



Hizballah Women – an Underestimated Power

The role of women within the *Hizballah Shi'a* movement stands in stark contrast to their almost non-existent public function within the Sunni militant groups. Writer *Fatima Al-'Isawi* examines their political, social and military role in shaping *Hizballah* by relating first-hand accounts of conversations with mothers and sisters of militants who have been killed. *Al-'Isawi's* private conversations reveal the stoic demeanor of an exceedingly organized and ideologically effective group of women who, by virtue of the special, deferential status bestowed upon them by the community, represent the nucleus of an expanding female power within the movement.

The author, quoting other Arab sociologists, also discusses the complementary role that the *Hizballah* women play in their behind-the-scenes support of the militants in the field, emphasizing their effectiveness in social endeavors while propagating the group's ideology. She notes that the purely voluntary aspect of their mission makes them a political movement par excellence.

In a typical example of the exchanges related by the author, a mother explains: "In our society, a martyr's mother has a special standing, commanding above-normal respect. She is the focus of attention and patronage by the party..." She continues, "Do not believe [those who say] that a martyr's mother is unhappy, although it is true that she shed tears, she is happy." Another mother with a large family adds: "I sent them to fight and I believe that a child since the age of ten, should train to carry weapons in order to defend his land." When asked by the author if she does not fear for her sons, she replies: "There is no mother who does not fear for her sons, although should I only fear for mine and not for the others' children.... I thank God for their safe return and I will thank him equally if one of them is martyred... I thank God for their survival in order for them to continue the fighting." The author also offers insights into important role of women in supporting the fighting men, including many daily chores. A young woman comments: "If a religious dictum commands women to join the battlefield, we are ready and will all join..."

Through these conversations, *Al-'Isawi* identifies key factors giving rise to the importance of women in the *Hizballah* movement:



- **One factor is equality among members**, regardless of their wealth and stature. The author cites the 1997 death of the son of the Hizballah leader, *Nasrallah*, which demonstrated *Nasrallah's* equal shouldering of the suffering, as an early catalyst for the perceived equality among members. Sacrifices endured by women who lost their sons and husbands were seen as a reinforcing factor for their zealous ideological beliefs.

- **The certainty of women that the death of their family member is for a higher cause** is very important for the ever-present network of young activists¹ in charge of recruitment, guidance and military readiness. As one woman said: "I cried for my cousin who died from natural causes, as it is unknown to me if he made it to heaven; I am certain however that my martyred brother is with *Al-Hussayn*² and with lady *Fatma*³ [reference to Heaven]; rather than crying over him, I envy him."

- The third factor is the **stature accorded to the "mother of the martyr"** and the constant support associated with it. As the husband of one such woman explained: "Do not forget that we are secured in all respects, the martyr's foundation attends to all our needs: health care, education, housing and special remunerations, they cover it all."

The author indicates that these factors have created an important, non-conventional role for women that is, directly or indirectly, political in nature. On the military front, women take on many roles behind the scenes, such as food

¹ A fluctuating number of 500 young women is mentioned by *Khadija Sallum*, the movement's representative for Beirut and the south

² The third imam who occupies a central place in Shi'a faith.

³ Youngest daughter of the prophet Muhammad

preparation, transporting arms, surveillance and communication. Also, according to *Al-'Isawi*, “[i]n contrast with the past, *Hizballah* women, properly dressed visit Christian institutions during their holidays.”⁴ The lack of religious rigidity in the *Hizballah Shi'a* party, as compared to the Sunni extremist movements, has also enabled women to participate more directly in the political sphere. Although there are no women in parliament, one woman, *Rima Fakhry*, is part of *Hizballah's* eighteen-member political bureau and *Hizballah* women have run for office in Lebanese city councils.

The integrated camp-style role played by *Hizballah* women represents a new and unusual structure in modern Islamic societies and their effectiveness in maintaining and expanding the power of the movement cannot be underestimated. It remains to be seen, however, whether this integrated socialistic religious ironically kibbutz-style administration remains a sustainable structure or crumbles, if and when the ideological fervor which helped create it diminishes.

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⁴ *Hizballah* recognizes and accepts the multi-confessional Lebanese society and the coexistence among those with different faiths as well as secularism.