

Why Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV Broadcasts Sunday Mass

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Global Research presents this article to highlight the pan-Lebanese character of the December protests in Beirut. The disinformation campaign attempts to portray the protests in Beirut as Shia Muslim in nature or only composed of Hezbollah supporters, when in fact a large majority of the Lebanese population have rallied against a government which serves U.S. and Israeli interests.

A truck laden with yellow Hezbollah flags drives past the Christian neighbourhood of Gemayzeh early Sunday morning in downtown Beirut. There's a picture of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on the windscreen, but it's not his name that the young men on board are chanting. "General, General!" yell these young Shiite boys.

Their chant is for the leader of Hezbollah's largest Christian ally, the former General Michel Aoun. And this van captures an important dynamic that many of the international and Lebanese press have omitted from their coverage of the last few days — that almost a quarter of the crowd at the huge anti-government protests have been Lebanese Christians.



Image: An Anti-goverment protester wearing Michel Aoun badges.

The size and commitment of the Christian participation became clear Sunday, as thousands of Christians from Aoun's 'Free Patriotic Movement' marched in from East Beirut to join their Shia allies in calling for the Prime Minister to resign. "We are all Christians and we are against the government," 45-year-old Joseph from East Beirut tells me as he walks past with his son, "We want our own Lebanese government with no Syrian influence, no American influence and not any influence from other Arab countries. "

Umm* but haven't we been told that Hezbollah are just Syrian agents? Why would nationalist anti-Syrian Christians want to be in a coalition with them?

“No! I’m not worried about Hezbollah working for the Syrians,” Joseph exclaims. “Maybe Hezbollah likes Syria’s words against Israel and in that they support Syria* but in Lebanon they are Lebanese!”



Image: A supporter of the Christian Free Patriotic Movement.

For Joseph, the fact that his Shia allies have never been involved in his country’s many civil wars is proof enough of the party’s commitment to Lebanese nationalism. “Hezbollah has never used its weapons inside Lebanon against the Lebanese,” he explains, “Not like the other side; they all killed each other and ran militias.”

As the marchers walk on, they pass a TV crew they think is from ‘Lebanese Forces’ Television, a network that belongs to a pro-government Christian party firmly aligned against Hezbollah and Syria.

“The Christian people in Lebanon are different to what you are showing on TV!” yells one young man at the camera crew as others join in with, “Stop your lies!”

“We are yelling at them because they do not tell the truth,” explains 30-year-old Mona to me after party officials make the crowd march on. “They are saying that it is only Muslims who are here protesting. They say all Christians belong to the Lebanese Forces. But look, we are here demonstrating and we are not Shiite!” she says exacerbated.

Twenty-eight-year-old Sharden **believes the media have been ignoring them on purpose. “We know all the media in the world, especially the Americans, are trying to make the picture that it is just the Shiites. They don’t want it to look like the Lebanese are united against the government,”** he tells me. **It’s hard to tell exactly how many of Lebanon’s Christians belong to parties aligned with either Hezbollah or the government. Both will tell you that their numbers make up 70% of all Christians in Lebanon *and it’s a continuously argued figure that no one is this country seems to know the answer too.**

“They’re not the majority of Christians,” scorns 26-year-old Hammad as he watches the crowds march past. “They might have used to be with Aoun, but not now he’s with Hezbollah.” A pro-government supporter, Hammad describes the coalition between Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah as just ‘a marriage of convenience.’

“Aoun just wants to be the President and Hezbollah has promised him this, so now he will do anything to reach that,” he accuses. “He would work with the devil just to be president!”

interrupts Hammad's friend Ziad. To these government supporters, 'the devil' is Syria. And it's a strange twist of Lebanese politics that Michel Aoun spent many of his years in exile in France lobbying against the Syrians and calling for their withdrawal from Lebanon — to now be in coalition with the Syrian backed Hezbollah; leaving many Lebanese to view this new coalition as disingenuous. "I believe he's turned pro-Syrian," charges Hammad. "I believe he's even working for them now, the Syrians."



A young demonstrator wears the yellow of Hezbollah and the orange of the Free Patriotic Movement.



Many demonstrators wear the orange of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement.



The full mix of the anti-Government opposition outside the Hariri Mosque in downtown Beirut.

Hezbollah's keenness to highlight their Christian allies was obvious at Friday's huge opposition rally, with Aoun given the role of key speaker rather than the crowd favourite Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah; and many pro-government supporters view these kind of tactical moves very cynically. "To make Aoun speak is to try and show people that the opposition is united. Hezbollah doesn't really care about Aoun. They just want him now — to use him to say 'the Christians are with us'," alleges Hassan.

Whatever is behind this strange coalition between the hardline Shiite group and their Christian allies, it's certainly producing some unique cultural mixes. As the march reaches

downtown Beirut's St Georges cathedral, Hezbollah TV vans are out the front transmitting Sunday mass live. "No we don't usually have Sunday mass broadcast on Al-Manar," one of the Fathers tells me inside, "but it's still just normal mass, nothing political is said here." As I push my way out of the packed church, I pass a funny looking kid on the steps. **He has an orange T-shirt and wristband in the colour of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, but a yellow Hezbollah cap and a picture of Hassan Nasrallah hanging around his neck.**

"Oh yes, I'm a Christian, I went to mass," explains nineteen year old Josef... and um, why do you have a picture of the man the West sees as a terrorist leader hanging off you? "Because I love him," says Josef simply, "He's a good man, and he's not bad like all the others."

Later that afternoon, representatives from all Hezbollah's allies are given the stage, but the crowd is told that the speeches won't start until everyone puts down their party flags. After fifteen minutes of delay, a respectable amount of Lebanese flags dominates and Hezbollah TV is allowed to begin their broadcast.

Once again, the universal demand is for Siniora's immediate resignation, but listening to the speeches from these opposition speakers, there is certainly unifying themes here that bring this seemingly mismatched coalition together.

Hezbollah's Christian and Druz allies stand proudly with the party's Shiite army, and they join in Hezbollah's accusations that the government failed to adequately support them during the July war with Israel.

"During the Israeli invasion, the government stood on the sides if not against the resistance!" cried the Druze opposition party leader Talal Erslan. "Maybe the execution of the resistance to Israel was executed by the Shiites, but I Talal Erslan, I am one of you!" It had been a long day and it was growing cold, but the crowd responded enthusiastically to his calls. "We are ready to give our blood to this resistance, " he declared to a cheering crowd. " And we're proud not to be called the allies of Israel***this government just follows the American and Zionist rule!"**

The speeches end and the crowds slowly disperse, while those who are sleeping here dig in for another night. "Hezbollah are the best thing that happened to Lebanon," **24-year-old Maurice, a Christian, tells me. "They are real Lebanese. Israel is our enemy too and we are with Hezbollah against Israel."**

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