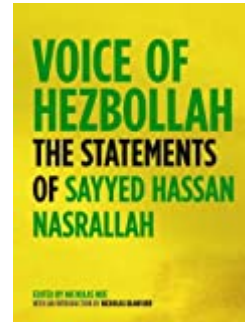




**Nicholas Noe, ed.** *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayed Hassan Nasrallah.* Translated by Ellen Khouri. London: Verso, 2007. ix + 420 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84467-153-3.



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## Hizbullah: From Radicalism to Accommodation

According to Nicholas Noe, his *Voice of Hezbollah* is intended as an introduction to Nasrallah's thinking, and not as any kind of a comprehensive, final word (p. 17). In this, it represents a laudable effort. Noe provides useful, straight to the point, and sometimes insightful introductions to each of the thirty-two texts included in the volume, thereby attempting to place each of Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah's speeches and interviews in context. Noe also acknowledges that he obtained Hizbullah's approval of the translations: "It is also important to say that Hezbollah was informed at various points about the materials we were interested in obtaining and translating.... A final set of proof pages was provided to a third party, approved by Hezbollah, for comment on issues related to the accuracy of the translation, as well as the accuracy of the original text" (pp. 17-18). Such close cooperation creates the appearance of party sponsorship and supervision of Noe's work, which raises serious questions about its overall objectivity.

Furthermore, there are problems with the translations. While they are, on the whole, satisfactory in the

literal sense, shades of meaning and much of the context are frequently lost. This suggests that either Noe's translator, Ellen Khouri, does not have the knowledge of Shari'a (Islamic law), Qur'anic verses, or basic Islamic terminology that is necessary for this task, or that Noe's choice of texts was highly selective and therefore unrepresentative of Nasrallah's thought. For example, Shari'a is mentioned only once although the concept is central to Nasrallah's discourse, as he constantly references the Shari'a as the basis of legitimacy for Hizbullah's actions (p. 32). In addition, in the thirty-two texts reproduced here, the Qur'an is explicitly mentioned only twice (pp. 301, 349). This absence is inexplicable, for the Qur'an is frequently quoted in almost every one of Nasrallah's speeches. In fact, Khouri appears to have missed several instances in which Nasrallah used direct quotations from the Qur'an. Two of these appear in a single speech: "If God is on your side, no one will ever defeat you" is not a mere slogan. It comes from the Qur'anic verse 3:160. Likewise, "weaker than a spider's web" is a clear reference to verse 29:41: "but truly the flimsiest of houses is

the spider's house, which Nasrallah usually employs to connote Israel (p. 242).

Khouri's translations also occasionally suffer from a tendency for oversimplification and reductionism. Rendering *maslaha* in the most generic form as 'interest' falls into this category (cf. pp. 267, 353). Actually, here Nasrallah is referring to one of the maxims of Islamic jurisprudence (*qawa'id al-fiqh*), which states that the avoidance of vice is always preferable to any benefit that might accrue from the act. There are also inconsistencies between Khouri's translations of the texts and those found in Noe's annotations. For example, Noe rightly translates Nasrallah's use of the concept *jihād* as 'striving in the way of God' (p. 53). In the texts, however, Khouri insists on translating it as 'struggle', which is too generic and simplistic (p. 192). The semantics of 'strive' vs. 'struggle' aside, the term, as used by Nasrallah, never loses its religious signification. Thus, it should at least be rendered as 'struggle in the way of God.' Khouri renders other significant Qur'anic concepts incorrectly or inconsistently, a practice made more frustrating by her failure to cite the translation of the Qur'an from which she is working. For example, the term *mustad'afin*, which is derived from phrases found in verses 28:4-5 and 34:31-33, should, in the context of Hizbullah's discourse, always be rendered as 'the oppressed' or 'the downtrodden,' as Khouri does on pages 138 and 242, respectively. However, elsewhere, she translates it as 'dispossessed' (*mahrumin*), which has an entirely different connotation (p. 133).

Other unorthodox transliterations and incorrect translations appear throughout the text and cause unnecessary confusion. I will cite just a few notable examples. First, *ahl al-dhimma* and *dhimmiyya*, which designate Jews and Christians who enjoyed a protected status under Muslim rule in exchange for payment of the poll tax (*jizya*), are rendered as 'Ahlul Thimma' and 'dhimmiyya' (pp. 66, 68). Another such error is Khouri's inconsistent transliteration of 'Khoms' and 'Khums' (pp. 230, 136, respectively). And 'Khums' does not mean 'five' as Noe contends; the term actually means one-fifth or 20 percent (p. 136). The difference is significant, as 'khums' refers to the proportion of a Shi'ite Muslim's wealth that should be given, as an obligatory religious duty, to the religious authority (*marja'*) who that person emulates, in conformity with the Shi'ite interpretation of the Qur'anic verse 8:41. Finally, Khouri mistranslates the well-known eulogistic expression *qadasa Allahu sirrahu* as 'may God sanctify his soul' (p. 300). The correct translation is 'may God sanctify his secret,'

which is precisely how the phrase is rendered in the most commonly used Arabic-English dictionary, Hans Wehr's *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Such an error raises questions about the accuracy of Khouri's translations throughout the text.

Another frustrating feature of *Voice of Hezbollah* is Noe's failure to provide a guide to the acronyms and abbreviations that appear frequently in the text. In addition, the index is brief, highly selective, and far from exhaustive. Thus, many key terms and personal names are not found therein. The most notable example is 'Mostapha Chamran'—the late minister of defense of Iran, who played an instrumental role in the founding of Amal and Hizbullah, and who is mentioned in the text, albeit in passing and without explanation (p. 118). Other key terms from Nasrallah's speeches and interviews do not appear in the index. These include the Great Satan, Greater Israel, Jews, *jihād*, Khaybar, Khiam, Khoei, Khoms, Lebanonization, the Little Satan, mobilization, the National Pact, national dialogue, prisoner exchange, al-Qaeda, Sabra and Chatila, September 11, suicide operations, Sunni fundamentalism, Taliban, and Zionism, among others. Furthermore, the index contains many errors that can confuse the reader, e.g., referring to former prime ministers Salim al-Hoss and Najib Mikati as 'Presidents,' an impossibility given the 1943 National Pact's exclusive designation of the presidency to Maronite Christians (pp. 417-418).

However, a more significant shortcoming is Noe's failure to subject some of Nasrallah's most important public pronouncements to critical analysis. This is particularly the case with Nasrallah's varying and misleading accounts of Hizbullah's founding and of his whereabouts during the critical period of 1978. Noe reproduces, without comment, Nasrallah's assertions that he was in either 'Baalbek' or 'Najaf' when Musa al-Sadr disappeared (August 31, 1978) and Israel's first invasion of Lebanon occurred (March 14, 1978) (pp. 124, 110). These seemingly minor details are crucial, for they undermine Hizbullah's official narrative, which states that the party was not founded until 1982, in response to the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Again, this raises questions, at least in the reviewer's mind, about Noe's objectivity vis-à-vis his subject.

Finally, the five-page concluding section of the book entitled 'Further Reading'—in addition to excluding Arabic and French sources—is highly selective in its choice of English sources. Noe again appears to endorse

Hizbullah's official narrative by including Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem's *Hizbullah: The Story from Within* (2005) and deeming it indispensable due to the presence of party documents in its appendix (p. 412). At the same time, other works that contain these and many more documents, in addition to critical analysis of them—the reviewer's *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology* (2006),

for example—do not appear.

In spite of its obvious shortcomings, Noe's *Voice of Hezbollah* is a welcome addition to the English-language literature. The reviewer is unaware of another work of comparable scope or diversity that attempts to place its subject in context via several forms of annotation.

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