

Interview – Massaab Al-Aloosy

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Massaab Al-Aloosy currently works as a non-resident fellow for the Gulf International Forum. He received his PhD from the Fletcher School, Tufts University. He has previously worked as an academic, and a journalist covering Iraq and the Arab Spring for Al-Jazeera and the World Peace Foundation. His research focuses on Iraq, Iran, Shia armed groups, and critical security topics in the Middle East. He is the author of the *Changing Ideology of Hezbollah* (Palgrave 2020); some of his other publications include articles on “Deterrence by insurgents: Hezbollah’s military doctrine and capability vis-à-vis Israel,” “Hezbollah in Syria: An Insurgent’s Ideology, Interest, and Survival,” and “Insurgency, Proxy, and Dependence: How Hezbollah’s Ideology Prevails Over its Interest in its Relationship with Iran.” See his full list of publications here.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The most interesting aspect about researching the Middle East today is the rise of non-state armed groups that are parallel to the government, independent of it, and simultaneously they believe it is their obligation to protect the status quo. In Iraq, for example, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) played an instrumental role in defeating ISIS, but they undermine the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Iraqi government through continuous attacks against U.S bases and repression of any dissent. They also engage in illicit economic activity, play a political role, but they do not seek to mould the political system according to their ideology. Similarly in Lebanon, Hezbollah is the decision-maker in terms of waging war against Israel without coordination with the government, and its military capability surpasses that of the Lebanese army. In other words, it is very interesting to see how this relationship between the government and these armed groups evolve, and how international players react to it.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

We, as humans, continuously adapt information, biases, misperceptions, and behavioural tactics. Unfortunately, many do not question this inheritance that, if it ceases to be a factor in our lives, then it threatens our social status, relations, and even our psychological foundations. Having said that, my understanding of the world changed tremendously as I revised and rejected many of the inaccurate precepts that I had which helped me be more objective in looking at the unfolding events around me. Having an autonomous mind certainly comes at a cost, but it is trivial in the face of having an independent stance and being authentic first and foremost to myself. Many of Nietzsche ideas had a tremendous effect on my thinking such as the destruction of idols, questioning the premise of some of our beliefs, and building an original model of thinking. This process has been years in the making and will continue well into the future.

How has Hezbollah’s role in the region changed since the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza War?

Hezbollah is meticulously playing a supportive role for Hamas, and it is assiduously trying to avoid a large-scale conflict with Israel for domestic reasons. This was evident in Hassan Nasrallah’s, the General Secretary, long awaited speech after the conflict commenced between Israel and Hamas. Additionally, Hezbollah realises that the Lebanese political situation is precarious at best and a wider conflict with Israel might lead to chaos that Hezbollah prefers not to have in its own backyard. Lebanese society, since 2019, has suffered tremendously because of

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Covid-19, the depreciation of the Lebanese Lira, the port explosion, and the deterioration of services. The demonstrations that the country witnessed is indicative of social frustration that will only be aggravated by a conflict with Israel. As a result, the repercussions will be incalculable if Hezbollah enters a wider war with Israel.

In your 2022 Publication, you make it clear that the deterrence dynamic between Israel and Hezbollah exists because neither are confident, they would be successful if conflict escalated to war. Does the recent outbreak of conflict represent a significant enough change to escalate to war?

The main tenets of the deterrence posture between Hezbollah and Israel still exist i.e. a full-scale war between them will inflict tremendous damage on each side without ensuring the demise of the adversary. What has changed in recent years, however, is the introduction of a multi-front against Israel by the so-called “axis of resistance.” But this approach, as we see from Hezbollah’s actions, has its limits as well because Hezbollah is not putting its full weight behind Hamas, and Israel is able to maintain an uninterrupted military campaign in Gaza despite the skirmishes on its northern border. It is also important to remember that deterrence between Israel and Hezbollah does not imply the demise of Hezbollah’s animosity towards Israel; rather, it indicates that Hezbollah, at least for the foreseeable future, does not see any utility from a full-scale confrontation with Israel while continuously improving its military capabilities.

In your book *The Changing Ideology of Hezbollah*, you argue that Hezbollah views its conflict with Israel increasingly as a nationalist as opposed to a religious matter. What is the reason for this shift? How does it impact Hezbollah’s relationship to the Palestinian cause and their role in the conflict?

The Islamist universalistic objectives that Hezbollah embarked upon in its early days crashed on the rock of reality. Creating an Islamic government in Lebanon akin to the one in Iran or forming a unified Islamic state by all Muslims seems naïve in hindsight for Hezbollah’s leadership. Additionally, Hezbollah became more tuned towards its constituency in Lebanon, and there was a subsequent shift from Islamist internationalism to Lebanese Shi’ism. At the end of the day, Hezbollah must operate within its environment which is living under a consociational political system, and a heavily sectarianized society. This entails a continued sympathy for the Palestinians but not a direct role in trying to “liberate Palestine.” Nasrallah himself indicated in some of his speeches that the task of liberating Palestine is mainly on the shoulders of the Palestinians. Hezbollah’s task is of a supportive nature through training Palestinian fighters, providing them with intelligence, and even distracting the IDF in the north as it is currently doing, but not marching into Jerusalem as Hezbollah once envisioned itself doing.

How do you characterise Hezbollah’s political project within Lebanon in the years since its 2006 war with Israel? How will Hezbollah’s role in the Israel-Gaza War impact that project?

One of the processes that Hezbollah went through in the past few decades is the integration into politics. Starting from 1992 when it participated in parliamentary elections and later in 2005 when it became part of the cabinet, Hezbollah slowly became invested in maintaining the consociational nature of the Lebanese political system. The main argument Hezbollah presented for becoming more political was to protect its rear, especially after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. But it is becoming increasingly evident that Hezbollah is unwilling to push for reforms of the political system, cannot envisage its replacement, and is invested in maintaining it. In other words, Hezbollah views the collapse of the fragile economic and political setting in Lebanon as detrimental development, and the war in Gaza – with the possibility of a full-scale war with Israel – threatens the very foundation of the Lebanese state and puts it on the brink of the abyss. It is, therefore, maintaining a delicate balance between its aim to support Hamas but simultaneously trying to shield Lebanon from an overall war with Israel.

In your 2023 Publication you argue that Hezbollah has reached a point where it is no longer as dependent on Iran for funding. How has it come to be more self-sufficient? How does this self-sufficiency change its role in the “Axis of Resistance,” and could that impact its strategy in what is rapidly becoming a regional conflict?

Hezbollah, starting in the 1990s, began to think more globally in terms of generating more revenue. One avenue that it pursued was funding from the Shia communities in different countries. Many Shia, specifically the Lebanese,

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supported Hezbollah in its cause against Israel and the role it was playing in protecting the Lebanese Shia community. Additionally, at least according to many reports, Hezbollah engaged in drug trafficking and/or allowed the drug production within areas such as the Beqaa Valley for a specific fee. Finally, Hezbollah invested in its own businesses within Lebanon and Iraq – the latter case has not been researched sufficiently.

Despite Hezbollah's economic activity, however, its strategy is closely coordinated with Iran and more specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Hezbollah is inseparable from the Iranian theocratic regime, their relationship transcends the material because Hezbollah's foundation, existence, and survival is tightly tied to that of Iran's current rulers. It is sometimes equally important that this relationship is very close on a personal level as well. For instance, the daughter of former Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani married the son of Hashim Safi al-Din, a senior Hezbollah figure.

As conflict between Hezbollah and Israel escalates, what are the implications for the already fragile Lebanese political and security environment?

Conditions in Lebanon, for some years now, have been deteriorating, and a war with Israel will plunge the country into the unknown. The ramifications will encompass the political, economic, and social without any tangible benefit or justification as the average Lebanese will ask why Lebanon is fighting for the Palestinians to the detriment of their own country? Simultaneously, the decision of war and peace is in the hands of Hezbollah, therefore, Lebanese society will put the blame on Hezbollah's shoulders. The loss of legitimacy will include the Lebanese Shia which is Hezbollah's popular base that it cannot afford to antagonise. Naturally, many Lebanese Shia have viewed Hezbollah as a force that protected their sect from domestic Lebanese rivals and from Israeli attacks. However, that support will dissipate if Hezbollah's wars with Israel will continue in frequency especially to help the Palestinians.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My advice is to enjoy the process and do not focus only on the goal. Embarking on a career in international relations is arduous, ragged, and uncertain but that is one of the most fascinating aspects of a profession in international relations: travelling the road not taken. If you are a person that is easily piqued over different opinions, seeks absolute truths, and does not apply a multi-dimensional view to intricate problems then you might be better off becoming a computer engineer.