

## Augustus Richard Norton. *Hezbollah: A Short History.*

Skyler J. Cranmer

Volume 28, winter 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs28br02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Cranmer, S. J. (2008). Compte rendu de [Augustus Richard Norton. *Hezbollah: A Short History.*] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 28, 0–0.

Indeed, the integration of different perspectives and foci represents the greatest contribution of this book. There are numerous facets of issues concerning the contemporary debate about the use of force, each of which is relevant in today's world, and each of these areas is discussed here: from peacekeeping to multilateralism to counter-terrorism. This is important for numerous reasons, not least of which is to help us understand that all of these issues are interrelated, and decisions on one necessarily impact decisions on the others.

For those who are new to the topic, or unfamiliar with these literatures, this book is a good place to start. All of the main elements and issues are well discussed and provide an excellent foundation concerning the issues of legitimacy, use of force, parts of international law, and the just war tradition. Additionally, the work uses well-written and timely case studies on varied topics (and with varied actors) to explore the various facets of these issues. In this respect, readers unfamiliar with these topics will walk away with a robust picture of the situation.

For those more familiar with the literature, however, the book might be greeted with a slight bit of disappointment. Since it is a reprint of a special issue of the *Review of International Studies*, the chapters in the book may already be familiar to some readers. In this respect, the book is somewhat disappointing in that it does not really provide anything "new."

All in all, however, the fact that this discussion is now being brought to a larger audience cannot be undervalued. With these issues at the forefront of many policy and security debates in today's world, having a compilation of this type easily accessible to a wide audience takes on even greater importance. In this respect, the material presented should be considered recommended reading for anyone interested in use of force issues within the contemporary international community and not just those familiar with academic journals. *Force and Legitimacy in World Politics* accomplishes this task.

**Rachel Bzostek** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of California at Bakersfield.

Norton, Augustus Richard. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Since its inception following the 1982 occupation of southern Lebanon by Israel, *Hezbollah* has been the center of considerable controversy. At various times and to various people, *Hezbollah* has played the role of a terrorist organization, a guerrilla group resisting occupation, a charity organization providing medical and social support for the disenfranchised, and a political party vying for support in a struggling democracy. *Hezbollah's* history is nuanced and a proper

understanding of the organization precludes placing it in any one of these simple categories.

Augustus Norton's *Hezbollah: A Short History* offers its readers a useful and accessible accounting of how *Hezbollah* came to power and the role it has played, not only in terms of political violence, but also with respect to Lebanese politics and society. The book is written for popular consumption and contains an interesting mix of history and social commentary, both colored by the author's extensive personal experience in the region. This book is precisely what its title professes it to be: a short history. Readers seeking a comprehensive history of *Hezbollah* will be disappointed, but readers with little or no prior knowledge of the group will find this a practical and comprehensible introduction

Norton provides his readers with a history more of *Hezbollah's* influence and influences than its acts. The first two chapters are dedicated to the emergence of *Hezbollah* in the context of the Lebanese civil war, religious tensions within Lebanese society, and the political pressures put upon Lebanon by its neighbors. Following a discussion of Shi'a Islam, Norton discusses *Hezbollah's* role in terrorism and political violence, particularly with regard to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and the period of pseudo-ceasefire along Lebanon's southern border between Israel's withdrawal in 2000 and the 2006 war. Norton then turns his attention to *Hezbollah's* role in Lebanese politics; he gives a good treatment of *Hezbollah's* electoral strategy and the array of social services *Hezbollah* provides (predominantly) for the Shi'a community. The discussion then moves to the tensions surrounding the 2006 war with Israel, the conflict itself, and *Hezbollah's* role in post-war reconstruction and politics.

While there are many laudable aspects of Norton's book, the greatest among these — in my opinion — is the book's general approach. It is easy, when writing about a group like *Hezbollah*, to devote what may turn out to be excessive attention to the political violence perpetrated by the group (indeed, that is what *Hezbollah* is best known for) at the cost of attention to important non-violent aspects of *Hezbollah's* organization. Here, Norton's approach shines. While Norton certainly explores *Hezbollah's* violence, this discussion comprises approximately a third of the book. Norton is careful to place *Hezbollah* in its appropriate historical, religious, and political contexts. For example, Norton dedicates an entire chapter to the practice of Shi'a Islam (the Islamic denomination to which *Hezbollah* subscribes) and the tug-of-war religion and politics play in Lebanese society.

My objections to this history are few, but two of them bear mentioning. First, acknowledging that it is difficult — when writing for popular consumption — to draw heavily on primary sources and existing literature without making one's writing vapid, I often could not help but feel like too much of the factual material presented drew either on what is (presumably) common historical knowledge, and thus not cited, or on Norton's personal experience. Often, I

found myself thinking “How does he know that?” For example, Norton writes:

*Hezbollah’s* example of military strength against Israel also galvanized Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. As in the past, when successful resistance in southern Lebanon helped to inspire Palestinian militants to wage their own uprising against Israel, pro-*Hezbollah* sentiment exploded in the Palestinian territories on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. (p. 149)

The evidence given following this quote consists of the sighting of pro-*Hezbollah* graffiti and an increase in viewership of the *Hezbollah*-run *al-Manar* television channel. Setting aside the fact that an increase in pro-*Hezbollah* sentiment does not necessarily imply a causal relationship between *Hezbollah’s* successes and an increase in Palestinian militancy, and if we assume graffiti and *al-Manar* viewership are good predictors of pro-*Hezbollah* sentiment throughout the Palestinian territories, one is still left wondering how much graffiti was seen and where, and no source is given for the increase in *al-Manar* viewership. So, while Norton’s observation is probably correct, I often found myself having to trust his assessment of a given situation more than a healthy skeptic would be comfortable with.

My second point of criticism is less important than my first, and it concerns the way Norton presents information. Throughout the text, readers are faced with the rather gratuitous (for a book addressing a broad audience) introduction of Arabic words which are rarely central to understanding the material and seldom, if ever, used again in the text. For example, knowing that *bidar* means “a field” (p. 64) or that *bi-ta`awun ma`a al-muqawama* means “in cooperation with the resistance” (p. 142 and never used again) adds little to the reader’s comprehension of *Hezbollah’s* history, unnecessarily complicates a number of passages, and this style of presentation — I fear — could alienate some readers.

These few shortcomings aside, Norton provides a concise and informative introduction to *Hezbollah’s* place in the history of armed conflict, Lebanese politics, and Lebanese society. The text is quite accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with *Hezbollah* and the region, and can be recommended for readers interested in those subjects.

**Skyler J. Cranmer** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.