

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

1. I would like information about Hezbollah targeting Sunni simply because they are Sunnis.

RESPONSE

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A search of the sources consulted found no specific information regarding Hezbollah targeting Sunni simply because they are Sunnis.

An *Asia Times* article dated 20 July 2006 indicates that Hezbollah is a “Lebanese Islamist Shi’ite group”, which is led by Hassan Nasrallah. It “was set up in 1982 to resist Israeli occupation of Lebanon during the brutal civil war. The group declared a political existence in 1985.” According to the article, “The political platform of Hezbollah calls for the destruction of Israel, but the group has successfully transformed itself from a radical extremist group into an effective political force that holds 18% of the seats in the Lebanese parliament.” It is stated in the article that:

In Lebanon, the group had first hoped to transform the whole country into a fundamentalist Shi’ite state. But it has now abandoned that objective for a more inclusive platform.

About 60% of the 3.8 million population of Lebanon is Muslim, most of them Shi’ite. This is where Hezbollah draws its support. The rest of the population is almost all Christian. A 15-year civil war between Muslim and Christian groups ended in 1991.

The article also notes that “Hezbollah became the most powerful military force in Lebanon after Syria withdrew its troops last year. It now has a seat in the Lebanese cabinet.” Hezbollah had been “invited to join the government last July in the hope that the move would bring national unity to Lebanon as the country struggled for stability and peace” (Jamail, Dahr 2006, ‘Hezbollah’s transformation’, *Asia Times*, 20 July – Attachment 1).

An article dated 16 April 2006 refers to the comments of “Ibrahim Bayram, a prominent Shiite author who writes for Lebanon’s leading newspaper, An-Nahar,” who “said Hezbollah views Sunnis as potential allies who could give the Iranian-backed group an opening to a Sunni-dominated Arab world suspicious of Iran.” Bayram also said that “A main challenge for Hezbollah is to win over the Sunnis,” and “Hezbollah believes that winning over everyone in Lebanon and not the Sunnis would amount to nothing” (Hendawi, Hamza 2006, ‘Hezbollah Links Plot to Clashes in Iraq’, *Associated Press Newswires*, 16 April – Attachment 2).

An International Crisis Group report dated 5 December 2005 notes the comments of a UN observer, who said that Hezbollah’s leader “Nasrallah repeatedly asserts that they have no conflict with the Sunnis”. According to the report:

By and large, Hizbollah has sought to dampen sectarian tensions. According to a UN observer, “they will not allow their people to be used in an inter-Lebanese fight. They are very keen to be seen as an inter-Lebanese group, and Nasrallah repeatedly asserts that they have no conflict with the Sunnis”.

The report also indicates that Hezbollah had “sought to achieve “popular legitimisation across all sectors of Lebanese society”.” However, the report also notes that “By referring to Lebanon now as the arena for “a new phase of confrontations”,... Hizbollah is signalling growing domestic rifts and, potentially, the opening of an internal front or, at a minimum, the presence of home-based hostile elements.” Hezbollah leaders had “criticised citizens who make common cause with intervening third parties... The references have become increasingly explicit and hostile. Anti-Syrian demonstrators... and members and leaders of the Sunni community (notably after Saad al-Hariri’s comments about disarming Hizbollah)... were specifically targeted... In his 28 October Jerusalem Day speech, Nasrallah, warned that [UN Security Council] Resolution 1559 was driving a wedge between confessions and accused UN envoys of stoking “Sunni-Shiite tensions”” (International Crisis Group 2005, *Lebanon: Managing the gathering storm*, Middle East Report No 48, 5 December, pp. 17-18 – Attachment 3).

An article dated 5 March 2004 indicates that one of Hezbollah’s nine members of parliament in Lebanon at that time was a Sunni Muslim (Sykes, Hugh 2004, ‘New era for Hezbollah’, *BBC News World Edition*, 5 March – Attachment 4).

There are recent reports of a possible increase in sectarian tensions in Lebanon as a result of street protests led by Hezbollah and its allies against the present Lebanese government. There are also reports that although Hezbollah’s leader had “vowed to continue mass protests” against the government, he had warned “Lebanese Shia that there was no need to fight Sunnis or Christians within Lebanon.”

An article in *The Economist* dated 13 December 2006 indicates that the present “stand-off has split Lebanon neatly in two.” The article refers to huge crowds continuing “to gather daily in Beirut’s swanky downtown to demand the resignation of the government” and that “Coils of barbed wire separate this throng from the object of their ire, the Saray, an Ottoman-era barracks that houses the offices of the prime minister, Fouad Siniora, whose cabinet, supported by a parliamentary majority known as the March 14th movement, staunchly refuses to bow down.” It is stated in the article that:

The stand-off has split Lebanon neatly in two. Mr Siniora, a Sunni Muslim, controls the parliament, and can rely on the professional neutrality of the army. His opponents include the Christian president, Emile Lahoud, as well as the Shia speaker of parliament, whose nod is needed to convene the legislature. But their main power, both in numbers and guns, comes from Hizbullah, the highly disciplined and well-armed Shia militia.

Opinion polls show that a majority of Lebanese back the opposition's main demand, the formation of a "national unity" government that would more fairly represent all the country's myriad factions and sects. But a majority also want an international tribunal to try suspects in the series of assassinations targeting March 14th figureheads which have been the subject of a UN investigation. Mr Siniora says he would be willing to widen his cabinet, but not so much as to grant his opponents veto power, precisely because he fears they would try to block such a tribunal, since any trial would be likely to finger Hizbullah's key ally, Syria.

Yet the polarisation is not just over such political technicalities. The opposition includes nearly all of Lebanon's 30% Shia minority, and half its 30% Christian minority. But the bulk of the 30% Sunni minority, along with the other half of the Christians and most of the 6% Druze community support the government. Even as hundreds of thousands of mostly Shia protesters massed in Beirut on Sunday December 10th to denounce the government, smaller demonstrations in Lebanon's largely Sunni second and third-largest cities, Tripoli and Sidon, showed equally fervent support for Mr Siniora. Within Beirut, friction between neighbouring sects has sparked occasional brawls, with one person killed so far ('Lebanon – The turmoil continues' 2006, *The Economist*, 13 December

http://www.economist.com/daily/news/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=8428880 – Accessed 14 December 2006 – Attachment 5).

A recent RRT research response dated 15 December 2006 provides information on the current demonstrations against the government in Beirut and refers to articles that include information on whether the political unrest has divided the country on sectarian lines (RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response LBN31040*, 15 December – Attachment 6).

An article dated 14 December 2006 in relation to the protests in Lebanon notes that "Despite the street protests and Saniora's refusal to step down, both sides have expressed willingness to talk to draw the country away from the sectarian tones of the division. Lebanon's Sunni Muslims largely support the Sunni prime minister, and Shiite Muslims back Hezbollah. Christians are split" (Faramarzi, Scheherezade 2006, 'Moussa Seeks to Defuse Crisis in Lebanon', *Associated Press Newswires*, 14 December – Attachment 7).

Another article dated 7 December 2006 refers to Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah ruling "out a civil conflict, warning Lebanese Shia that there was no need to fight Sunnis or Christians within Lebanon." He also "vowed to continue mass protests calling for Lebanon's Western-backed government" to resign. Hezbollah had withdrawn "its minister from the government last month – and other pro-Syrian members of the cabinet followed suit" ('Hezbollah leader urges defiance' 2006, *BBC News*, 7 December http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6219732.stm – Accessed 11 December 2006 – Attachment 8).

An *Associated Press Newswires* article dated 5 December 2006 indicates that following the killing of a Shiite Muslim youth in a "shooting on Shiites who were walking through Sunni and mixed neighborhoods on their way back from an anti-government demonstration in downtown Beirut", Shiite leaders had "urged the family of the victim to avoid revenge, fearing sectarian violence that could detonate Lebanon's political crisis." The youth's father

“said he had initially thought of revenge, but had backed down after a visit by envoys of Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah and his ally, Parliament Speaker and leader of the Shiite Amal Movement Nabih Berri, who told him vengeance would only play into the hands of those trying to divide Lebanon” (Faramarzi, Scheherezade 2006, ‘Shiite Muslim leaders urge family of victim against revenge following violence with Sunnis’, *Associated Press Newswires*, 5 December – Attachment 9).

An article dated 25 November 2006 refers to clashes between Sunnis and Shiites in Beirut, including an attack on a Sunni mosque “by Shiites waving Hezbollah flags, prompting hundreds of club-waving Sunnis to charge into the streets looking for revenge.” The article also refers to the comments of a Shia businessman, who “said that Shia anger over a series of what he called provocations was being restrained only by Mr. Nasrallah, who has repeatedly asked his supporters to refrain from violence.” According to the article, Christians and Sunni Muslims were “furious over Hezbollah’s efforts to topple the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, a Sunni Muslim” (MacKinnon, Mark 2006, ‘Lebanese fear a new civil war; Killings and reprisals between Shiites and Sunnis stir bad memories of the 1970s’, *The Globe and Mail*, 25 November – Attachment 10).

An earlier article dated 10 September 2006 indicates that a pledge of “loyalty to the Lebanese tradition of religious and social tolerance” by Hezbollah’s leader Nasrallah “was not well received by many Sunnis and Maronites.” According to the article:

Nasrallah has gone out of his way to reassure fellow Lebanese that Hezbollah has no intention of remaking Lebanon to look like Iran. In his recent interview, he pledged loyalty to the Lebanese tradition of religious and social tolerance.

“Lebanon is a pluralistic country,” he declared. “It is not an Islamic country. It is not a Maronite country. It is not an Orthodox country. It is not a Shiite country. It is a country of consensus. You have nothing to fear from anybody from Hezbollah.”

But Nasrallah’s pledge was not well received by many Sunnis and Maronites. Hezbollah only weeks ago went to war without consulting the government, they noted, and moved as soon as the cease-fire took effect to help refugees without reference to government agencies charged with the same task.

Perhaps more important, they noted, was Nasrallah’s postwar assertion that Hezbollah must be taken into account in government deliberations from here on out. The party ran for office in the last elections, gaining seats in parliament and two ministers in Siniora’s cabinet. But Nasrallah seemed to be saying his group will be seeking more power now that, in his words, it has fought a war on Lebanon’s behalf.

A share of power that reflects the Shiites’ true place in the population would probably change Lebanon’s orientation significantly, the Sunni and Maronite observers predicted. But a refusal to acknowledge the demographic change and Hezbollah’s enhanced status after the war, they said, would be a recipe for more intercommunal conflict (Cody, Edward 2006, ‘Lebanon Left to Face Most Basic of Issues; War Exposes Deep Conflicts About the Nation’s Identity and Its Future’, *The Washington Post*, 10 September – Attachment 11).

An article in *The New York Times* dated 25 August 2006 refers to the comments of residents of Marwaheen, a “predominantly Sunni village near the Israeli border” in Lebanon, who said that “Hezbollah was using them as human shields.” The article indicates that 23 people had been killed by Israeli warplanes as they tried to flee the village during the recent fighting

between Hezbollah and Israel. Hezbollah militiamen had “brought arms and rockets into town in preparation for battle” for months before the fighting. Many residents of the town blamed Hezbollah “for having brought trouble to their quiet community.” It is stated in the article that “Villages like Marwaheen – which largely supports the Future Movement of Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri – often miss out on Hezbollah’s largess but pay the price for its politics” (Fattah, Hassan M. 2006, ‘At Funeral, a Sunni Village Condemns Hezbollah’s Presence’, *The New York Times*, 25 August – Attachment 12).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Government Information & Reports

Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/>

UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

United Nations (UN)

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rsd>

Non-Government Organisations

Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org>

International News & Politics

BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

Region Specific Links

Search Engines

Copernic <http://www.copernic.com/>

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. Jamail, Dahr 2006, ‘Hezbollah’s transformation’, *Asia Times*, 20 July. (CISNET Lebanon CX157843)

2. Hendawi, Hamza 2006, ‘Hezbollah Links Plot to Clashes in Iraq’, *Associated Press Newswires*, 16 April. (FACTIVA)

3. International Crisis Group 2005, *Lebanon: Managing the gathering storm*, Middle East Report No 48, 5 December.

4. Sykes, Hugh 2004, ‘New era for Hezbollah’, *BBC News World Edition*, 5 March. (CISNET Lebanon CX90706)

5. 'Lebanon – The turmoil continues' 2006, *The Economist*, 13 December
http://www.economist.com/daily/news/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=8428880 – Accessed 14 December 2006.
6. RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response LBN31040*, 15 December.
7. Faramarzi, Scheherezade 2006, 'Moussa Seeks to Defuse Crisis in Lebanon', *Associated Press Newswires*, 14 December. (FACTIVA)
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9. Faramarzi, Scheherezade 2006, 'Shiite Muslim leaders urge family of victim against revenge following violence with Sunnis', *Associated Press Newswires*, 5 December. (FACTIVA)
10. MacKinnon, Mark 2006, 'Lebanese fear a new civil war; Killings and reprisals between Shiites and Sunnis stir bad memories of the 1970s', *The Globe and Mail*, 25 November. (FACTIVA)
11. Cody, Edward 2006, 'Lebanon Left to Face Most Basic of Issues; War Exposes Deep Conflicts About the Nation's Identity and Its Future', *The Washington Post*, 10 September. (FACTIVA)
12. Fattah, Hassan M. 2006, 'At Funeral, a Sunni Village Condemns Hezbollah's Presence', *The New York Times*, 25 August. (FACTIVA)