

Hezbollah's New Political Platform

By [Fawwaz Traboulsi](#)

Global Research, January 25, 2010

[Z Net](#) 24 January 2010

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

[Translator's Introduction: The following article by Fawwaz Traboulsi appeared in the Beirut daily as-Safir of December 2, 2009.]

Traboulsi's article is an assessment and left critique of the main themes in Hezbollah's new political platform. The platform was released on November 30 at the conclusion of a general congress that had met intermittently over several months. It was published partially or entirely in several Arabic-language media outlets, inside and outside Lebanon, in early December 2009. The platform now becomes Hezbollah's political manifesto in place of its founding document, its so-called 1985 Open Letter.

Hezbollah has undergone many changes since the mid-1980's. The most significant perhaps, seen from a Western perspective that tends to stress Hezbollah's narrow Islamist focus, is its gradual shift away from the call to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon. This call, as well as the allegiance to the Rule of the Jurisprudent (Wilayat al-Faqih), were explicit in the 1985 Open Letter. The new platform renounces the call for an Islamic state in Lebanon, accepts the diversity of Lebanese society, and makes no mention of the Rule of the Jurisprudent. This is of course a welcome development. But there are other aspects in the new platform that are far less praiseworthy, which Traboulsi addresses in his article. — Assaf Kfoury]

What stands out in the political platform issued by Hezbollah at the conclusion of its recent general congress is how it assesses its own history and development since its founding in the mid 1980's. This document reviews a quarter of a century of multi-faceted experiences and sacrifices. It reflects a multiplicity of alliances and inspirations, if not splintered identities. At one and the same time, Hezbollah aspires to be a "national liberation" movement among other such movements in the world; a "resistance" movement at the regional level, with all the connotations the latter designation evokes among Arabs in relation to the Palestinian struggle; and increasingly a "force of national defense" for Lebanon. In this third designation, Hezbollah dispenses with any lingering doubt regarding its resolve to become a full partner in Lebanon's confessional system, if not its acceptance of the socio-economic conditions underlying such a system.

In its quest to position itself among national liberation movements worldwide, and to contribute to the regional struggle against colonial domination, Hezbollah's new political platform borrows many formulas and ideas elaborated by leftist traditions. Among these is its realization that imperialism's global reach today calls for a global mobilization in response to it. This becomes evident in the platform's insistence on the links between the struggles of Arab peoples and leftist movements in several countries of Latin America.

The platform offers a global view of the imperialist system led by the United States of which

Israel is an integral part. It does not ignore the economic basis of imperialist domination, which it identifies as “savage capitalism” — assuming it does not harbor any illusion that the alternative of “soft capitalism” will be any less cruel. Although its reference to the “military-industrial complex”, rather than financial capitalism, is somewhat outdated as the determining factor shaping US policies, the platform rightly designates the latest stage of imperialism as the globalization of monopolies and military alliances. On this understanding, one would expect Hezbollah to reconsider its positions on the struggle between wealth and poverty and between oppressor and oppressed.

Apart from the rush to announce the imminent demise of the unipolar world and the Zionist project’s inevitable downfall, Hezbollah’s new platform does not include much that can be attributed to Ali Shariati’s revolutionary ideas or to “revolutionary Islam”, as some may contend. Instead, the platform reproduces some of the Islamic Republic’s slogans under Ali Khamene’i, Iran’s current supreme leader. These slogans are less about earlier republican values and revolutionary fervor than they are about the Iranian rulers’ current need for security and ideological control.

On regional Arab affairs, the new platform abandons most of this earlier agenda [inspired by Ali Shariati’s ideas], of which it mentions only the plundering by imperialism of the region’s oil resources. Nonetheless, this emphasis on oil is important and cannot be overstated at a time when there is very little public discussion of it and its role in maintaining the region’s despotic subservient regimes. These are a few welcome tokens to pry open a widely-ignored topic and raise important issues that have yet to be examined critically.

Turning to issues of resistance and negotiations in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hezbollah’s new platform completely evades the question of a Palestinian state and contents itself with a call for the total liberation of Palestine and the restoration of all Palestinian rights. Hezbollah reiterates its demand to Arab officialdom to desist from pursuing a negotiated settlement with Israel and offers its own experience of armed resistance as an example to follow and learn from.

On internal Lebanese matters, Hezbollah’s new platform proclaims its unequivocal adherence to Lebanon’s political system. It is reassuring to read this kind of proclamation from those who paid dearly in defense of the country. Equally satisfying is the platform’s unambiguous respect of diversity, even though it extends the scope of this diversity to things other than political, cultural and ideological, to include Lebanon’s entrenched confessional politics.

Although Hezbollah’s new platform asserts that confessionalism is the bane of Lebanon’s system of government and the chief obstacle to the realization of true democracy, it shies away from even issuing a call to supersede it. In the press conference on the day following the platform’s publication, Hassan Nasrallah [Hezbollah’s secretary general] limited himself to a call for the formation of a national council for the elimination of confessionalism, but quickly added that the formation of such a council does not necessarily mean adoption of its eventual directives. In the meantime, Hezbollah proclaims its respect of consociationalism* as reflecting best the spirit of the constitution. Of course, this ignores the fact that, whatever “spirit of the constitution” means, it cannot be a unilateral definition and must be reached by deliberation with other concerned citizens and groups.

Hezbollah’s new platform does not stop at the enunciating of general principles of

democracy and good governance, but goes on to spell out a specific blueprint for “building the state”. On this issue, the platform contributes to a fraudulent consensus, common to all the branches of Lebanon’s ruling establishment, by repeating a long inventory of desirable attributes for the future good state — from the erection of modern institutions and the rule of law, down to the care of emigrants, and listing in between such things as fair parliamentary representation, end of corruption, independence of the judiciary, devolution of government administration, etc. — as if the absence of such attributes is the root cause of a defective system rather than its effect.

What is said here about “building the state” is like what is said about “eliminating confessionalism”. In both cases, they mix and conflate: the hoped for, the impossible, and the premature — all in the same breath. It is incumbent on Hezbollah, as it is on all its partners in the ruling establishment, to break this riddle: How do they conceive “building the state” within the limits of a consociational/confessional system which they declare, at one and the same time, to be the fundamental obstacle to the realization of true democracy? How can this be done when the system is the chief stumbling block in the face of the aforementioned attributes of the good state [which Hezbollah and its partners in the government do not tire of mentioning]?

Hezbollah’s new platform elicits a similar questioning in matters regarding the economy. It enumerates a long list of wishes — a balanced development between regions, an economy based on productive sectors, improved means of production and distribution, adequate services in education, health care, and housing, the provision of work opportunities, etc. — as if they are all within reach and without a need for fundamental structural changes. The platform declares Hezbollah’s intention to reduce poverty, for example, but how will this be achieved by abiding by the World Bank’s neo-liberal policies [readily accepted by successive Lebanese governments] rather than by reducing income disparities between classes? And what plan is there to reduce emigration and provide employment while Lebanon’s educational system has been largely privatized, mostly divorced from the country’s local needs, and increasingly directed at supplying university graduates to external economies? This long wish list is compiled without due consideration to the enormous national debt and the need to reconsider the decision-making process necessary to promote investments, protect the productive sectors, and undertake an equitable re-distribution of public resources and services.

It is remarkable how far Hezbollah has moved away from its earlier image as the party of the poor in rural areas and neglected urban suburbs, though it was always within the confines of the Shiite community. Does this reflect the sweeping transformations that this community has witnessed in the last quarter of a century? In recent years, Lebanese Shiites have fueled large waves of emigrants, developed a confident middle-class, produced large numbers of university graduates, and accumulated considerable wealth in distant places of immigration. Or does this changed image correspond to the shifting allegiances that other confessional communities in the Lebanese system have also experienced in the past, whereby the bourgeois section in each community tends to throw its weight behind the dominant power within its own community? Hezbollah is now the unchallenged political party among Lebanese Shiites, and more so since the July-August 2006 war.

It is worth noting that, in anticipation of having to resist future pressures to disarm, Hezbollah’s new platform calls for maintaining a popular militia (exemplified by Hezbollah’s current guerilla force) alongside a national army, with both involved in the country’s defense. It is possible to read Hezbollah’s refusal to ever recognize Israel as a prior warning

that it will not relinquish its arms, in case of a resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria possibly leading to a peace agreement that will encompass both Lebanon and Syria.

Lastly, concerning Lebanese-Palestinian relations, Hezbollah's new platform does not share the anti-Palestinian racism of its ally, the Free Patriotic Movement led by General Michel Aoun. The platform insists instead on the respect of the Palestinians' civil rights. It does repeat the worn-out "refusal of a permanent settling" (of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon) — a catchphrase of all the branches of the Lebanese ruling establishment — but it couples it with the Palestinian right of return.

In a recent campaign to organize car traffic in the Dahiya (Beirut's sprawling southern suburbs where Shiites are the majority), Hezbollah displayed banners that read "order is from faith". Is this kind of order — serving and controlled by bankers, traders, and contractors — derived from faith or is it downright impiety?

Note

* *Consociationalism (al-tawafuqiyyah or al tawafuqiyyah al-tawa'iffiyyah) is a current Lebanese euphemism for the more traditional but increasingly disparaged "confessionalism."*

Fawwaz Traboulsi has written on history, Arab politics, social movements and popular culture and translated works by Karl Marx, John Reed, Antonio Gramsci, Isaac Deutscher, John Berger, Etel Adnan, Sa'di Yusuf and Edward Said. His most recent book in English is A History of Modern Lebanon (Pluto Press, 2007). The translator, Assaf Kfoury, is Professor of Computer Science at Boston University.

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