The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication
by Lina Khatib et al.

A Review by Anne Bergren

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Lebanon, a small state of roughly six million people, fascinates as often as it perplexes. The country’s cultural and religious diversity (which includes Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and Druze among a total of 18 religions), combined with its unique political structure and resultant violence, has attracted the attention of international affairs novices and experts. Geographically situated between the opposing states of Israel and Syria, and influenced by Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Lebanon and its politics require no small effort to comprehend. But if you know even a little about Lebanon, you probably know something about Hizbullah.

Considered a political party by Lebanon and the broader Middle East, and a terrorist group by the West and Israel, Hizbullah (also known as “The Party of God”) makes headlines worldwide and has been studied thoroughly by scholars of many traditions. The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication, written by Lina Khatib, Dina Matar and Atef Alshaer, examines the evolution of this contentious political actor through a political communications perspective, chronicling shifts in Hizbullah’s communications strategy since its inception in 1982.

The authors argue that what is missing from the literature on this well-known organization is a close look at Hizbullah as a rational political actor similar to Western political parties. Instead of treating Hizbullah as a
reactionary group reliant on favorable local political or social conditions that may or may not arise, experts and scholars must consider the skill with which Hizbullah manipulates political events. By effectively using strategic political communications, the group is able to exploit the local context and garner support. The authors assert that Hizbullah continues to deliberately and masterfully adapt its political communications strategy to appeal not only to the Shiite base from which it emerged, but also to Lebanon’s Sunnis, Christians, and the broader Arab public.

*The Hizbullah Phenomenon* is divided into five chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The first half of the book (chapters 1 through 3) utilizes a consistent analytical approach that deviates in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Hizbullah’s short and long-term political goals and describes how it integrates professional communications strategies to support and achieve those aims. These same topics are covered in chronological detail in chapters 2 and 3: Chapter 2 examines Hizbullah’s methods and political branding in the years from 1982 to 2000 (from the start of Israel’s invasion of southern Lebanon to its eventual withdrawal), while the third chapter looks at these same themes from 2000 to 2013.

Chapter 4 significantly diverges from the first half of the book with an in-depth content analysis of Hizbullah’s poetry throughout its history. The author of this section, Atef Alshaer, offers insight into the more niche topic of the role of poetry in Middle East societies, which acts as “the primary form of artistic expression in the region.” Initially, the subject seems out of place, but Alshaer deftly demonstrates the importance of poetry in politics by contextualizing its historic significance to Hizbullah’s primary audience, the Shiite community. According to Alshaer, “Poetry is generally perceived as a residue of past authenticity, underlining the authority and legitimacy of those who embrace it, and this aspect comes across in the writings and speeches of Shiite pioneers whose ideas and activities gave rise to the organized political community epitomized in Hizbullah today.” Alshaer goes on to analyze the content of specific works by Arab poets linked to Hizbullah, highlighting themes of “resistance, connectedness, and continuity of past glories, heroism,
certainty of victory, defiance, and patience” that are ultimately used to cement solidarity with Hizbullah across the Arab world.

Chapter 5 also contrasts from the first half of the book by focusing solely on Hizbullah’s charismatic secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, and his ascent to power. According to the author of this section, Dina Matar, Hizbullah shapes Nasrallah’s image and crafts public appearances to best attract followers from Lebanon and abroad. She explains, “Nasrallah is depicted in numerous articles, books, and media commentaries ... as a modest cleric-cum-political ideologue with ‘genuine’ charisma, whose political path has emulated ... that of Iran’s ... Imam Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini, as well as other figures within Lebanon’s Shiite community.”

Over the course of the chapter, Matar argues that, “The combination of his person, demeanor, and language has provided powerful imaginary significations that helped him and Hizbullah mobilise alternative, collective identities over time and at particular historical junctures.” Matar strengthens her argument by noting that the only texts written about Nasrallah are in Arabic and almost exclusively published by Hizbullah after 2006, suggesting that Hizbullah molds Nasrallah’s public image.

The authors of *The Hizbullah Phenomenon* skillfully connect events in Lebanon to shifts in Hizbullah’s rhetoric and communications tactics, and conclude the book with a discussion of how the Syrian civil war is negatively affecting Hizbullah’s popularity today. Overall, the reader turns the last page convinced of the authors’ thesis: Hizbullah relies on targeted political messaging adapted to Lebanon’s political landscape and public opinion to maintain momentum, gain political clout, and grow its support base throughout the Middle East. Unfortunately, the book does not feel altogether cohesive, perhaps reflecting the authors’ separate areas of expertise: the first three chapters follow the same analytical approach and structure, but the remaining two chapters stand isolated. For the reader, these stark topic shifts are distracting and weaken the authors’ overall argument. Dividing the book into three sections and integrating the topics of chapters 4 and 5 (poetry and charismatic leadership) into the chronological discussions presented earlier may better streamline the authors’ arguments. Restructuring could also help avoid repetition: Some
chapters include an unnecessary review of historical events covered in previous chapters.

In terms of its content, the book is intended first for communications scholars, then for those who study Hizbullah, and finally for readers interested in Lebanese politics or security issues in the Middle East. For the political communications novice, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon* discusses political communications theory in an approachable way, but occasionally delves too deep into context analysis for readers with a casual interest. For readers with limited background knowledge of Hizbullah — its formation, leaders, political and social evolution in Lebanese society, and communication strategies — this book provides a solid grounding.

Scholars and policy-makers interested in understanding Hizbullah will benefit from the book. It adds to the literature by offering an alternative, sophisticated view of the organization’s success at leveraging the media. Although the authors fail to offer any solutions for the political intricacies of Lebanon and proffer a neutral depiction of Hizbullah that may vex those who associate it with terrorism, understanding this integral part of Hizbullah’s strategy will allow future policy-makers to approach the group more effectively by targeting one of their primary — and most powerful — weapons.

**Endnotes**

2 Ibid., 121.
3 Ibid., 120.
4 Ibid., 153.
5 Ibid., 154.