

Hangin' with Hezbollah
Encounter in an East Jerusalem café.
by Jeffrey Gedmin
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Jerusalem

I WAS SITTING IN A CAFE in East Jerusalem the other day, drinking a Diet Coke and waiting for a friend, and I couldn't resist asking. Three teenage boys, all Arab-Israelis it turned out, were watching a report on the war in Lebanon on a small TV in the corner, and I wanted a translation of the commentary.

They were watching Al-Manar (the lighthouse), Hezbollah's satellite television station, which can be seen throughout the Middle East. We ended up talking for an hour and a half.

They were engaging guys, with warm smiles. One wore a T-shirt with the word "America" emblazoned on it. They had a sense of humor. I thought they were joking at first, when they told me they all supported Hezbollah, the Party of God. They would pump their fists in the air when "good news" was reported from the front.

"The Jews are on our ground," said one. "They should go back to Europe." When I suggested some of the Jews may wish to stay in Israel, he calmly told me they should be moved. Iran's mad president, the one who wants to wipe Israel off the map, has his supporters.

The Iranian regime has been a leader in the last quarter century in promoting anti-Western thought and hatred of Israel and the United States. Its influence in Lebanon has been extraordinary. Thanks to support from Iran, Hezbollah is a state within the Lebanese state. It collects taxes, operates clinics, and runs its own media, courts, police force, prisons, and schools with materials imported from Iran. I have to laugh every time a European friend tells me--in the name of balance, to be sure--that Hezbollah is not just a militia, but also a provider of important social services. I've not yet seen a study of Hezbollah textbooks, but if what Iranian kids are taught is any indication, Hezbollah schools could be a little creepy. The Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (www.edume.org) has compiled from Iranian textbooks lovely examples like this one, from a third grade text: "At that time the Israeli officer pounded [three-year-old] Mohammed's head with his rifle's stock and his warm blood was sprinkled upon [his six-year-old brother] Khaled's hands." From an eleventh grade text there is this: "[Israel] has been created . . . as a base for America and other aggressive powers, with the aim of taking over the Muslim lands."

You always wonder how much of this stuff sticks. On the one hand, you have the woman from the Lebanese port city of Tyre who just told the *Daily Telegraph*, "It is our duty as mothers to start producing more boys . . . to be martyrs for their country." (I keep thinking about those nicely dressed, well-spoken young gentlemen from the East Jerusalem cafe, who, unless they really were kidding me, are committed to the slaughter of innocents in the name of "resistance" and "liberation.")

On the other hand, moderate Lebanese seem to be popping up everywhere these days. The German daily *Tagesspiegel* recently published a letter to the editor from a Lebanese man living in Berlin, who lived in south Lebanon until 2002. Writes Dr. Mounir Herzallah: "After Israel left, it did not take long

until Hezbollah called the shots in all towns and villages. [They] installed rocket launchers in bunkers. The social work of this Party of God then consisted of building schools and apartment buildings on top of these bunkers!" Those who follow the Arab blogosphere report heavy criticism of Israel's actions in Lebanon, but even heavier criticism of Hezbollah and its patrons. That would be mildly encouraging.

It was as predictable as it was embarrassing these past days to see European diplomats scurrying to Beirut and Damascus. In Beirut, the French foreign minister fawned over his Iranian counterpart, calling Iran's mullah regime a respectable actor and force for stability in the region. This was happening at the same time that the chairman of Iran's powerful Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, was urging Muslims from around the world to send weapons to Hezbollah.

Iran's contribution to stability is well-known. In a recent report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (www.csis.org/burke), Anthony Cordesman writes that "there seem to be regular meetings between Iranian, Syrian, and Hezbollah leaders." Cordesman continues: "The Hezbollah also seems to send some cadres for expert training in Iran." Indeed. On July 25, the London Arabic daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* quoted a high-ranking Iranian Revolutionary Guards officer, who claimed that the Iranians had assisted Hezbollah in the July 14 firing of a C802 missile at an Israeli navy ship. The same officer boasted that "hundreds of Hezbollah fighters currently confronting Israel's military array took part in special training courses at the Revolutionary Guard bases in Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, and Ahvaz."

Iran is oozing affection for its offspring in Lebanon these days. The Iranian Farda news agency stated recently that some 2,500 suicide fighters had been recruited and are awaiting an order from Iran's supreme leader to begin assisting Hezbollah. Ayatollah Ebrahim Amini, one of the country's top clerics, says Israel's actions in Lebanon resemble "the Crusades."

Israelis are sensitive to this kind of incitement. The Israel Defense Forces conducted a raid in Lebanon several days ago apparently aimed at capturing a prominent Hezbollah leader, Mohammed Yazbeck, who is the personal representative of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The supreme leader made himself heard in an August 2 communiqué, in which he called Hezbollah "the Muslim nation's front-line defense" and promised more "martyrdom" to fend off the Zionist-American plot aimed at seizing control "over the Muslim world."

It is hard to know for certain how the shadowy Shi'ite connection between Hezbollah and Iran works. Senior officials in Washington are doubtful that Iran actually controls Hezbollah.

In contrast, there have been unconfirmed reports from Israeli sources that an Iranian general, Yahya Rahim Safavi, has assumed command of the Lebanon war. Former Israeli chief of staff Moshe Yaalon believes at a minimum that Iranian Zelzal missiles--the items in the Hezbollah arsenal that are capable of striking Tel Aviv--may be under Iranian command and control.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the former Israeli prime minister who now leads the opposition Likud party, keeps telling me that Iran is the real game. Hezbollah, says Netanyahu, "is just an appendage." To be sure, like Iran's mullahs, Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah is obsessed with the Great Satan. In January 2003, Nasrallah told Hezbollah radio that the Muslim world should understand that "Israel is merely a battalion of the American army . . . the United States is the principal enemy."

I guess by now most of us have come to the conclusion that reaching out to the moderates in this part of the world is a morally, but also strategically, important thing to do. It is surely worth every penny, conference, broadcast, and scholarship we can muster to build bridges to and learn from voices of decency and moderation. That's an investment for the long term.

Meanwhile, you don't have to be Israeli to see that Hezbollah must be defanged. We surely also have to do everything we can to delegitimize, discredit, and, ultimately, defeat those powers that keep feeding groups like the so-called Party of God.

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