

Terrorist Attacks in Beirut: Western Media frames Civilian Areas as “Hezbollah Strongholds”

By [Sharmine Narwani](#)

Global Research, August 20, 2013

[Sandbox on Al-akhbar.com](#)

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

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Beirut was thrown into turmoil on Thursday evening as a terrorist attack against residents of Dahiyeh – a southern suburb of the Lebanese capital and a predominantly Shia neighborhood – threatened to draw the country into a region wide crisis.

As conflicting news reports began to eke out in the immediate aftermath of the city’s deadliest car bombing in eight years, there was a disconcerting congruity in headlines beaming out from western capitals – and it had nothing to do with facts.

In lock-step, western media was calling the scene of the crime a “Hezbollah stronghold”:

Wall Street Journal: “Car Bomb Blasts [Hezbollah Stronghold](#) in Lebanon”

BBC: “Deadly Lebanon Blast in Beirut [Stronghold of Hezbollah](#)”

LA Times: “Massive Explosion in Beirut Rocks [Hezbollah Stronghold](#)”

Washington Post: “Bomb Explodes in [Hezbollah Stronghold](#) in Beirut, Injuring Dozens”

Reuters: “Over 50 Hurt as Car Bomb Hits [Hezbollah Beirut Stronghold](#)”

Associated Press: “Car Bomb Rocks [Hezbollah Stronghold](#) in Lebanon”

France24: “Car Bomb Rocks [Hezbollah Stronghold](#) in Beirut”

A quick [Twitter](#) or [Google](#) search for “Hezbollah stronghold” is all you need to see how hard western media works to “frame” language and drive use of a phrase that makes Shia civilian life negligible.

On Twitter Thursday night, “tweeps” questioned the validity of this phrase in describing a civilian neighborhood. Said [one observer](#): “When you write “Hezbollah stronghold” instead of South Beirut it gives the impression military barracks were bombed and no innocents died.

That view seemed to be confirmed by the reaction of [an American tweep](#) who wrote: “GREAT NEWS!!!!” in response to the BBC headline “Deadly Lebanon blast in Beirut stronghold of Hezbollah.”

Worse yet was this [reprehensible tweet](#) by Al Monitor’s Washington correspondent and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council Barbara Slavin, who declared on Twitter: “As I recall, Hezbollah invented the car bomb; what goes around, comes around.” Except, of course, the targets of Thursday’s terror attack – where 27 died and nearly 300 injured – were civilians, not Hezbollah.

An army of tweeps quickly reminded Slavin that Hezbollah neither invented the car bomb

nor targets civilians, and drew attention to the ironic fact that Israeli militant groups used them liberally in attacking British officials in Palestine last century – well before Hezbollah's 1985 formation to combat Israel's occupation of Lebanon.

And herein lies the problem. By calling a residential neighborhood a "Hezbollah stronghold," western media softens public opinion to accept these terror attacks as justifiable, and their targets, legitimate. Because the only reason for characterizing civilian Shia neighborhoods as "strongholds" of Hezbollah is to justify carnage against those populations most likely to support the Lebanese resistance group.

Similar language – War on Terror, terrorism, militants, extremists, Al Qaeda – is also frequently employed to excuse western carnage in countries from Iraq to Afghanistan to Mali to Yemen to Pakistan. Droning and bombing targets are rarely characterized as "civilian," even though data suggests that most victims of US attacks are not militants. The goal? To eradicate second thoughts about violence against innocent civilians – often bolstered by a complicit media that characterizes these deaths as "collateral damage."

While the term "stronghold" can simply refer to an area in which an organization, party or point of view holds sway, in the context of US foes in the Mideast, it is instead usually used to suggest a militant base absolutely controlled by that foe. As [one tweep](#) noted, western media uses similar language against other American targets to scene-set for "excusable" carnage: "Hezbollah stronghold" for car bombs in Lebanon, "Assad stronghold" for car bombs in Damascus; "Assad heartland" for massacres in Latakia."

Dahiyeh – the scene of Thursday's explosion – is also, for instance, home to significant [Maronite Christian](#) and Sunni communities. And even within the suburb's Shia community, there are disparate political views and affiliations. It is by no means true that all Shia residents are supporters of Hezbollah, a Lebanese political party that – in lieu of national political consensus – provides local social services and security for residents of all sects and backgrounds in these areas.

A December Christian Science Monitor article entitled "In Hezbollah Stronghold, Lebanese Christians Find Respect, Stability," (a piece which repeats the "stronghold" theme and other Hezbollah stereotypes ad nauseum) does however manage to highlight the positive experiences of Maronites living in Dahiyeh neighborhood, Haret Hreik:

The face of the revered Shiite militant leader appears on posters, a calendar, and in several photographs nestled amid those of Christian homeowner Randa Gholam's family members. Mr. Nasrallah is, Ms. Gholam asserts amid a string of superlatives, "a gift from God."

Lebanon's sectarian divides are legendary, and the residents of the historically Christian neighborhood of Harat Hreik, now a Hezbollah stronghold, remember well the civil war that set Beirut on fire. They were literally caught in the middle of some of the most vicious fighting, with factions firing shots off at one another from either side of their apartment buildings.

But in the intervening years, as Hezbollah cemented its control over the suburb of Dahiyeh, which includes Harat Hreik, the militant group has been an unexpected source of stability and even protection for the few remaining Christian families. Just a few blocks away from Nasrallah's compound is St. Joseph's Church, a vibrant church that Maronite Christians from across Beirut flock to every Sunday.

"I feel honored to be here. They are honest. They are not extremists. It's not like everyone describes," Gholam says. "I can speak on behalf of all my Christian friends. They would say the same thing."

Why western media uses the term "Hezbollah stronghold"

Dahiye is not the only Lebanese area referred to as a "Hezbollah stronghold" by western media. Most Shia towns, cities and neighborhoods in this country are labelled with that moniker – facts be damned. Bekaa, Nabatiyeh, Bint Jbeil, Khiyyam and other predominantly Shia areas are frequently cited as such. Not coincidentally, all these civilian areas have been subjected to Israeli strikes over the years.

While [hunting for Scuds in Lebanon](#) two years ago – a search prompted by Israel's fabricated claim that Hezbollah was hoarding the difficult-to-conceal ballistic missiles – I came across some IDF ["3D animated clips"](#) that allegedly "illustrate how Hezbollah has turned over 100 villages in South Lebanon into military bases."

Introducing an array of IDF computer-generated slides that purport to identify existing Hezbollah weapons stores by marking large Xs in Shia-heavy civilian centers, the Israeli military then alleges:

"Hezbollah stores their weapons near schools, hospitals, and residential buildings in the village of al-Khiam (Khiyyam). They follow similar tactics in villages across southern Lebanon, essentially using the residents as human shields, in gross violation of UN Resolution 1701. al-Khiam was used as a rocket launching site during the Second Lebanon war."

When I asked him about it, The Independent's veteran Beirut-based journalist Robert Fisk scoffed at the IDF slide show: "The Israelis are making excuses for the next war crimes. The Scuds don't exist, they're not here. I've seen the (IDF) pictures – garbage. There's nothing in those houses."

Human Rights Watch's extensive report on Israel's 2006 attack on Lebanon, entitled Fatal Strikes: Israel's Indiscriminate Attacks Against Civilians in Lebanon, covers at length the Jewish state's unproven allegations that Hezbollah stashes weapons among civilian populations – charges that Israel continues to repeat despite evidence to the contrary.

The group's Executive Director Kenneth Roth concludes: "The pattern of attacks shows the Israeli military's disturbing disregard for the lives of Lebanese civilians. Our research shows that Israel's claim that Hezbollah fighters are hiding among civilians does not explain, let alone justify, Israel's indiscriminate warfare... In the many cases of civilian deaths examined by Human Rights Watch, the location of Hezbollah troops and arms had nothing to do with the deaths because there was no Hezbollah around."

Instead the Report clearly states:

"Human Rights Watch did not find evidence that the deployment of Hezbollah forces in Lebanon routinely or widely violated the laws of war, as repeatedly alleged by Israel. We did not find, for example, that Hezbollah routinely located its rockets inside or near civilian homes. Rather, we found strong evidence that Hezbollah had stored most of its rockets in bunkers and weapon storage facilities located in uninhabited fields and valleys. Similarly, while we found that Hezbollah fighters launched rockets from villages on some occasions,

and may have committed shielding, a war crime, when it purposefully and repeatedly fired rockets from the vicinity of UN observer posts with the possible intent of deterring Israeli counterfire, we did not find evidence that Hezbollah otherwise fired its rockets from populated areas. The available evidence indicates that in the vast majority of cases Hezbollah fighters left populated civilian areas as soon as the fighting started and fired the majority of their rockets from pre-prepared positions in largely unpopulated valleys and fields outside villages.”

Fisk is correct. The Israelis are making excuses for the next war crimes. In 2006, the IDF used the “Hezbollah stronghold” and “human shielding” arguments for carpet bombing Dahiyeh, the very same residential neighborhood targeted by terrorists on Thursday.

And Western journalists act either as dupes or complicitly when they repeat these same Israeli-generated mantras – laying the groundwork for further military and terror strikes against Lebanese civilians.

It is not just Western media that regurgitates this irresponsible language. “Hezbollah stronghold” has been so mainstreamed that virtually all English-language media utilizes the expression, from Iranian-backed Press TV to Moscow’s Russia Today. But online searches identify Western media – by far – as the main driver of this narrative.

Not all Western journalists are complicit though. On Twitter last Thursday, a rare moment of rationality came from a Voice of America source, of all places. VOA reporter [Cecily Hilleary](#) bothered to ask the all-important question: “Does term ‘Hezbollah stronghold’ aptly describe this Beirut neighborhood that was just hit by car bomb?” The first two responses were “no” and “it’s a civilian area.”

And as freelance British journalist [Patrick Galey](#), a past Beirut resident, noted sarcastically after the Bir al Abed car bombing in July unleashed another Twitter-frenzy of “Hezbollah stronghold” tweets: “For ‘Hezbollah stronghold’ you can also say “highly-populated civilian area.” Just a thought.”

Watching an elderly woman sitting alone on the steps outside Bahman hospital on Thursday, her head in her hands, sobbing, as she awaited news of a relative injured in the car bomb earlier that day – it seemed ludicrous that the media still uses “Hezbollah stronghold” as a term to describe Israel’s past and future civilian-targeted neighborhoods.

And yet, on Sunday, as four rockets were fired into the northern Bekaa – one landing in a school playground – the “Hezbollah” association was invoked again. There are many dangerous words and phrases used to frame people and events in the Middle East, but here, now, we can collectively make a start to change that.

Sharmine Narwani is a commentary writer and political analyst covering the Middle East. You can follow Sharmine on twitter [@snarwani](#).

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