

From LCP to Hezbollah: diverse allies in Lebanon

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Ibtisam Jamaledine stood in the room of her dead son, Maxim. Maxim was 18 years old when he was mistaken for a fighter and killed by an Israeli missile during this summer's war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Pictures of Che Guevara and soccer players as well as a plaque dedicated to Shiite Islam's most revered imam, Ali, adorn the walls of his room. They tell a story unknown in the West, of the complex nature of forces that fought Israel last summer.

During the war, U.S. President George W. Bush pitted the conflict as one fuelled by "Islamofascism," pushed by Hezbollah, the Party of God. But fighting alongside Hezbollah was an older, more seasoned resistance movement - the Lebanese Communist Party, which allied with the Islamic party for the first time and showed its members that Islam and communism can complement each other.

For Maxim's mother, the alliance of these two ideologies was natural and the pictures in her son's room of a communist martyr and a Muslim hero attest to that.

She said her son wasn't religious. She said she sees her son as part of a line of resistance fighters "that began with Imam Ali and went to Che and then to Maxim. It's one lineage of struggle."

The Jamaledine family has increasingly woven religious symbols into their lives since the Aug. 14 ceasefire went into effect. Ibtisam's daughter, Lina, was hit by shrapnel from a missile that exploded outside the family's house. She now wears a head scarf. Ibtisam hung a picture of Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in her living room "just to spite Bush." But both deny being very religious.

"The LCP's decreasing support shows that the (Lebanese) are becoming more confessional. They believe that because the state is weak they must turn to their sect for protection," said Saadallah Mazraani, vice-president of the LCP.

The communists' organizational and social clout was the envy of many militias at the onset of the civil war that raged from 1975 to 1990. The group's power began to dwindle with the rise of Hezbollah and other sectarian militias. Hezbollah formed in 1982 to fight Israel and hasten its withdrawal from the south.

The communist resistance dates to 1937, when members of the LCP contributed forces to communist Palestinian militias to fight Israeli militias. In that way, the group is known as the father of the resistance.

But Hezbollah has become the main source of resistance in Lebanon.

"It's not that we support (Hezbollah) because they are Islamic. We support them because they are a resistance," said LCP member Mohammed Jamaledine, Ibtisam's cousin.

"There was no other strong, active resistance during the (summer) war," Ibtisam said.

"It's an internationally politicized resistance that Hezbollah promotes. We like that," Mohammed said.

The Jamaledines have supported the LCP since its inception and live in the communist stronghold of Jemmalieh in the Bekaa Valley. Four of Ibtisam's family members - her brother-in-law, his son and two cousins - died fighting with the LCP during the Lebanese civil war.

"I've always voted for the LCP before the summer war," Ibtisam said. "This time, Hezbollah and the LCP better run together."

Hezbollah and the LCP are similar in their support for the poor. Both parties often build roads, schools and infrastructure for impoverished, government-neglected villages. The LCP, with support from the Soviet Union, once was the main provider for the poor. But Hezbollah has surpassed it in philanthropy with its larger coffers and support from Syria and Iran.

LCP party members have come to support Hezbollah in growing numbers, mixing secular politics with sectarian beliefs, an alliance to promote a stronger resistance.

The LCP's mandate is to protect Lebanon in the absence of a strong state, Mazraani said. He pointed to the party's fight against the 1976 Syrian occupation as proof that resistance is not woven into religious strife.

University of Chicago professor Richard Pape argues in his book *Dying to Win* that communist and socialist groups accounted for 75 per cent of suicide attacks during Lebanon's civil war. Pape also asserts that 70 per cent of suicide bombers during the civil war were Christians belonging to secular parties.

This summer's war "was not a religious conflict - Jewish vs. Muslim. It was a political conflict," LCP vice-president Mazraani said. Israel turned "the conflict into a religious one because they are a Jewish entity. They try to show their enemy as a religious force, to unite Jews for Israel and get support from American Jews by showing the conflict as a clash of religions and not as a resistance to Israeli aggression."

Hezbollah members displayed their political sentiments over what they perceived as Israeli-U.S. political aggression during the war. Anti-Bush Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's image was often altered to appear next to Nasrallah's, illustrating their resistance to U.S. policy and downplaying claims of religious strife.

Although their goals might be similar, their tactics during the war differed. "We worked more with the people of the villages," Mazraani said. "Hezbollah had its own independent faction. We collaborated with citizens to provide local protection. We wouldn't seek conflict, but resist attempted occupation."

According to Houssein Diab, an LCP commander and a fighter in this summer's war, LCP fighters mainly fired at planes trying to land and release ground troops into Lebanon.

The Bekaa valley has about 400 villages and the LCP has sympathizers and members in most that number several thousand, Mazraani said.

An official LCP decree released at the start of the summer conflict told members to organize and "resist attempts of Israeli invasion."

“We’re closer to Hezbollah (now) as we both have one goal: to resist Israeli occupation,” Mazraani said. “The Resistance is not just Islamic.”

P.S.

*Maria Abi-Habib is a journalist based in Beirut, Lebanon. This article originally appeared in the Montreal Gazette.

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