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MIDDLE EAST

## Jihadi Tourism Hits Lebanon

Hezbollah Boasts New War Museum to Commemorate Struggle Against Israel

By Don Duncan

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MLITA, Lebanon—Hezbollah has opened its first permanent museum atop a wooded hill here that was strategic territory in a 2006 war with Israel, the latest step in the group’s evolution from a band of militants to an established political force in Lebanon.

Since its birth in 1982 as an Islamic militia fighting Israel’s invasion of the country, Hezbollah has transformed itself into a powerful military, political and social organization. It controls a large swath of southern Lebanon, much of the Bekaa Valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut.



Two Shiite women pass by a damaged tank last month during the inauguration of Hezbollah’s new museum attraction in southern Lebanon. ASSOCIATED PRESS

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last year.

Those elections cemented the arrival of the group—still designated a terrorist group by the U.S.—in Lebanon’s political establishment. It now has 13 seats in parliament and fields two cabinet ministers in the coalition government led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri. On June 8, Mr. Hariri met for the first time in two years with Hassan Nasrallah, the elusive leader of Hezbollah.

Now, in addition to significant political leverage, Hezbollah also has a sprawling 15-acre, \$4 million tourism complex. Hezbollah opened the park in late May, marking the 10th anniversary of Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

A walking trek called “the Path” is the centerpiece, winding along a what was once Hezbollah’s front line against Israel during the occupation. It is peppered with artillery shells of various sizes, along with mockups with mannequin Hezbollah fighters crouched, glaring out through the brush, or receiving medical treatment.

From inside a 600-foot-long tunnel, visitors can peer through glass at some of Hezbollah’s former underground hideouts. The fortifications were closely guarded secrets until recently, and key to some of Hezbollah’s recent operations, including its fight with Israel in a brief 2006 war along the southern border.

To manage the new museum and other planned sites, Hezbollah is creating its own museum department, adding to its other divisions, which include radio and TV stations.

“It shows that the resistance is more stable,” said Muhammad Kawtharani, director of Hezbollah’s arts foundation and a spokesman for the Mlita museum project. “You’re seeing a secret that is a secret no more.”

Hezbollah has had some time to refine its skills in memorialization. Not long had the dust settled on its 2006 conflict with Israel than it opened a temporary exhibition in honor of the group’s “victory” in Dahiya, its south Beirut power base. There the presentation was rough and the propaganda raw.

At Mlita, slick informational plaques dot the way, explaining, in Arabic and English, the significance of certain places and pieces of equipment. Water

coolers provide refreshment.

Visitors from all sects have come to the museum, but predominant among them have been Shiite supporters of Hezbollah from southern Lebanon.

"The resistance developed and grew to challenge the most powerful army, the Israeli army, which was once described as an unbeatable myth," said Yassir Abboud, a 53-year-old Shiite, visiting from the southern town of Marjayoun. "This is not a museum. This is a place built with blood and sand."

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