

# The “Rebirth” of Hizbollah: Analyzing the 2009 Manifesto

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Hizbollah’s secretary general Hassan Nasrallah surprised many people when, during a live press conference in Beirut on November 30, 2009, he personally announced and read the organization’s new “Manifesto.” Significantly, the Manifesto is only the second ideological platform published by Hizbollah and was issued twenty-four years after the original “Open Letter,” which was the main tool to present the group’s weltanschauung to the world over the previous decades. Composed of an introduction and three chapters – on the state of the world (“Domination and Hegemony”), the group’s domestic policy (“Lebanon”), and its view on the Arab-Israeli conflict (“Palestine and Compromise Negotiations”) – the Manifesto reflects the political and military evolution of the organization since the 1985 Letter and explains the group’s strategic vision for the future.

The Manifesto, which was presented during the seventh political conference of the organization,<sup>1</sup> generated a wide spectrum of reactions both within Lebanon and worldwide. While many observers interpreted the document as an incontrovertible sign of Hizbollah’s process of “moderation” and full political integration in the Lebanese system, others countered that the platform did not include any substantial changes, either ideological or strategic. The essay below focuses on the political context that prompted Hizbollah to release its new declaration of principles as well as the contents of the document, and draws conclusions on whether the Manifesto marks a true organizational “rebirth.”

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### Understanding the Timing: Hizbollah and the Lebanese Arena

The release of Hizbollah's new ideological platform should be seen in the context of the group's post-electoral efforts to reposition itself within Lebanon. Despite the fact that the Hizbollah-led opposition forces lost the June 2009 parliamentary elections to the incumbent March 14 coalition, the elections still awarded Hizbollah thirteen parliamentary seats and reconfirmed the political importance and popular support of the Lebanese-Shia armed organization. Indeed, on the basis of votes cast, Hizbollah was the clear winner at the polls, earning almost 55 percent of the ballots. In the aftermath of the elections, the opposition forces were able to leverage this political power to insist on greater political participation and block the formation of the new executive cabinet for months by demanding at least eleven of the thirty available cabinet seats – which in the Lebanese political system amounts to effective veto power.

In the end, the elected government agreed to form a "unity cabinet" composed of fifteen members of the March 14 coalition, ten members from the Hizbollah-led opposition, and five independent candidates

appointed by President Michel Suleiman.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Hizbollah obtained three seats in the new cabinet: the ministry of agriculture, the ministry of administrative reforms, and the ministry of youth and sports.<sup>3</sup> This agreement is acceptable to Hizbollah, which can now count on the support of the "independent" candidates to prevent the elected government from implementing reforms that would hurt the organization's strategic interests.

In other words, despite the electoral defeat, Hizbollah's current position in the Lebanese political arena is still solid and strong: the group and its political allies forced the elected majority to agree to rule under the banner of "national unity," thus applying their political power and leverage well beyond that of a typical opposition party. In this sense, an additional important sign

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of Hizbollah's current political status in the post-electoral phase is the recent adoption by the new executive cabinet of a joint statement

supporting Hizbollah's "resistance." On December 1, 2009, Information Minister Tareq Mitri announced that the cabinet had approved a statement affirming "the right of Lebanon, its people, its army, and its resistance to liberate the occupied Lebanese territory in Shab'a and Kfar Shouba hills."<sup>4</sup>

Understanding Hizbollah's current status and political role is a crucial first step in assessing the strategy and potential impact of the new Manifesto. In fact, Hizbollah did not – contrary to what several commentators have suggested – release its renewed ideological platform during a phase of weakness, as an "accommodation tool." Even though the group lost the elections, Hizbollah's political role within Lebanon is now more entrenched than ever before, both through the national unity agenda and the executive cabinet, and through the government's guarantee that it would not (and cannot) actively pursue Hizbollah's disarmament. In this sense, the declaration of principles was formulated from a position of power, and it reflects this reality.

### **Hizbollah and the World: Foreign Policy in 1985 and 2009**

There is undoubtedly deep continuity in both content, and to a lesser extent language, in Hizbollah's view of the world and its adversaries as expressed in the 2009 Manifesto and the original document, the 1985 Letter.

The first declaration of principles, which many consider to be Hizbollah's ideological foundation, was published on February 16, 1985, following the creation of the group in the early 1980s. Formulated in the midst of both the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli intervention in the country, the group's document reflected a Manichean view of the world, divided between the forces of evil, namely the West and its local allies, and the Party of God. More specifically, the 1985 Letter rejected all foreign presence and interference within Lebanon and the Muslim *umma* in general, and maintained the need both to repel the presence and corrupting influence of the West on the Islamic world and to fight until the final destruction of the State of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

The 2009 Manifesto adopts and develops these same concepts, showing, however, a greater degree of political sophistication. For instance, while in the 1985 Letter Hizbollah refers to the United States and the West as an evil and oppressive force on the Muslim world, the

2009 declaration of principles describes the US world plan in terms of seeking global "hegemony" and emphasizes the negative impact of globalization on the Muslim and Arab identity.<sup>6</sup> In other words, although strikingly similar in content, the 2009 document reflects the organization's growing understanding of international politics and its attempt to employ terminology and notions that are commonly associated with the "anti-globalization" and "leftist" movements, in an effort to transcend its national and regional boundaries and identify as an international movement.

To support this endeavor to be increasingly "global," for example, Hizbollah clearly associates itself with the "independent and free endeavor that opposes hegemony in Latin American states," and notes the common contribution to "building a more balanced and just international system."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the organization now adopts a more nuanced approach towards Europe, and instead of as in 1985 openly attacking it, it chooses to criticize Europeans for their "subjugation to US policies," while reminding them of their "special responsibility pursuant to the colonial heritage" inflicted on the region, and recalling Europe's "long history with resisting the occupier."<sup>8</sup>

In the 2009 platform, Hizbollah also openly acknowledges its regional allies – another important political element that was absent in the 1985 Letter and that signals the group's self-perception as part of the regional resistance axis. First, it declares that "Syria has recorded a firm distinctive attitude in the struggle with the Israeli enemy, supported the resistance movements in the region, and stood beside us in the most difficult circumstances," adding "the need to adhere to the distinguished relations between Lebanon and Syria."<sup>9</sup> While continuing to push Lebanon towards Syria, Hizbollah also reiterates its political and ideological alliance with Iran. Yet apart from this open acknowledgment of the crucial regional role of Iran and its core contribution to the "resistance," the Manifesto remains silent with respect to the role that the Islamic Republic has played in supporting Hizbollah and its political-military development. The absence of reference to the strategic partnership between Iran and Hizbollah stems from the organization's need to assert itself as a Lebanese national movement, and to downplay those who describe the group as an Iranian puppet. Directed at the national audience, the

Manifesto balances the need to cite the existing links with Iran with the need to portray Hizbollah as an independent Lebanese actor.

The other main theme that Hizbollah has retained unaltered in content since 1985 is its view of the State of Israel. Israel was the organization's primary enemy and its *raison d'être* since its foundation in the early 1980s, and it is identified with the West's attempts to take over the Muslim world. Capitalizing on traditional Shia themes such as martyrdom and oppression, Hizbollah defines its struggle against Israel in existential-defensive terms: "Israel represents an eternal threat to Lebanon. The role of the resistance is a national necessity as long as Israeli threats and ambitions to seize our lands and water continue."<sup>10</sup> On this subject, it is clear that there has not been any significant change, both in content and form, and that Hizbollah's prime organizational duty to this day remains "resistance." Similarly, twenty-four years of organizational development and political integration have not led to any shift in Hizbollah's fervent opposition to any negotiated agreement between Israel and the Arab world. The group continues in its "absolute refusal to [accept] the very principle of the choice of settlement with the Zionist entity, which is based on recognizing the legitimacy and existence of this entity and giving up to it the lands it usurped from Arab and Islamic Palestine."<sup>11</sup> Predictably, Palestinian groups reacted positively to these statements, with Islamic Jihad representatives declaring their support for Hizbollah and asking people in the Arab world to rally behind the document. Similarly, Hamas spokesperson Fawzi Barhum declared: "This shows that we can strengthen the Arab and Islamic resistance front to face all challenges....It also shows that we can reinforce the Palestinian people's right to resist the Zionist enemy."<sup>12</sup>

In sum, Hizbollah's foreign policy has not changed in its substance between 1985 and 2009, and countries that deal with the organization – including Israel – should be mindful of this strategic continuity. At the same time, some of the terminology now employed by the organization

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shows a growing internal push to transcend its exclusive regional identity and be recognized at the international level.

### **Hizbollah in Lebanon: Domestic Policy in 1985 and 2009**

In contrast to Hizbollah's foreign policy, which shows remarkable continuity throughout its development, the organization's view of its role within Lebanon has shifted quite considerably since its original 1985 formulation.

In the Open Letter, Hizbollah stated its desire to establish an Islamic state within Lebanon, and rejected the possibility of participating in what it saw as the inherently corrupt existing political system.<sup>13</sup> In the organization's *weltanschauung*, the creation of this Lebanese Islamic state, to be modeled after Iran, would be only the first step towards the establishment of a larger pan-Islamic state that would unite all Muslims in the region under the same government.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, the 2009 Manifesto omits the call to create an Islamic state, and recognizes that the Lebanese political system is the most suitable environment for Hizbollah to operate in.

In truth, however, this shift in domestic priorities does not come as a surprise to those who have observed Hizbollah's political evolution over the past decades. In fact, as early as 1992, when the organization first decided to join the political system and participate in the parliamentary elections, it had started to underplay the goal of creating an Islamic state, describing it as a long term desideratum more than a practical, political objective and in effect recognizing that the political reality of Lebanon did not allow for the realization of an Islamic republic.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, even though the 1985 program was very specific as to what constituted the final political goal for the organization in Lebanon, the Letter was not as precise in describing Hizbollah's means to achieve the creation of the model Islamic state. Furthermore, it clearly stated that the leaders called "for the implementation of the Islamic system based on a direct and free choice of the people, and not through forceful imposition as may be assumed by some."<sup>16</sup> This assertion, together with Hizbollah's numerous references to the importance of the principle of non-compulsion in Islam (whereby no one should be forcibly converted to Islam),<sup>17</sup> had already allowed the organization a great degree of ideological flexibility in adapting its original agenda to changing strategic priorities. In this

sense, publically evading the goal of creating an Islamic state is more a confirmation of an ongoing trend and recognition of Lebanon's political reality than a strategic change.

Similarly, the new ideological platform lends prominence to a series of political themes that Hizbollah developed in the past two decades, such as the importance of administrative decentralization and the open objection to both federalism and the current sectarian system.<sup>18</sup> The document in fact affirms: "The main problem in the Lebanese political system which prevents its reform, development, and constant updating is political sectarianism."<sup>19</sup> While ranking the abolition of confessionalism among its key priorities, Hizbollah also claims that until the achievement of this goal, "the consensual democracy will remain the fundamental basis for governance in Lebanon."<sup>20</sup> This point is particularly important, as one can detect here an expression of Hizbollah's new understanding of its political power and subsequent status in Lebanon. By stressing the need for a consensual democracy and a national unity government, the document's message is that Hizbollah sees itself as a major political player and that regardless of the electoral results, the government must take this reality into consideration and rule by agreement with Hizbollah. This is exactly the result produced by the 2009 elections, where the majority coalition cannot actually govern without a larger alliance with the Hizbollah-led opposition forces.<sup>21</sup>

Lebanese reactions to these claims varied widely, from praising and appreciating Hizbollah's "soft-spoken" tone and its numerous references to the importance of "democracy,"<sup>22</sup> to openly recognizing Hizbollah's growing interest in political power. In this context, a statement of the March 14 forces sharply criticized the group's demands, by charging that they "suspended the constitution itself under the headline of *consensual democracy* instead of the *parliamentary democracy*."<sup>23</sup>

Another important point that emerges in the Manifesto is Hizbollah's vision of its military role in Lebanon. On this front, the group is extremely clear about its intention to continue to maintain its armed structure and its refusal to even discuss disarmament. For instance, the document reads: "The continuous Israeli threats oblige Lebanon to endorse a defensive strategy that couples between a popular resistance that participates in defending the country and an army that preserves the security of the

country and safeguards its security and stability in a complementary process that has proved in the previous phase to be successful."<sup>24</sup>

This statement is extremely interesting for a number of reasons. First, it shows that since 1985, Hizbollah has moved from considering the Lebanese army as an enemy to treating it as a de facto auxiliary force. In this sense, the expectation that the armed forces will have the capacity or interest to turn this cooperative relationship into a confrontational one in order to pursue an eventual disarmament of the Lebanese-Shia organization seems unrealistic at best. Second, this paragraph downplays the efforts of the National Dialogue Council, created to investigate issues such as finding national solutions to Hizbollah's weapons, or any project calling for the group's dissolution into the armed forces. Here Hizbollah is clear in affirming that it agrees to carry out its "resistance" in cooperation with the army, but that it intends to remain a separate and autonomous entity. This point was also criticized in a statement by the majority March 14 forces: "On the issue of defending the homeland against the occupation and foreign attacks, the document of Hizbollah has entrusted this mission with the Islamic resistance in Lebanon and made the state, the army, and the people as backers to it....As for the national army, the only mission it has is to protect the rear lines of the resistance under the headline of maintaining internal stability....On this issue, the document of Hizbollah contradicts the Ta'if agreement, which entrusts the state with the mission of liberation."<sup>25</sup>

### **Hizbollah in 2009: New Trends and Old Themes**

By closely analyzing the content of the 2009 ideological and political platform and comparing it to the 1985 Open Letter, it is clear that the Manifesto is not a mere replacement of the older document in different terms. Hizbollah has changed and adapted to its new political and security environment; as Secretary General Nasrallah admitted: "We have no problem or any complex about describing what happened – be it development or transformation. This is natural. People develop. Indeed, the entire world has changed in the past twenty-four years."<sup>26</sup> Hizbollah in 2009 is a more politically savvy, integrated, and powerful party and a greater military force than in 1985. At the same time, there is a basic organizational continuity in content and strategic priorities, as well as in the main ideological references. In this sense, the group maintains



its strong Islamic identity throughout the text, and it seems excessive to assert that it has undergone a "strategic rebirth."

First, in terms of foreign policy, Hizbollah shows complete continuity both regarding its worldview and its strategic goals; however, the group has learned how to convey these ideas in a more politically savvy way. By relating its struggle to other non-Islamic movements (for instance by mentioning a continuity of goals with Latin American anti-US policies) and by employing "anti-globalization" terminology, the organization attempts to gain an even more international identity and support. At the same time, Hizbollah's goals with respect to Israel have remained unaltered, and so has its complete opposition to any negotiated solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The international community, including Israel, should expect the organization to attempt to block any progress in this direction, acting as spoiler whenever possible.

Second, the group showed a certain degree of change in terms of its domestic policy. Hizbollah finally recognized that the Lebanese political system is the best arena for the organization to develop in, and has thereby forfeited its goal to create an Islamic state. However, this statement reflects Hizbollah's increased political power and status within Lebanon, and should not be interpreted as a sign of weakness or retreat. The group has in fact become so entrenched in the political system that it now demands increased decision making power, for example by insisting on a "consensual democracy formula." Finally, the group maintains a "business as usual" posture with respect to its armed wing: specifying in the Manifesto its intention to remain a separate and autonomous armed group, and to retain its weapons and resistance. Again, the document shows the growing power of the organization and dismisses any internal talks about military integration, let alone disarmament.

## Notes

- 1 "Nasrallah Announces Today the 'Rebirth' of Hizbollah," *As-Safir*, November 30, 2009 (translation by MidEast Wire).
- 2 "Without National Consensus New Cabinet Will Achieve Nothing," *Agence France Presse*, November 11, 2009.
- 3 "Lebanon's New Government," *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*, November 9, 2009, [http://www.ifes.org/publication/38e87b372599cdff387c76fd022fb123/Lebanons\\_new\\_government.pdf](http://www.ifes.org/publication/38e87b372599cdff387c76fd022fb123/Lebanons_new_government.pdf).
- 4 "Hizbollah Has Right To Keep Arms: Government," *al-Arabiya.net*, December 1, 2009.

- 5 Hizbollah, Open Letter, February 16, 1985. Cited in *Jerusalem Quarterly* 48, Fall 1988, [http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/hezbollah\\_program.pdf](http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/hezbollah_program.pdf).
- 6 "Lebanese Hizbollah Leader Outlines Party's Foreign, Domestic Policy," al-Manar TV, December 1, 2009, (provided by BBC Worldwide Monitoring).
- 7 The Political Document (Manifesto) of Hizbollah 2009 AC /1430 H," November 30, 2009, Syrian News Station, <http://sns.sy/sns/?path=news/read/7187>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 "Palestinian Factions Back Lebanese Hizbollah's Political Document," al-Manar TV, December 1, 2009, (provided by BBC Worldwide Monitoring).
- 13 Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 37-40.
- 14 Amal Saad-Gorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 34-36.
- 15 Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders, "Know Thy Enemy: Hizbullah 'Terrorism' and the Politics of Perception," *Third World Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2005): 179.
- 16 Hizbollah, Open Letter, 1985, p. 20.
- 17 Saad-Gorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, p. 49.
- 18 Franklin Lamb, "Hezbollah's New Manifesto: The 'Rebirth,'" *The Palestine Chronicle*, December 2, 2009.
- 19 The Political Document (Manifesto) of Hizbollah 2009.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Hassan Haidar, "Hizbollah's New System," *Dar Al Hayat-International Edition*, December 3, 2009.
- 22 Jean Aziz, "On Hizbollah's document," *Al-Akhbar*, December 1, 2009, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/167443>.
- 23 "14 March Forces Criticize Hizbollah Political Document," Lebanese National News Agency, December 3, 2009, emphasis added.
- 24 The Political Document (Manifesto) of Hizbollah 2009.
- 25 "14 March Forces Criticize Hizbollah Political Document."
- 26 "Nasrallah Press Conference after Reading of Manifesto," MidEast Wire, November 30, 2009.