



Hanin Ghaddar

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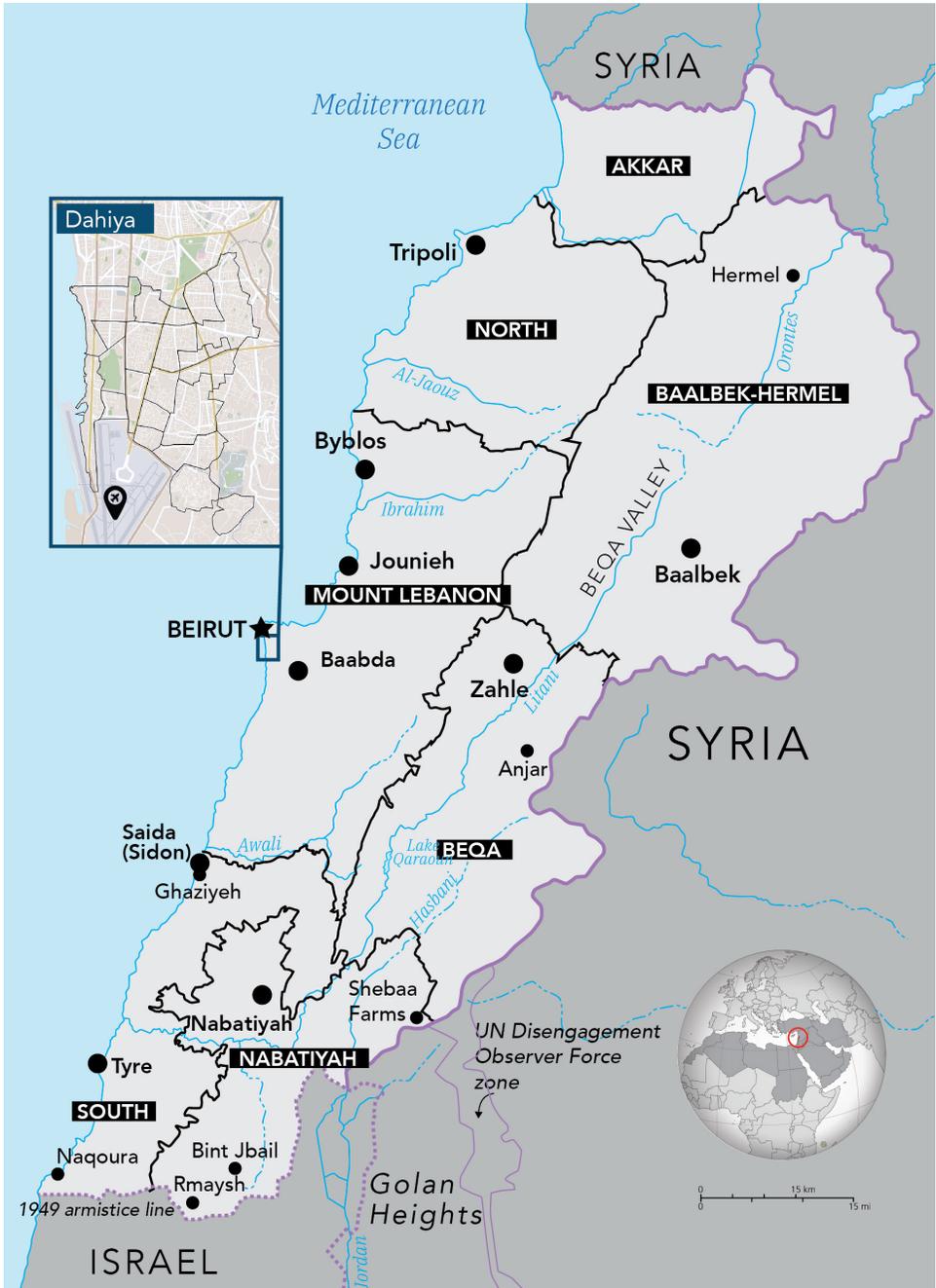
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Map of Lebanon



Contents

List of Illustrations	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Preface	viii
Methodology and Objectives	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Geographic Composition of Dahiya	5
3 Historical Background	15
4 Layers of the Lebanese Shia Community	29
5 Challenges to the Three Pillars of Hezbollah's Popular Support	52
6 Hezbollah's Eight Historical Stages and Relations with the Shia Community	63
7 Hezbollah's Shia Network Within State Institutions	90
8 The October 2019 Protests	97
9 Conclusion	108

Illustrations

2.1 Map: Geographic Composition of Dahiya	6
2.2 Map: Hezbollah's Prisons and Secret Detention Centers	9
2.3 Iran's Media City	12
4.1 Map: Najaf-Affiliated Institutions	34
4.2 Dahiya's Shia Community, Hezbollah Community, and Fighters	38
5.1 Visualizing Pillars of Popular Support for Hezbollah	53
6.1 Stages of Hezbollah	64
8.1 Protests in Lebanon, 2019–21	102

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Preface

Much literature about the Shia in Lebanon focuses on the role of Hezbollah in the country's security and political spheres. Reference to the broader Shia community is mainly an afterthought used to contextualize the larger political discussion—as if the people within this community had no agency, no history, no nuance. This framing works perfectly well for Lebanon's political parties, which prefer the image of a static, monolithic Shia community that they claim to represent.

In fact, Lebanon's Shia have long been misinterpreted in academic and policy circles. The community consists of multiple layers and conflicting identities that resist analysis through the usual security or theoretical lenses. Hezbollah really occupies only one layer, though it often overshadows others, owing to the group's international operations, terrorism, threatening rhetoric, and sponsorship by Iran. But the broader community's collective history, diverse identities, and varied attitudes toward politics can confound even Hezbollah's historically effective campaign for control.

Hezbollah has always sought to obscure layers within the Shia community, believing that the perception of homogeneity helps the group safeguard its legitimacy. Even today, the layers are largely confined to private spaces, with the public milieu reinforcing the group's preferred narrative. But those private spaces have been vibrant, rich with differences, debates, and aspirations for agency and uniqueness.

I grew up in these spaces. As a child of eight, I witnessed the Israeli invasion of 1982 in Ghaziyeh, my hometown in southern Lebanon, along with the establishment of Hezbollah, its growth, the group's "golden period" from 2000 to 2006, and eventually the emergence of its "resistance" narrative. Like many Shia in southern Lebanon, I lived the invasions, battles, and conflicts, and saw many of my peers drawn into the violence, their mothers struggling to conceal their fears and grief. The private spaces offered solace during the difficult times, but they also opened up the community to

doubts and reservations during these periods, eventually leading to a more collective, and sometimes public, discontent. Here a tension emerges in mothers' public pride in their sons' sacrifice versus a far more vulnerable, fragile, human response in private.

For me, researching and writing about the Shia community and Hezbollah is as much a personal undertaking as it is a vocation. From a personal standpoint, growing up in these spaces provided a level of insight simply unavailable from scholarly or journalistic experience. I once saw, to give an example, a female Hezbollah member shred a picture of Iran's late Ayatollah Khomeini, which had been on her living room wall, when her husband cited him as an excuse to forbid her from traveling to the city.

I come from more than one world—my Shia background, the cosmopolitan, Westernized milieu of Beirut, and the American University of Beirut, where I studied English literature (BA) and Middle Eastern studies (MA). In Lebanon, I worked as a journalist and editor for a number of newspapers (*al-Safir*, *an-Nahar*, and *NOW Lebanon*, where I edited the website). My current career in Washington DC as an English-language writer and analyst and my personal life as a Lebanese woman are at once intertwined and in conflict, but I have encountered similarly tangled, conflicting identities in most Shia people I have interviewed.

It is not enough to be a Shia to know the Shia, a close friend once told me, and there is great wisdom in this. Being a Shia helps, of course. It has helped inform my research in immeasurable ways. I know the culture, the rites and ceremonies, the fears and uncertainties, and the political shifts at the core of identity and daily life. Yet even as the Shia experience is deep in my psyche, I'm not sure if it's still in my blood, and this is because of my secular beliefs.

I do not identify as a Shia, but many of my interviews with Dahiya residents would never have happened, or would have proceeded less easily, if the interviewees did not see me as "one of them." Many Shia opened up in ways they would only have done in the private spaces of the community. Given the familial character of my country and its deeply rooted sectarian mindset, I was, for many, a Shia no matter my political opinions or secular self-expression. This dynamic forced me to work especially hard to maintain

professional distance, even as it ultimately enriched my findings. As one interviewee put it to me the moment he heard my last name: “You are from Ghaziyeh!? You are from the South. You know everything. Why are you asking questions?”

Methodology and Objectives

The research behind this work is based on four types of sources:

- Interviews with 176 Lebanese Shia, including dissidents, religious figures, leftists, and former Communist Party members, as well as supporters, members, fighters, and commanders of Hezbollah. These interviews were conducted in Lebanon, mostly in Beirut and its southern suburbs (Dahiya)—with follow-up interviews via phone and Skype—between 2012 and 2021.
- Personal observations and several visits to Dahiya, its neighborhoods, and a number of households.
- Study of academic and journalistic sources on Hezbollah and the Shia community.
- Conversations with officials and policy experts in both Lebanon and the United States.

The goals of the study are twofold:

- To challenge the thinking that underlies much of U.S. policy toward Lebanon and Hezbollah—that is, that the Shia community is a solid bloc in support of the Shia group.¹ Understanding the nuances of this misconception, which Hezbollah has long promoted and benefited from, can help shape a better policy toward Hezbollah and Lebanon.
- To analyze the diverse Shia community—away from Hezbollah’s influence and attempts to benefit from engagement and assistance—in an effort to inform a policy aimed at containing the group. Such a policy, which should also seek to counter Iran’s soft-power initiatives in Lebanon, will require an outside-the-box approach that favors long-term strategies and incorporation of new tools.

Notes

- 1 A condensed version of the anti-Hezbollah policy argument was published in Hanin Ghaddar, *A Strategy to Contain Hezbollah: Ideas and Recommendations*, Policy Note 109 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2021), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/strategy-contain-hezbollah-ideas-and-recommendations>.

1

Introduction

On the way from central Beirut to Rafic Hariri International Airport—whether you are traveling to the airport itself or to the South of Lebanon—you will pass through the suburb of Dahiya, the capital of Beirut’s Shia community. But in reality, if you stay on the main highway, you can avoid seeing Dahiya and almost forget that you are in the midst of Hezbollah’s stronghold. The New Airport Highway, built after the Lebanese civil war, skirts Dahiya, allowing passersby to feel the power and presence of Hezbollah without comprehending the community for what it is—multiple layers of clashing and besieged identities, a set of dynamics that often constitutes Hezbollah’s major internal challenge.

Astride the highway, you will see enormous posters of Iran’s late Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and current Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, along with smaller posters of Hezbollah fighters killed in battle—mostly in Syria. These offer a feel for what lies on the other side of the highway—the base for Hezbollah’s constituency, military power, and ideological strength—and the images will accompany you all the way to the Israeli border. Many Lebanese residents and visitors alike have driven on this highway at least once, but very few have actually been to Dahiya.

This is by design. Hezbollah has implemented a strategy of concealing Dahiya over decades. The aim is to isolate Dahiya’s Shia community from

other communities in Lebanon, a strategy that has often played in Hezbollah's favor, enhancing its control over the Shia community in Lebanon. Through services, indoctrination, education, and cultural initiatives, Hezbollah has ensured that very few Shia are exposed to Lebanon's other cultural and social practices. Indeed, many who reside behind the highway walls have no need to travel elsewhere in Lebanon, except to other Shia locales in the South or the Beqa Valley, because most Dahiya residents originally come from those rural areas and have family or property there.

Around the Kuwaiti embassy is another highway, running perpendicular to the airport road. It is called the Hadi Nasrallah Highway—named after Hassan Nasrallah's son who was allegedly killed in 1997 during a military operation targeting the Israel Defense Forces. This road, whether you take it west or east, connects you to the heart of Dahiya. Except for residents of Dahiya, very few venture here.

Tack west, and you enter Bir Hassan, a relatively well-off residential and commercial area that hosts the Iranian embassy as well as a number of Hezbollah officials and their families. To the east, you immediately enter the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camp, which is remembered grimly as the site of a 1982 massacre carried out by a Lebanese Christian militia. But the camp is no longer "Palestinian" per se, now hosting a vast number of Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese families in addition to the poorest foreign workers, such as Sudanese and Egyptians.

Only the Hadi Nasrallah Highway separates the poorest parts of Dahiya from the richest, but the highway was intentionally designed to maintain the sharp socioeconomic divide among the Shia themselves.

Traveling south within Dahiya, you notice the streets narrowing, your perception of space shifting. The neighborhoods become crowded, poverty-stricken, and dark. Drive even further south to Hay al-Sellom, and the warrens are so narrow you will have to leave your vehicle and continue by foot.

The deeper you go into these derelict neighborhoods, the more posters you encounter of Hezbollah "martyrs" decorating the walls. More women in black. More mourning. And the very air heavier than what you breathed just a few minutes ago in Hay Madi in Haret Hreik. Presently, you feel you have entered the Syrian war arena. On the old, pocked walls, you see stained

pictures of young men smiling for a long-ago camera, their visages fading. Their friends and families were told they died defending Lebanon and the Shia shrines in Damascus and other parts of Syria. That they were killed in Aleppo and Idlib in defense of the “resistance.”

Much of Dahiya is similarly divided—by roads, streets, checkpoints, and sometimes walls. These divisions have only increased as the gap widens between rich and poor and as Hezbollah tries to guard itself against growing Shia discontent. Indeed, the financial crisis afflicting Lebanon and Hezbollah, political discontent, Covid-19 restrictions and repercussions, and the implications of Hezbollah’s growing regional role have all fueled a sharp rise in Shia discontent toward the group and its allies—namely Amal, the other Shia party.¹

The Shia community presents Hezbollah with multiple, increasingly complicated challenges that are snowballing as the group gets more entrenched in its regional roles. This said, Hezbollah has been relatively successful not only in keeping the Shia community isolated from external influence—and even assistance—but also in ensuring that expressions of unhappiness stay contained behind the highway walls.

The purpose of this study is to peel back these layers that dwell behind the walls, and to explore the complexity of Dahiya, especially with regard to relations between the Shia community and Hezbollah. But this work is not only about Dahiya. Rather, this southern Beirut suburb can be regarded as a microcosm of Lebanon’s Shia community—in that it hosts Shia from all regions and social milieus—and Hezbollah’s base. In Dahiya, the relationship between Hezbollah and the Shia community is magnified, transformations are experienced with greater intensity, and dynamics among its layers are more apparent.

This work, then, is about Shia-Hezbollah dynamics throughout Lebanon—as they are represented in Dahiya. Dahiya has always been perceived as an isolated, closed-off, and sometimes shadowy place. Thus, attempting to penetrate its layers and explore its diverse identities is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of the Shia community and informing better policy solutions for outside actors aiming to lift Lebanon from its current misery.

Notes

- 1 See “Amal,” U.S. Library of Congress, available at <http://countrystudies.us/lebanon/88.htm>.

2

Geographic Composition of Dahiya

The population of Dahiya is estimated to be between 750,000 and 1 million, with 53 percent originally from the South, 21 percent from the Beqa Valley (mostly members of area clans), 14 percent from Beirut, and only 12 percent from Mount Lebanon governorate, of which Dahiya is a part.¹

The many neighborhoods of Dahiya are accommodated by five main districts:

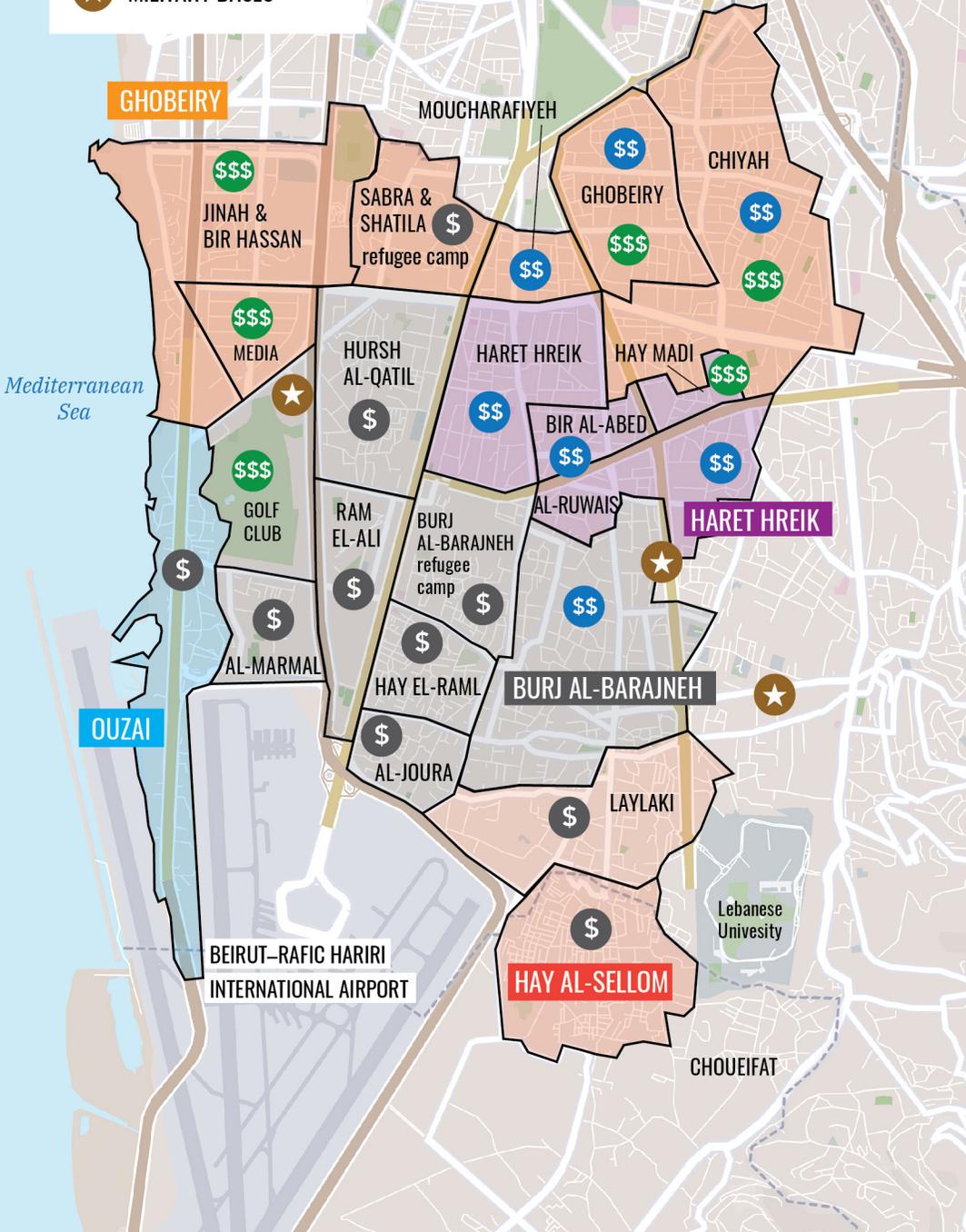
GHOBEIRY. Most of the original inhabitants of Dahiya live in Ghobeiry, which today has around 200,000 residents and is considered the posh district. Most rich and upper-middle-class Shia reside there, including high-ranking Hezbollah officials and members of the business community.

BURJ AL-BARAJNEH. This is a less well-off area whose residents are separated from Ghobeiry by the only golf club in Lebanon.² Officially located in Burj al-Barajneh but more accessible from Ghobeiry, the Golf Club of Lebanon is a prestigious, elite institution that requires societal connections and expensive membership fees. In addition, most of Dahiya's official and private schools are located in the Burj, which is considered a mixed residential and commercial district.

HARET HREIK. Hezbollah's heart, Haret Hreik has a population of around 250,000 and once included most of the group's political, religious, and cultural institutions. After the 2006 war with Israel—and especially after 2012, when Hezbollah started its strategic and budgetary shifts toward the

DAHIYA DEMOGRAPHICS

- 🇸 POOR
- 🇸🇸 MIDDLE CLASS
- 🇸🇸🇸 RICH
- ★ MILITARY BASES



Syrian war—many of these entities were closed or relocated. Iran’s various offices and buildings are also located in this neighborhood. Such institutions include the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation and the offices of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other Iranian and Iraqi Shia religious authorities, such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Ahl al-Bait publishing house.

HAY AL-SELLOM. The poorest district in Dahiya, Hay al-Sellom and the adjacent Laylaki are regarded as the slums, with 250,000 residents living in a condensed area of four and a half square kilometers. Most residents are originally from the Baalbek-Hermel clans in the Beqa, and moved to Dahiya owing to economic hardship. After the Syrian crisis, many Syrian refugees settled in this area because of its cheap rents.

OUZAI. This area, home to luxurious beach resorts before the Lebanese civil war, is now one of Dahiya’s poorest districts. During the war and for some time after, residents took advantage of Ouzai’s position on the road from the South to Beirut; thus, it became known for its small, chaotically built shops along the highway that sold cheap products such as furniture and home goods. When the new highway was constructed and drivers could avoid Ouzai’s traffic, the area suffered.

Economic Divides

Dahiya is divided, a reality vividly illustrated by the real estate market, with costs in the wealthier Jinah area dwarfing those in the less prosperous Haret Hreik and Chiyah³ In addition to Hezbollah’s resources and services, many Dahiya families depend on public-sector jobs—through the prevailing practice of clientelism—and the money transfers of Shia expatriates, whose families mostly reside in rich and middle-class neighborhoods. The remaining residents are owners and employees of Dahiya’s small businesses, most of which are not registered publicly and whose employees therefore lack protection from state laws or social security.

Throughout the years, the number of university graduates in Dahiya has

increased, predominantly in middle-class and rich areas. This increase has created new dynamics that have raised not only income but also expectations. Most of these graduates—those who have not left Lebanon, that is—are competing for a dwindling supply of job opportunities and services. Unemployment is on the rise, as is overpopulation.

Economic gaps are expected to widen. Dahiya's poorer districts will become even more crowded, and real estate prices in both rich and poor areas will increase. Initially, Dahiya was supposed to house no more than 100,000 people; with the influx of incomers from the South and the Beqa, however, it was developed to house around 150,000 people. Today, Dahiya is inhabited by 750,000 to 1,000,000 residents, all of whom are competing for real estate, services, and resources. Such scarcity and competition over resources—in addition to increased poverty and Hezbollah's shifting priorities, which affect its service networks—could lead to more chaos, crime, and internal clashes among Dahiya residents.

A Parallel State Structure

Despite the presence of municipalities and municipal services, these—like larger state institutions—are superficial and inefficient, serving as a kind of smokescreen for Hezbollah's stronger and more efficient parallel state structure. The military framework of this state is very well covered in scholarly literature and the media. And it is true that Hezbollah is a military group that uses military power to enforce its agenda and protect Iran's interests in Lebanon. But Hezbollah is much more than an army.

Hezbollah's military power is based on a wider structure that functions as a parallel state. Hospitals, schools, and other social entities are the more apparent institutions, which Hezbollah promotes to show its charitable side. The other part of Hezbollah's structure—such as its prisons, police force, and intelligence units—remains hidden.

News about Dahiya's prisons broke when sisters Amal and Mona Shamas managed to escape from a Dahiya prison in 2015—after being arrested for taking videos of a fire that erupted next to a Hezbollah center. In an interview

at their home in Dahiya, the sisters said the fact that they belonged to one of the big Shia clans in Lebanon saved them from assassination.⁴

In 2018, Hussein Mazloum, son of a late high-ranking Hezbollah official, accused the group of building a number of secret detention centers, away

Figure 2.2. Hezbollah’s Prisons and Secret Detention Centers



from the Lebanese government's watch, saying that he was detained in one of these centers for nine months. Mazloum, also known as al-Hajj Wala, leaked pictures showing what he alleged were entrances to the secret Hezbollah prisons, saying he was subjected to the "worst forms of torture and humiliation" during his time there.⁵

According to Mazloum, the most prominent of Hezbollah's secret detention centers are the central prison in Haret Hreik, behind the Bahman hospital (Iranian Hospital), and the Bir al-Abed prison behind the Islamic Cooperation Center. Hezbollah also runs another investigation center near the al-Qaim compound and the Mujtaba compound prison behind Hezbollah's al-Manar TV channel headquarters.

Hezbollah has also built a parallel banking sector—embodied in the firm al-Qard al-Hassan—that was sanctioned by the United States in 2016 and again in 2021. When Lebanese banks began limiting the withdrawal of U.S. dollars in October 2019, many depositors decided to take out as many dollars as they could. Since then, Lebanese residents have withdrawn an estimated \$6 billion in cash from banks, and Hezbollah has sought to benefit from this unofficial public cash reserve. Among other tactics, the group has encouraged people to use its financial institutions to exchange and deposit their money—especially al-Qard al-Hassan, which has become Hezbollah's main money exchanger and the default bank replacement for its Shia constituency.

In 2020, al-Qard al-Hassan installed ATMs at its branches in Dahiya, reportedly allowing locals to receive cash payments and loan money from Hezbollah without the restrictions seen at other banks. The foundation is not a bank or financial institution, so it does not receive money from the central bank or any other official state organ. This arrangement allows it to set its own rules, cut its own deals, and otherwise boost Hezbollah's parallel economy and financial structure. Down the road, Hezbollah hopes to regain access to hard currency, particularly the large cash deliveries Tehran used to make before sanctions. If and when that happens, the group aims to be the only party in Lebanon with substantial amounts of U.S. dollars, thereby transforming al-Qard al-Hassan into the country's only viable banking system.

Iran's Media City

Beirut has proved ideal for hosting Iran's Arab media headquarters. Because of Hezbollah's impressive logistical capabilities and specialized personnel, Iran can broadcast from Lebanon without a license. Hezbollah's increasing control of state institutions allows it to work illegally on many levels, from smuggling operations to drug production and broadcasting, thereby saving money and avoiding all kinds of state reporting.

Supported by the thousands of Hezbollah-funded and managed institutions that employ soft-power tools—e.g., religious, health, educational, and social associations—many Iran-funded media outlets have recently moved to Dahiya. In addition to al-Manar TV and al-Nour (Hezbollah's radio station) and dozens of print and online newspapers, Iran opened headquarters and branches for virtually every outlet in its Arab media structure. These institutions, which cater to Shia communities in the Arab world, are directed by the Cultural Center for the Islamic Republic of Iran in Beirut and managed primarily by Hezbollah.

These offices and studios are based in what residents refer to as Iran's "media city," located just a block away from the Iranian embassy in the Bir Hassan–Jinah neighborhood, in a compound closed off and guarded by armed Hezbollah operatives. In addition to Iran's al-Alam and Press TV,⁶ many smaller and more specialized channels operate from this compound, including al-Lualua TV, catering to Bahraini Shia; al-Etejah, for Iraqi Shia; al-Naba, for Saudi Shia; Hamas's al-Quds; and Islamic Jihad's Palestine Today, among others.⁷

When recent conflicts started in strategic countries where Iran is involved, such as Yemen and Syria, Iran decided to invest in additional channels. The al-Sahat and al-Masirah TV stations were established to cover news and developments in Yemen, while al-Alam Syria opened many branches in the country. Before U.S. sanctions crippled Iran's finances, more than fifty television and radio channels were operating from Dahiya, employing thousands and broadcasting to millions. In addition to its traditional media outlets, Hezbollah operates a massive social media army from the area. Likewise in the media city, Iran has recently employed and trained Hezbollah

Figure 2.3. Iran's Media City



*Actual location is near al-Manar.

operatives in cyber tools and hacking; these individuals coordinate with the social media units to organize and implement social media campaigns and attacks.⁸

Iran's media city in Dahiya, like many Iranian institutions in Lebanon, has experienced budgetary shifts. Some small, nonessential channels closed, while a few moved to cheaper locales such as Damascus.⁹ The plan was to move the entire media city to Damascus, but two factors reversed that decision: (1) the fear of Israeli attacks on Iranian facilities in Syria and (2) the inability to move all specialized media employees from Beirut to Damascus for both security and personnel-related reasons.¹⁰

Iran was expanding its media empire in Dahiya just as many Lebanese media institutions were trying to stay afloat. Indeed, many failed to do so. As Iran hired fresh graduates and paid them in U.S. dollars, traditional TV channels and newspapers were shutting down or firing their employees. In recent years, the *al-Safir* newspaper and Hariri-owned al-Mustaqbal TV channel closed, while *an-Nahar* fired many employees and made substantial pay cuts. Many other independent and anti-Hezbollah institutions lost their funding and had to close.

Maintaining media city in Dahiya is costly, and recent pay cuts mean many employees are not being paid on time or in full. Hezbollah's financial crisis could continue, which would spell additional challenges for media city. That said, media city is still better off than most other media institutions in Lebanon.

Notes

- 1 Muhammad Wahba, “The Conditions of Dahiya: The Class Contradiction Within the Sect’s Walls” (in Arabic), *Khiyam*, August 20, 2013, <http://www.khiyam.com/news/article.php?articleID=15801>.
- 2 James Montague, “Lebanon Golf Club: From War to Recovery,” CNN, December 13, 2010, <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/SPORT/golf/10/22/golf.lebanon.club.hezbollah/index.html>.
- 3 To browse disparities in real estate prices, see for Jinah, <https://www.3akarat.net/real-estate-apartments-For-Sale-jnah-beirut-beirut-lebanon-16014.realestate>; Haret Hreik, <https://www.3akarat.net/real-estate-apartments-For-Sale-haret-hreik-baabda-mount-lebanon-lebanon-15739.realestate>; and Chiyah, <https://www.olx.com.lb/ad/apartment-for-sale-beirut-165-m-170000-cach-ID7CIYW.html>.
- 4 Amal Shamas and Mona Shamas, interview by author, Dahiya, Lebanon, June 7, 2015.
- 5 “Hezbollah’s Secret Prisons: Five in Residential Areas, Getting Creative with Torture” (in Arabic), *Al Arabiya*, October 1, 2019, updated May 20, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kj8e73>.
- 6 Al-Alam closed in 2017 for financial reasons.
- 7 Hassan Fahas, “Iran’s Media Empire from Tehran to Dahiya” (in Arabic), *Al Arabiya*, May 20, 2015, updated May 20, 2020, <https://bit.ly/36yB6jK>.
- 8 Ben Schaefer, “The Cyber Party of God: How Hezbollah Could Transform Cyberterrorism,” *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, March 11, 2018, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/03/11/the-cyber-party-of-god-how-hezbollah-could-transform-cyberterrorism/>.
- 9 Hala Ahmed Nasr, “Iran Is Moving Its Media City from Beirut to Damascus,” *Majalla*, November 30, 2018, <https://eng.majalla.com/node/48361/majalla-exclusive-iran-is-moving-its-media-city-from-beirut-to-damascus>.
- 10 Hezbollah fighter, interview by author, Beirut, May 2017.

3

Historical Background

To understand the current state of the Lebanese Shia community, one must step back and examine its collective history and memory—a history marked by violence and a sense of victimhood. It is also a history of merged identities and political uniqueness. This narrative has led to a Shia identity today that both conflicts and overlaps with other Shia communities in the region.

According to the Lebanese historian Saadoun Hamadeh, Lebanese Shia were not, like other communities, migrants to Lebanon from elsewhere in the region but rather part of the area's pre-Islamic settlement.¹ They converted to Shia Islam with the arrival of Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, a companion of the Prophet and partisan of Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb. The Shia presence in Lebanon—and in Greater Syria as a whole—was extensive during the twelfth century, but later diminished because of religious persecution by Sunni rulers. Between 1291 and 1305, following their successful war against the remnant Crusader states in the Levant, the Mamluks of Egypt drove out the Shia in three campaigns, the third of which was endorsed by a fatwa of the Hanbalite jurist Ibn Taymiyyah.

From the seventeenth century onward, during the Ottoman period, the Shia were gradually ousted from Keserwan in northern Lebanon, moving to Jabal Amel (in the South) and later to the Beqa. In the same century, the Shia feudal dynasty was established by Ali al-Saghir after the Ottomans executed Druze leader Fakhr al-Din II. The Shia dynasty met its brutal end in 1781, when the forces of Ottoman governor of Acre Ahmad Jazzar Pasha

killed Shia feudal lords and their cavalrymen in the famous Battle of Yaroun, officially ending Shia autonomy in Jabal Amel. Jazzar's purge also targeted notable Shia scholars and institutions.

Religious scholars have always been a vital part of Shia politics. For example, Nur-al-Din Karaki Ameli (1465–1534) played a significant role in fostering relations between Safavid secular leaders and Shia clerics. He even started an emigration movement of Shia scholars—of the first two Safavid shahs, Ismail I (r. 1501–24) and Tahmasp I (r. 1524–76)—from Jabal Amel to Persia.²

After the attacks of Jazzar Pasha, aspiring Shia scholars from Jabal Amel focused on their studies. Many left for Najaf, while others returned to Lebanon to open schools. The first school in a Shia area was opened in Nabatiyah in 1884, with a curriculum based on the Najafi Shia scholarly tradition. Several famous Shia scholars and politicians attended this school, including Ahmad Reza, Solayman Zaher, Ahmad Aref Zayn, and Mohammad Jaber al-Safa.³ In 1909, Ahmad Aref Zayn founded *al-Irfan*, an intellectual, political, and cultural review that gave voice to its founder's reformist and modernist ideas and provided a forum for debate among scholars.

In May 1920, during the French Mandate in Lebanon, Shia scholars and political leaders gathered at Wadi al-Hojayr, the geographic center of Jabal Amel, where they formed an alliance with King Faisal's Syria—a decision that put them in conflict with Lebanon's Christians and led to armed fighting. The Shia rebellion was eventually crushed by the French, after which both Jabal Amel and the Beqa were joined together with Mount Lebanon to form the State of Greater Lebanon in September 1920. Five years later, fearing the Shia would join the Druze anti-French rebellion, the French granted the Shia their own jurisdiction—based on the Jafari (Shia) law—so that they could apply their own laws in their own tribunals.

From the 1930s onward, a new generation of Western-educated individuals began to participate in political life in Lebanon.⁴ Rebellious sentiments against the French mandate, traditional Shia notables, and religious institutions grew stronger, ultimately coalescing as a Shia call for social justice and the reform of state institutions.

When Lebanon became officially independent in 1943, an unwritten

agreement by Christians and Sunnis, the National Pact, complemented the constitution and stipulated that the president of the republic be a Maronite Christian and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim. The Shia did not join.⁵ Four years later, however—in 1947—the custom emerged that the speaker of the house be a Shia.

When in 1959 Imam Musa al-Sadr (1928–78) was appointed president of the Jafari court of justice in Tyre, the politicization of Lebanon's Shia community commenced, as measured by a growing sense of sectarian-based identity, political awareness, and participation. Sadr, who belonged to the Persian branch of the Sadr family from Jabal Amel, had studied religion at both Qom and Najaf. He settled in Lebanon at a time when its Shia youth were tempted by nationalist ideologies—including Nasserism, Baathism, and Marxism—and as a new political and financial elite was surfacing, supported by affluent Shia in Africa and the Americas. Sadr's mission was to unite Lebanon's Shia under their shared sectarian and ethnic identity. By highlighting the Shia identity in his political work, Sadr eventually laid the perfect foundation for Hezbollah, which—after Sadr's disappearance in 1978—worked hard to move the Lebanese Shia identity of Sadr in alignment with Iran.

Hezbollah Enters the Shia Scene

Since its initiation in 1982, Hezbollah has sought to preserve the collective memory of the Shia and the many layers of their multifaceted identity. Indeed, the group—instead of trying to erase past Shia identities—worked to integrate them under *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurisprudent, the system followed in the Islamic Republic of Iran). This process, however, has forced Hezbollah to reconcile several competing identities, and thereby to change its rhetoric and policies over time. Hezbollah's leadership has also had to navigate political and security shifts in Lebanon and the region as a whole. Accordingly, Hezbollah's relations with the Lebanese Shia community have also been transformed, and they continue to change as Hezbollah adjusts its policies and priorities in the Middle East and inside Lebanon.

Throughout these shifts, the Shia community's social and political perspectives vis-à-vis Hezbollah have fluctuated, and support for the group has contracted or expanded according to its ability to assuage growing concerns. Hezbollah has made tremendous efforts to maintain its public support; however, as the group's role in the region has expanded, and as its status in Lebanon has changed, social, economic, and political challenges have transformed the Shia community in a number of ways.

Most of these prospects could be attributed to the nuances of the Shia community and to its shifting views on Hezbollah. Indeed, the Shia community is not a singular entity with one uniform perspective. It has been politicized and divided many times; the residues of these political phases have left major gaps that Hezbollah—and other political parties in the past—have failed to fill.

Lebanon's Shia community has been transformed since Lebanon's independence from a largely rural population dominated by a handful of elite families—originally from the South and the Beqa region—to a sectarian force whose newfound power stems from the emergence of Shia political parties, most notably Hezbollah. But this transformation was abrupt; its foundations were laid hastily, and the sense of collective community history faded. Thus, there is no singular Shia tradition today; rather, multiple individual and group identities coexist within the community.

Political Shiism—or the process by which the Shia community became politicized—came about because of two major transformations in the region: (1) the collapse of Arab nationalism and (2) the commencement of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979 and the establishment of the first Shia state. Arab nationalism was, in a way, anti-Shia, in that Arab Shia felt they were included in the movement only if they identified themselves as secular Arabs. Eventually, however, the exclusion of Shia from such a powerful national identity made them more vulnerable to the narrative of Iran's Islamic Revolution. The ideological nature of the Islamic Revolution was a basis for its expansion to many Arab states with Shia communities, but the revolution was focused on the Lebanese Shia for four reasons:

- Lebanon serves as a hub for Iran's fight against Israel. Lebanon not only shares a border with Israel; it also has been involved in

anti-Israel operations, which started with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon and were eventually appropriated by Hezbollah.

- The Lebanese Shia—unlike the Iraqi Shia—do not have an umbrella institution like Najaf that encompasses their political and religious practices. Rather, the nature of the Lebanese system and the chaos caused by the Lebanese civil war led to an environment characterized by greater freedom of political thought and action.
- The Lebanese Shia have been politicized since Musa al-Sadr founded the first Shia political movement, *Harakat al-Mahrumin*, in the 1970s.⁶ During the movement, Sadr managed to move the weight of popular Shia political support from the hegemony of certain families (e.g., al-Asaad, Hamadeh, Khalil, al-Zein) and the various Lebanese leftist and secular parties to the Shia religious institution. According to the late Lebanese scholar and writer Fouad Ajami, the “‘Shia journey out of self-contempt and political quiescence’ began in 1959 when the Iranian-born cleric Musa al-Sadr arrived as the religious mufti, or judge, in the southern Lebanese city of Tyre.”⁷
- Both the civil war in Lebanon, during which Sadr was kidnapped, and the marginalization of Shias by Lebanese state institutions exposed the community to the influence of the Iranian regime.

As the community became more politicized in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many Iranian revolutionaries arrived in Lebanon, where they established relations with Lebanese and Palestinians (the latter through the PLO). Iranian figures like Mostafa Chamran played a key role.⁸

The politicization of the community occurred as the Shia started to become aware of their marginalization. When President Fouad Chehab began his development initiatives in Lebanon in 1963, the government discovered that of 452 towns and villages in the South—home to 400,000 residents—250 had no access to water, and only 7 had access to electricity. The government

also discovered that half of the children under age six did not go to school, and that high schools barely existed. A major reason behind such lack of advancement is that the South, which constitutes 20 percent of Lebanon's population, receives only 1 percent of the country's public funding.⁹

According to a number of studies conducted before the civil war of 1975,¹⁰ only 21 percent of Shia were literate, compared to 73 percent of the rest of the population.¹¹ In his 1968 study, Michael Hudson found that in the two regions where Shia predominate, the Beqa Valley and the South, only 13 percent of Shia students attended secondary schools.¹² This figure was at least five points lower than for all other branches in Lebanon's secondary schools. In 1971, only 6.6 percent of Lebanon's Shia had a secondary education, compared to 15 percent of Sunni Muslims and 17 percent of Christians.¹³

Although Chehab's development plan increased the number of schools in the South, as well as access to water, electricity, and other services, these improvements were not enough for the new generation of Shia, who preferred to migrate to the city to study and work. Many moved to Dahiya and its surrounding areas; indeed, it is estimated that by 1975—that is, at the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon—around 315,000 Shia had moved to Beirut, constituting around one-third of the capital's population.

From Traditional Shia Leadership to Iranian Soft Power

Against this backdrop, many Shia religious figures came to Lebanon from Najaf and later Qom. The first was Musa al-Sadr, who arrived in Lebanon in 1959. Two prominent figures followed Sadr: Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah¹⁴ and Sayyed Mohammad Mahdi Shamseddine,¹⁵ both Lebanese scholars who studied in Najaf. Together, these three founded the Higher Islamic Shia Council and began the process of politicizing the Shia community.

The differences among the three personalities were noticeable. Fadlallah wanted to advance a global Islamic narrative, with Lebanon at its core.¹⁶ Shamseddine wanted to connect Shia jurisprudence to other systems of

Islamic thought in the region. Sadr aimed at politicizing the Shia community by highlighting its political demands and expanding its role in and access to state institutions. Among the three, only Fadlallah was a *marja*, the most senior rank in the Shia clerical hierarchy.¹⁷ According to the Lebanese political scientist Waddah Sharara—from a notable family and son of a Shia cleric—Sadr had two missions. The first was a public mission that highlighted an overarching Lebanese identity. The second was a hidden mission that advanced Shia politicization and established ties with other Shia movements in the region, mainly in Iraq and Iran. In a way, Sadr paved the way for Hezbollah, which took advantage of Sadr's network of relations from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as his efforts to politicize and unite the Shia under the umbrella of the Amal Party and the Higher Islamic Shia Council.

Hezbollah took this strategy in a different direction when Sadr disappeared,¹⁸ linking the Shia to *velayat-e faqih* in Iran. To ensure Sadr's influence was suppressed, Hezbollah had to weaken another Shia political leader, Nabih Berri, Sadr's Amal Party successor. Between 1985 and 1990, Hezbollah and Amal engaged in the Battle of the Brothers,¹⁹ which eventually inflicted many casualties among the latter's leadership and forces. Meanwhile, pro-Palestinian, leftist, and communist groups attracted many young Shia, whose members had constituted only 8 percent of Lebanese university students in the mid-1970s.

The ideology of the Shia identity—manifest today in Hezbollah—has its roots in three main events: the assassination of Kamal Jumblatt in 1977, which drastically weakened the unity of the leftist groups; the disappearance of Sadr in 1978; and the rise of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. As most of the leftist Shia, who were considered the fuel and the bulk of the leftist parties in the 1970s, felt the defeat of their project, Hezbollah emerged to fill that gap—politically, ideologically, and economically.

Because of these various community transformations, the Shia residing in Dahiya were not a coherent group. Most of Dahiya's current Shia residents arrived in the 1970s and 1980s. More than fifty thousand people moved to Dahiya from the Christian areas of East Beirut after the civil war, while almost all the rest moved from the South after the Israeli invasion of 1982 and the

conflicts that followed. Still others came from the Beqa Valley for purely economic reasons. The resulting populace was incoherent, disorganized, and vanquished—with no state protection or clear political vision. Thus, it took a while for the community to settle and put down roots.

Hezbollah was born within this context. Unlike other groups and parties within the Shia community, the group had organized, structured institutions, financial resources, and a unified army. It also had an objective—resistance—that many Shia sympathized with, particularly those fleeing the South of Lebanon because of conflicts with Israel.

Hezbollah presented itself as the leader and obvious representative of the Shia community, but not in the traditional way that has historically alienated the Shia. The group abandoned the tradition of political inheritance that was common among feudal families such as al-Asaad and Hamadeh, working instead through institutionalized systems. Beyond building a robust army and developing weapons, Hezbollah focused first and foremost on soft-power programs to build roots within the community and earn long-lasting support. The group worked directly with the people and had representatives in every Shia city, town, and village. Hezbollah focused on family dynamics, sponsored marriages, and added its ideological touch to every cultural occasion, from Ashura to funerals and weddings.²⁰ It entrenched its narrative in every social and cultural practice and established a triangle of power within the community: one defined by *velayat-e faqih*,²¹ resistance,²² and Shia identity. The connection among these three points made it very difficult for a Shia to separate his or her identity and political aspirations from Iran's ideology and *velayat-e faqih*. Financial assistance and services only served to support this power triangle.

Despite its strong ideological narrative and religious rhetoric, Hezbollah has proved—through political and military practices—that it can be pragmatic and modify its policies in order to advance its interests in Lebanon and the greater region. For example, the group realized that the Lebanese people, including the Shia community, are uncomfortable with Hezbollah's original goal of creating an Islamic state in Lebanon similar to the current Islamic state in Iran. Although the group did not abandon the concept, Hezbollah stopped mentioning the idea in its political rhetoric. Such an approach

has become part of Hezbollah's nature as a political party, but it has not come without challenges to both its capacities and its public support. These pragmatic modifications to its policy have allowed Hezbollah to gradually move into the Lebanese political scene, first through parliament, then through the cabinet, and eventually through most state institutions. However, as Hezbollah's state within a state encompassed Lebanon and gradually became stronger and more resolute, Hezbollah became the authority—and the group's constituency started to see it as such.

The political and economic gaps that Hezbollah successfully filled in the 1980s have reopened because of the party's recent failures in Lebanon specifically and in the region more broadly. Today, the Shia community is more divided around Hezbollah and its role in Lebanon and the Middle East; such division is attributable to a number of factors that will be discussed further in this study. Indeed, the Shia community's diversity of perspective—even as it constitutes many challenges for Hezbollah—could be a solid basis for a policy that aspires to contain Hezbollah in Lebanon and the region at large.

Dahiya is, in a sense, the perfect microcosm of Lebanon's Shia community. The roots that Hezbollah has been putting down there for decades are withering, and the triangle of power is shaking. Its soft-power programs are being challenged, causing rifts among the Shia. Although Hezbollah is trying hard to keep the Shia community tightly unified around the group's goals, diverse views with regard to political affiliation, family structure, collective history, socioeconomic status, social identity, and attitude toward Hezbollah and Iran could ultimately undermine Hezbollah's influence.

Acknowledging such diversity is critical to understanding (1) how Shia individuals and groups vary in their reactions to events and (2) how those reactions have, over time, created a schism between Hezbollah and its support base. It is too early to say whether Lebanon's Shia community is ready to turn against Hezbollah, but there are signs of discontent as Hezbollah finds itself more cornered. Hezbollah's role as representative of Lebanon's Shia community—and indeed as the main decisionmaker in Lebanon—is no longer taken for granted by its constituency. Rather, this discontent and the various expressions of it, as well as small acts of rebellion, could serve to clarify Shia dynamics beyond traditional stereotypes of the community.

Why the Shia Community Matters for Hezbollah's Power

Hezbollah's maneuvers and pragmatism have often been based on the need to accommodate the support base that is the Shia community. Indeed, the group has proved repeatedly that it will make many sacrifices to maintain that support, one of the most important pillars of Hezbollah's power in Lebanon and the greater Middle East.

Hezbollah has spent significant resources and time to preserve its relationship with Lebanon's Shia community. In fact, most of the group's soft-power initiatives have focused on just that. For example, all social services, media initiatives, and cultural projects—all with the very clear aim of ideological and religious indoctrination—seek to expand Shia support for Hezbollah and its vision for Lebanon, thereby linking this community to the religious and political authority in Tehran, *velayat-e faqih*.

Ideally, Hezbollah prefers the support and allegiance of the Shia community over imposing its agenda by force. The group wants Shia loyalty, not fear—that is, the community's genuine commitment, not its submission—for both elections and military recruiting. Hezbollah needs the Shia to believe in the group's agenda, not to be forced into it.

The Shia community not only provides Hezbollah with votes during elections as well as influence within state institutions; it also constitutes the only source of dedicated, disciplined, and ideological fighters for Hezbollah's and Iran's wars in Lebanon and the greater Middle East. Without full loyalty and allegiance to Hezbollah's agenda and ideology, these fighters would not be willing to die for the noble calling of the "resistance." Over the years, Hezbollah has carefully constructed a fighter culture that celebrates (1) "martyrdom" as a desirable objective and (2) a sacred religious calling that only befits its own.²³ This culture resonates with the Shia community, whose collective memory celebrates the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Hussein—the Shia's third infallible Imam—in the seventh-century Battle of Karbala.

In addition to being an ideal source of loyal militants, Hezbollah exploits

certain elements of the Shia community in response to the group's own internal conflicts and clashes. One of Hezbollah's main internal tools is the Lebanese Resistance Brigades.²⁴ The group, a mix of Shia, Sunni, and Christian fighters, is separate from Hezbollah's fighting force and has its own leadership. These fighters are only used to crack down on internal Lebanese opponents—for example, during the events of May 7, 2008,²⁵ when Hezbollah seized large parts of Beirut and the Druze Mountains, located south and east of Beirut, and more recently, in October 2019, when Hezbollah authorized its supporters to use force against demonstrators during protests in Lebanon.²⁶

Hezbollah cannot afford to lose the support of the Shia community, but the past few years have shown that Hezbollah is facing multiple challenges in maintaining that support. It is a vicious cycle that is hard to break: The more disenchanted the Shia community becomes with Hezbollah's practices, the more difficult it is for Hezbollah to achieve its objectives. Conversely, the less capable Hezbollah becomes of achieving its objectives, the more disenchanted the Shia community becomes.

For example, the more the Shia complained about Hezbollah's fighters getting killed in Syria, the less successful Hezbollah's recruitment mechanisms were. In turn, unable to hire more disciplined and capable fighters, the group's performance in battle further declined. That said, discontent and opposition alone—if they do not lead to a unified political alternative—cannot contain Hezbollah from maintaining its authority and control, however much the Shia community might wish that were the case.

After a combination of economic and political failures experienced on behalf of Hezbollah, Lebanon's diverse, divided Shia community is open to change. The "cracks in the façade" offer a rare opportunity for policymakers to work with the Shia, helping them realize political and economic alternatives and reintegrate within Lebanon's political and social fabric. This opportunity is especially critical as Lebanon goes through a socioeconomic upheaval in the wake of the October 2019 protests and the ensuing years of political and economic crisis. Policymakers have a chance to communicate with the Shia community, away from Hezbollah, but they must do so with a deep understanding of the community's complexities.

Notes

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- 6 Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
- 7 Quoted in John Kifner, “Shiite Radicals: Rising Wrath Jars the Middle East,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/22/world/shiite-radicals-rising-wrath-jars-the-mideast.html>.
- 8 Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).
- 9 Kamal Dib, *Warlords and Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2004).
- 10 Sabah Dakroub, “Expansion of Shi'a Schools (1960–2009): Factors and Dynamics,” master's thesis, American University of Beirut, 2009.
- 11 Yves Schemeil, “Sociologie du System Politique au Liban,” PhD diss., Université de Grenoble II, 1976.
- 12 Michael Hudson, *The Precarious Republic: Political Modernization in Lebanon* (New York: Random House, 1968).
- 13 Riad B. Tabbarah, “Background to the Lebanese Conflict,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 20, no. 1–2 (March 1979): 109–22.
- 14 Mohammad Mahdi Shamseddine was born in 1936 in Najaf, Iraq, and studied at the Najaf seminary. In 1969, he returned to Lebanon and worked with Musa al-Sadr to establish the Supreme Islamic Shia Council of Lebanon, a body to which he was elected president in April 1994. Shamseddine was also deputy of the Musa al-Sadr

- Organization. He was known to be a moderate cleric and advocate of Christian-Muslim coexistence; see, e.g., Ayman Shrouf, “Political Shia in Lebanon, from Sadr to Nasrallah” (in Arabic), *Alhurra*, August 26, 2020, available at <https://arbne.ws/3icdabs>.
- 15 See, e.g., Thanassis Cambanis, “Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah, Shiite Cleric, Dies at 75,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/05/world/middleeast/05fadlallah.html>.
 - 16 During the early stages of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, Fadlallah tried to create a bridge between Iran’s new Islamic government and Lebanon’s Shia community. He was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s religious representative and the Islamic Revolution’s envoy to Lebanon, until he became more outspoken against *velayat-e faqih* in the late 2000s; see Robert L. Pollock, “A Dialogue with Lebanon’s Ayatollah,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123698785743625933>.
 - 17 By tradition, Shia adopt a *marja*, or religious guide, whose interpretations and rulings inform the individual’s practice. Fadlallah and the Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—both trained in the Iraqi city of Najaf and opposed to *velayat-e faqih*—are popular *maraji* among Shia, especially those opposed to or uncomfortable with Hezbollah’s ideology.
 - 18 Sadr disappeared in Libya in 1978 while visiting Libya’s ruler, Muammar Qadhafi. Sadr is believed to have been killed, and his remains have not appeared since the fall of Qadhafi’s regime in 2011. A number of books and interviews allude to the role of the Iranian regime in his disappearance. Most recent is Kai Bird’s *The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames* (New York: Broadway Books, 2014), about a senior CIA official who was killed in the October 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut.
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- 21 The idea of guardianship by an Islamic jurist (*faqih*) was advanced by Khomeini in a series of lectures in 1970 and now forms the basis of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
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- 26 Reuters, "Hezbollah Protesters Clash with Supporters of Hezbollah, Amal in Beirut," November 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests/lebanese-protesters-clash-with-supporters-of-hezbollah-amal-in-beirut-idUSKBN1XZ013>.

4

Layers of the Lebanese Shia Community

Like other Lebanese groups, the country's Shia have many layers. A number of identities—all represented in Dahiya and divided along political, cultural, and social lines—affect every Shia individual.

Clans vs. Families

Originating from Arab tribes in the region, the Shia clans of Lebanon were initially based between Tripoli and Beirut. Later, they moved to Lebanon's Beqa region, where they continue to reside.¹ Today's clans share the same ancestral roots—those of the Hamadiyah clan. Descending from the Hamadiyah are two main branches, the Shamas and the Zaiter. Within the Zaiter branch are the al-Miqdad, Haj Hassan, Noon, Shreif, and Jafar. Within the Shamas branch are the Allaw, Nassereddine, and Dandash. According to Saadoun Hamadeh, author of *The History of the Shia in Lebanon*, some eighty tribes lived in the country at its founding in 1943, but the figure today has fallen to between thirty and thirty-five.²

Clans have supported various Lebanese political parties over the years. Many backed Lebanese president Bechara El Khoury and his constitutional party in the 1940s, while the Nassereddines sided with the Christian Phalange Party during the civil war. Most of the time, though, the clans have kept to themselves—the majority did not fight in the civil war or even support the so-called Islamic resistance.

Historically, the relationship between the clans and the political parties has been shaky. Hamadeh, the historian of Shia in Lebanon, explains, “The

clans abide by certain rules that they themselves have created, and have their own judge to look over their feuds. The state does not get involved, and political parties are encouraged to stay out. Religion is secondary to blood lines.”³

After its war with Amal in the 1980s, Hezbollah gained acceptance from most Shia families across Lebanon; it also garnered some support from the clans, but not entirely. Even in the 1980s, when the Revolutionary Guards came to Baalbek, the clans gave very limited support. While families in the South supported Hezbollah, the Beqa clans were reluctant to embrace a political and religious movement. The main difference is this: while Shia from the South are closer to the state and the political system because of their higher level of education and broader international access through immigration (mostly to West Africa), the Beqa Shia are poorer, less educated, and less worldly. Accordingly, the latter have serious problems with the state and its institutions, which ignore them to this day.

In addition, the Beqa clans are bothered that the main leaders of Hezbollah and Amal come from southern families—except for Subhi al-Tufayli—while the Beqa offers martyrs. Indeed, compared with earlier periods, a larger portion of Hezbollah martyrs in Syria come from what is now the Baalbek-Hermel governorate.⁴

Hezbollah deals very carefully with the clans, often acting as a mediator or peacekeeper when they go to war with each other. Recently, though, news reports have indicated escalating tensions between Hezbollah and the Beqa clans. Those tensions are attributable to Hezbollah’s increased control over cross-border smuggling—a source of income that the clans depended on—as well as unfulfilled promises regarding financial and legal issues.⁵ As Hezbollah’s financial crisis in Lebanon has worsened, its smuggling operations have increased, necessitating the larger infrastructure already put in place by the clans. In turn, Hezbollah has seized the clans’ operations and resources.

Furthermore, despite many promises to the Beqa clans, Hezbollah has repeatedly failed to pass the general amnesty draft law in parliament. The draft law includes amnesty for 30,000 people from the Beqa region, the majority of whom are from the Shia community and are wanted for drug trafficking, drug abuse, murder, kidnapping, robbery, and other crimes.

The draft law also includes amnesty for about 1,200 Sunni convicts, 700 of whom are Lebanese, and around 6,000 Lebanese Christians, most of whom fled to Israel in 2000. According to one news report, “Hezbollah appeared to agree to a pardon for entering Israel, but object to a pardon for anyone who worked or communicated with the enemy or acquired Israeli citizenship.”⁶

Accordingly, armed clashes erupted in many areas in the Beqa; these led to similar tensions in Dahiya, where some clan members reside. As the financial crisis worsens, and as Hezbollah continues to use cross-border smuggling as a financial alternative, the Hezbollah-clan tensions are expected to keep escalating.

In Baalbek, which Hezbollah describes as the “land of the martyrs,” the party took a painful hit in the 2016 municipal elections, with more than 40 percent of the vote going to the Baalbek Madinati (Baalbek Is My City) list headed by political activist and Hezbollah critic Ghaleb Yaghi. This outcome was the result of growing discontent among the Beqa Shia with regard to the security situation, which deteriorated after Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria. In addition to the security issues, Beqa clans have often complained about the absence of the state, the lack of development projects, increased poverty, and reduced Hezbollah-sponsored social services provided.

The Beqa Shia have always lamented the fact that most key Hezbollah leaders hail from Lebanon’s South, while Baalbek has provided fighters and “martyrs.” What they believe is a sacrifice was not rewarded with a better lifestyle. On the contrary, the impact of Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria, as well as of the group’s deteriorating financial situation, has been felt more in Baalbek-Hermel than anywhere else in Lebanon.

The clans have their own neighborhoods in Dahiya, where they enjoy a large measure of independence over their daily lives and decisions. They primarily reside in Dahiya’s more unregulated areas, such as Laylaki, al-Ruwais, and Ouzai. Within the clans, some members are armed; Hezbollah sees these individuals as a potential force for its localized operations, including security, elections, and politics. Hezbollah needs the clans’ support—it cannot alienate them. Further, clan loyalty has always proved stronger than party loyalty. Thus, Hezbollah almost always avoids confrontation with the bigger and more powerful clans and is forced to make compromises.

Leftism and Hezbollah

Before Hezbollah, a number of leftist parties unified under the Lebanese National Resistance Front, which was founded in 1982 on the same day the Israeli army entered West Beirut. On that day, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Organization of Communist Action–Lebanon, the Arab Socialist Action Party–Lebanon, the Arab Socialist Baath Party–Lebanon Region, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party–Lebanon issued a joint communiqué calling for the Lebanese people to rise up in arms and unite in a resistance front against the Israeli occupation. This move had the full support of the Palestine Liberation Organization leftist and Marxist factions based in Lebanon, mainly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

The Lebanese National Resistance Front was most active between 1982 and 1985, during which it carried out 128 guerrilla attacks against the Israel Defense Forces and Israel-related targets. Around that period, Hezbollah emerged as the party exclusively tasked by Iran with resisting the occupation. But Hezbollah had another job as well: continuing to weaken the leftist tide within the Shia community, following in the footsteps of Musa al-Sadr. Hezbollah assassinated many leftist party leaders, including Hussein Muruwwa, Mahdi Amel, and others.⁷

In addition, many internal conflicts erupted among the leftist groups themselves. The Communist Party and the People’s Movement of Lebanon, with their pan-Arab orientation, chose to support Hezbollah, believing resistance to be a priority over political ideology. Others wanted an end to military rule and the redeployment of the Syrian army—along with its withdrawal from Lebanon. The latter eventually formed the Democratic Left, which in 2005 chose to join the “March 14 coalition” demanding the departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon.⁸

Many Shia members of these groups—for political reasons, economic reasons, or both—joined Hezbollah or became supporters of the Islamic resistance. According to a number of interviewees, they had to focus on the main enemy—Israel and the occupation—instead of starting a conflict with Hezbollah.⁹

Because the majority of the leftist parties' members came from the Shia community, this group was important for Hezbollah. Thus, Hezbollah has incorporated Shia with leftist leanings in its milieu—but not necessarily among its core military and leadership structure or trusted elites. Rather, these individuals have to be ideologically and religiously aligned, and Hezbollah has always been wary of leftist ideologies and views.

Because many communists and leftists supported Hezbollah's resistance but not its Islamic and ideological principles, the group sometimes had to tamp down its ideological stance when it needed support. Indeed, when Hezbollah highlighted its connection to Iran's *velayat-e faqih*,¹⁰ many leftists were critical and expressed disillusionment.

The tension between Hezbollah and the leftist milieu in Lebanon is increasing today because of two factors: (1) Hezbollah's financial crisis and (2) its involvement in Iran's regional wars. Many leftists genuinely supported Hezbollah's resistance rhetoric but not its ideology, even while they benefited from the group's services and political power. As both have started to decline, the leftists in Lebanon are becoming an internal challenge for Hezbollah.

Najaf vs. Qom

Before Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, Lebanon's Shia community depended solely on religious scholars who studied in Najaf; these scholars (*maraji*, or sources of emulation) were the only religious reference for Shia. After the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei after him—imposed himself as the *marja* for Shia worldwide, using Hezbollah's power to compete with and eventually marginalize Lebanese scholars and *maraji* such as Mohammad Mahdi Chamseddine and Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. Khomeini also managed to dominate the Shia community's clerical networks. This marginalization became more aggressive when the two Najafi scholars ceased their support of Khomeini, after years of advancing Iran's interests in Lebanon and creating Hezbollah.

Despite this triumph by the Iranian regime in Lebanon, a number of religious figures, influential scholars, and their religious institutions are still

affiliated with Najaf and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Their presence and influence constitute a challenge for Hezbollah, especially during troubling times, when many within the Shia community start looking for alternatives.

Several Najaf-affiliated institutions are still active in Lebanon. Among them are Fadlallah's al-Mabarrat schools, Bahman hospital, and other religious and cultural centers located primarily within Dahiya. Sistani's offices are also present and active within the Shia community, though they do not draw too much attention. The Imam Ali Foundation in Dahiya deals mostly with religious, charity, and cultural activities but not political discussions.

Figure 4.1. Map: Najaf-Affiliated Institutions



Since 2003, Iraqi Shia leader Grand Ayatollah Sistani has largely avoided taking a stance on domestic or Lebanese politics, preferring to stick with religious and social issues. He did make a notable exception in 2006 after Lebanon's summer war with Israel, when Hezbollah was facing pressure to disarm. At the time, Sistani called on Lebanese clerics to heed his policy on abstaining from seeking political office, which many likely interpreted as a shot across Hezbollah and Iran's bow; he also said that Lebanese Shia should choose their own future without depending on Iran.

The Amal movement—Hezbollah's reluctant coalition partner—publicly agreed with Sistani's point, and other independent and anti-Hezbollah Shia leaders undoubtedly concurred as well. In general, however, these same leaders believe that their ineffectiveness in pushing for change in Lebanon is at least partly rooted in Najaf's "hands-off" strategy in decisive moments, including the 2005 Cedar Revolution and the events of May 2008. Yet Najaf's willingness to enter the ring may be shifting.¹¹

Compared to their Lebanese counterparts, Iraqi Shia seem more willing and able to stand up to Iran. This stance may be partly attributable to the powerful presence of major religious institutions in Najaf and Karbala, the latter of which is central to Iraqi Shia collective history. Moreover, despite all their difficulties, Iraqi Shia still see their country as prosperous and independent, allowing them greater wealth than Lebanese Shia. Lebanese Shia, however, have failed to form a national identity of their own, instead associating with the Palestinians, the Syrians, and now the Iranians in an effort to protect themselves against marginalization and injustice. Even those factions that actively oppose Hezbollah have mainly presented themselves as a Shia rather than a Lebanese alternative.

To foster a viable alternative to Hezbollah, the international community has persistently tried to work with such factions inside Lebanon, investing copious funds in development, social, and political projects that have openly criticized the group and its Iranian patron. Only until very recently, however, Lebanese Shia were not really looking for a political alternative. Rather, the majority of them were satisfied with Hezbollah's "resistance" rhetoric and the political power it brought, viewing the group as an acceptable authority that provided social services to needy Shia. In contrast, foreign donors gave

money to many figures who were not considered credible or reliable by the Shia community; indeed, there seemed to be no real strategy for strengthening mechanisms that would give the Shia a proper place in Lebanese civil society.

More broadly, anti-Hezbollah initiatives failed because they tried to replace one Shia group with another instead of pushing a Lebanese nationalist platform. That being said, Najaf-affiliated Shia figures do have a kind of public presence and power, which—if united and fostered—could constitute an alternative religious reference to Hezbollah's.

Amal vs. Hezbollah

The fissure between the Amal movement and Hezbollah is probably the most obvious yet the most complicated. Although the Amal movement—headed by Speaker Nabih Berri—has been Hezbollah's main ally for a long time, the relationship is not perfect. In addition to their ideological differences, the two Shia parties fought each other during the Lebanese civil war in what the Lebanese refer to as the War of Brothers (*Harb al-Ikhwa*); the fighting led to the death of approximately 2,500 Shia between 1989 and 1990.

Amal and Hezbollah have opposing views on Lebanon and the Shia community—namely, its political and religious identity. Unlike Hezbollah, Amal does not believe in the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. As Hezbollah's military and financial power increased, however, Amal wisely accepted the defeat; and in January 1989, under Iran's and Syria's alliance and sponsorship, Hezbollah and Amal signed an agreement to end months of fighting. Even so, the two parties are still considered “frenemies,” with street fights and clashes between their members occurring frequently.

Dahiya has been the backdrop against which the dynamics of this complex relationship have played out. Chiyah is traditionally known as Amal's stronghold in Dahiya, but it has been infiltrated by a powerful Hezbollah presence. That presence often reignites fiery tensions among older Amal and Hezbollah fighters who—despite the 1989 agreement—never really forgave and forgot.

Many Amal members interviewed for this study expressed explicit feelings of animosity toward Hezbollah, but two traits stood out as most abhorrent: arrogance and blind loyalty to Iran. For many traditional Amal supporters, Hezbollah had taken away their influence, limited their access to decision-making, and allowed them to keep only part of their power through Berri's position as speaker—that is, as long as Berri continues to implement Iran's agenda in Lebanon.

These fissures widened and expressions of animosity became more apparent during Lebanon's 2020 financial collapse. The traditional clientelist system, which allowed Berri to keep Amal's support base in line, started to fall apart when thousands of Amal members and supporters employed by state institutions saw their salaries drop by 90 percent and life savings seized by banks. Meanwhile, many of their Hezbollah-employed neighbors and family members continued to receive their salaries in U.S. dollars and maintained their access to Hezbollah's social services.

As Hezbollah faced growing discontent from the entire Shia community, the group tried to deflect the blame by holding Amal and Berri responsible for the corruption and financial crisis—which is certainly true to some extent. The tension between Amal and Hezbollah members and supporters played out both on social media and in street clashes, threatening a serious rift among the groups' leaders when Berri leaves the scene.

Berri's days are numbered as he is old and unwell, and the future of the Amal movement is very grim.¹² Amal has lost its chance to be a Shia alternative to Hezbollah; instead, Berri decided a long time ago to surrender in return for some power. Despite the remaining animosity between the parties, Amal became too weak to act as a viable option for the Shia community. After Berri leaves the scene, many Amal members and supporters will likely be absorbed by the "silent majority," while others might join Hezbollah for economic reasons.

This part of Dahiya—which also corresponds to Amal's headquarters in Tyre in the South—will probably be absorbed by Hezbollah. Likewise, the area's traditional Lebanese Shia identity could weaken in favor of the ideological Iranian Shia identity, unless another alternative presents itself.

Hezbollah Community vs. Shia Community

Figure 4.2. Dahiya's Shia Community, Hezbollah Community, and Fighters



The Shia have rallied around Hezbollah on many occasions, but that does not make it a Hezbollah community. Rather, Hezbollah deliberately draws distinctions among its constituent groups. To be sure, Hezbollah does not regard its entire constituency as its core community; similarly, the community does not regard itself as a single solid body. Indeed, the Hezbollah community comprises four distinct groups, all of which reside in Dahiya.

Larger Shia community. This category includes all Lebanese Shia, including Hezbollah supporters, members, and opponents of the group. The supporters are divided: some are core supporters of Hezbollah whose views have not changed despite political and financial shifts. These individuals, who are more ideological than others, have rallied around Hezbollah for protection and services—especially in times of victory and prosperity. As Hezbollah

stopped offering victories, services, and jobs, however, the views of less ideological supporters, outside the core, have shifted. These supporters constitute the bulk of the Shia community and reside in all of Dahiya's neighborhoods.

Hezbollah community. This includes all Hezbollah members, fighters, reservists, and employees. Some employees are essential staff such as medical and military personnel; others are nonessential and can be moved around when needed. Teachers, media professionals, and women's groups are among such personnel. Most of this community comes from middle-class areas (such as Haret Hreik) or poor neighborhoods (such as those of Burj al-Barajneh).

Community of fighters. Hezbollah's fighting force includes both full-time fighters and reservists (*tabia*). The latter, who might have their own jobs independent of Hezbollah, are occasionally asked to train, carry arms, and join a fight. Old fighters reside throughout Dahiya, but most new fighters and contract fighters come from poor areas.

Since 2006, Hezbollah has built up its capabilities in readiness for another conflict with Israel. According to Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism database,¹³ recruitment soared from around 3,000 full-time and part-time fighters in 2006 to more than 25,000 fully trained and active combatants in 2017, with another 20,000–30,000 reservists.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of State estimated in 2017 that Hezbollah had at least 7,000 active fighters and up to 10,000 reservists.¹⁵

Not all of these fighters are core Hezbollah fighting forces—that is, the ideological, religious, and fully trusted core. Most of the reservists and contractors (those who sign yearly contracts to go to Syria) were hired to join the fight in Syria and the greater region, with only hasty training and hiring processes.

Elites and commanders. This group comprises the “untouchables,” according to many fighters interviewed for this study. It includes high-ranking members of Hezbollah and senior military commanders who have received top military training and led significant battles for Hezbollah and the Iranian

regime. These individuals form a trusted circle around Hezbollah's secretary-general and are empowered to handle challenges and make decisions. They are also tied to the Shia bourgeoisie and business community. Many of Hezbollah's military and political elite are invested in fields such as real estate, tourism, and trade.¹⁶

The private wealth of Hezbollah elites was kept hidden until 2009, when Lebanese Shia financier Salah Ezzeddine embezzled around \$1 billion from Lebanese Shia, including a number of Hezbollah officials. Four Hezbollah senior officials were linked to the scheme, revealing their access to millions of U.S. dollars and assets. Since then, the integrity and incorruptibility of Hezbollah have been deeply shaken.

These political, military, and business elites tend to reside in Dahiya's upper-class neighborhoods, including Ghobeiry, Jinah, and Hay Madi.

Among these four groups, the fighting community is most complex, mainly because it has changed over time and, in doing so, has directly affected Hezbollah's most powerful tool—its fighting force. This particular community deserves more in-depth analysis because it reveals the most about Hezbollah's challenges. And as Hezbollah's financial crisis worsens, the difference between the full-time fighters, contractors, and reservists will only continue to grow.

Hezbollah's Shifting Fighting Force

Within Hezbollah's fighting force, the full-time fighters are the most ideological, as they have spent considerable time undergoing religious and ideological training. This is not to suggest that the reservists and contract fighters are not ideological; rather, they are not necessarily so. Full-time fighters have military training and are typically committed to security and military missions full time. Others have jobs outside Hezbollah and thus no obligation to any mission.

The most noteworthy gap, however, is that between the old fighters and the new ones. Hezbollah's new fighters—those who joined the party after

Hezbollah went to Syria—are very different from those who have been with Hezbollah for a longer time. Although Hezbollah is known for being extremely meticulous when selecting and training its fighters, the Syrian crisis forced the party to sacrifice quality for quantity; that is, it needed a large fighting force more than it needed a unified, organized, and trained one.

A longtime Hezbollah fighter is more ideological, more disciplined, and better trained to fight. The new Hezbollah recruit is less ideological but more sectarian—with a strong Shia identity—less trained but more aggressive. The motivation for joining Hezbollah has also changed, as have the enemy and the battlefield. Syria is a long war, with no victory in sight. Social services and financial assistance have shrunk as the military budget has expanded. Indeed, the poor are getting poorer, but the war has its own economy, with more benefits for those involved in it.

The differences in character, behavior, and motivation between the old and new fighters are most striking. Throughout interviews with both old and new Hezbollah fighters—mainly those who went to Syria—it became clear that they are all disillusioned with the war and have stopped believing in its sacredness. But the profile of the new Hezbollah fighter is unusual and, in a way, unsettling; he is more complicated, but also sectarian and aggressive.

While some could afford to leave the fight in Syria, others were forced to continue—many for financial reasons. The result is wide economic and social gaps within Lebanon's Shia community. These gaps have already had long-lasting consequences for the community, for Hezbollah as both a political party and an armed militia, and for Lebanon and Syria. The shifting profile of the Hezbollah fighter has also changed Hezbollah at its core, including its image, role, and prospects.

Here follow the stories of two fighters, one a veteran, one a newcomer. Both requested they be referred to by pseudonyms.

Qassem: A Longtime Hezbollah Fighter

I met Qassem at his home in Dahiya in the spring of 2016, in the middle-class neighborhood of Haret Hreik. The taxi driver, from the Christian neighborhood of Achrafiyeh, dropped me off at the building's entrance and insisted on waiting for me. Despite my attempts to send him away, he would not take no for an answer.

I left the driver downstairs and took the elevator to Qassem's floor. He met me at the door with his hand on his chest, and greeted me with the typical Hezbollah greeting, "*Assalamu Alaikum.*" Having grown up in the South myself, I am used to this greeting, so I replied with the same hand gesture and "*Wa Alaikum al-Salam.*" When I

told Qassem that the driver had insisted on waiting downstairs, he simply said, "I know. They told me." I left it at that, but I assumed that "they" already knew where I was and that Qassem was talking to me.

Qassem lives with his family; on that day, his mother was in the kitchen preparing lunch, and his siblings were gathered in the living room watching a soccer game. He asked me to join them, so I did. "You are from the South, yes?" one of his sisters asked. I said yes, to which Qassem replied, "That's great, you are one of us."

I did not see myself as one of anything, but that was neither the time nor the place to get into

a discussion about identity and the complexities of being a secular Shia woman. So I sat on the couch next to Qassem's sister, and we started talking as the coffee was served.

Qassem did not smoke, did not drink coffee, and would barely look me in the eyes. He wore blue jeans and an untucked white button-down shirt. He had a medium-length beard and held a black rosary in his hand. I had seen this look many times before—in fact, I saw it all over my southern town growing up. It is a typical look for a Hezbollah member: piety meddled with a hint of pride and modest assertiveness. It is an image that has been carefully crafted by

Hezbollah's institutions in charge of image and branding. A Hezbollah member or fighter needs to look confident yet humble, proud yet accessible.

Qassem was exactly that. He would look you in the eyes only if he really wanted to make a point, and his movements were minimal. He stayed in his chair all through the interview, which lasted around four hours. A Hezbollah member and fighter since 2005, Qassem was involved in the 2006 war; the last military training he received was in 2007. Having also received all the ideological and religious training the party could offer, his discipline and piety were well pronounced.



When Hezbollah decided to join the war in Syria, Qassem went to the towns along the Lebanese border “to defend Lebanon from al-Qaeda.” In 2013, however, he decided to come back to Lebanon—and never went back to Syria.

“Of course, I lost my salary. Some could not afford to do that, but I am doing okay. I realized at one point that Syria is not my battle; that I am an invader and I prefer to stay in Lebanon until Hezbollah figures this mess out,” Qassem said about his experience in Syria. He also expressed his disappointment over how many Hezbollah commanders made money from smuggling and selling weapons to “the enemy.”

In Qassem’s opinion, three factors are changing Hezbollah’s mission: (1) the war economy, (2) the corruption of Hezbollah commanders in Syria, and (3) reduced funding from Iran. But the main shift, Qassem continues, is the fact

that Hezbollah now prioritizes Iran and its regional operations over Lebanon, which is supposed to be its main priority. “The moment Hezbollah decided to join Iran in the region, [the group] lost.”

Despite a whiff of disappointment in some of his fellow fighters and commanders, as well as in Hezbollah’s “misjudgments,” Qassem still hopes that Hezbollah will return to its former mission and glory after filtering out most of the undisciplined members. As a resistance movement, Hezbollah is still sacred; the problem is with its new temporary role and some of its people, not with the group’s ideology or mission.

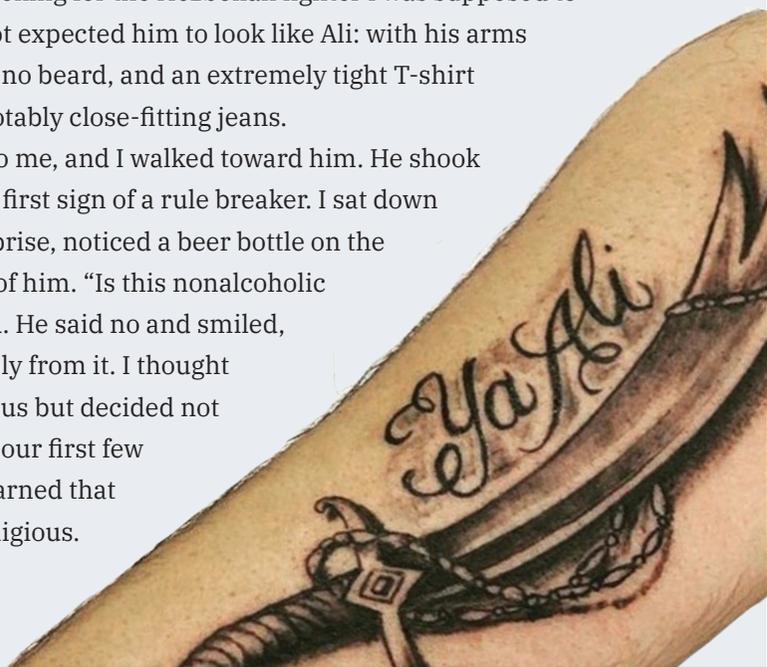
Qassem stopped talking only when lunch was served. I started to collect my things to leave, but I quickly realized that was not an option. So we had lunch together, moving on to lighter topics such as mothers, tattoos, and soccer.

Ali: A New Hezbollah Fighter

At first glance, one would not believe that Ali and Qassem fight for the same team—or militia, for that matter. Compared to Qassem’s traditional, collected ensemble and body language, Ali is almost the opposite.

We met on the cosmopolitan street of Hamra, in the middle of West Beirut, one block from the American University of Beirut on Bliss Street. Although I initially saw Ali waiting at the table, I kept looking for the Hezbollah fighter I was supposed to meet. I had not expected him to look like Ali: with his arms full of tattoos, no beard, and an extremely tight T-shirt tucked into notably close-fitting jeans.

Ali waved to me, and I walked toward him. He shook my hand—the first sign of a rule breaker. I sat down and, with surprise, noticed a beer bottle on the table in front of him. “Is this nonalcoholic beer?” I asked. He said no and smiled, drinking deeply from it. I thought that was curious but decided not to push. After our first few meetings, I learned that Ali was not religious.



He drank, did not pray, and did not fast. He was in it for the money and the power.

During our meeting, Ali's left leg was constantly shaking, bumping against the table and shifting his seat around. With a big smile on his face, he looked straight at me, making jokes and laughing out loud as he sipped his beer and explained his tattoos, many of which are linked to a strong Shia identity rather than overt religiosity. An image of Imam Ali's sword, *Zulfiqar*, is tattooed on one of his arms, while the number 313 (the number of soldiers in the army of the Twelfth Imam of the Shia Mahdi) is tattooed on the other.

Ali is from the poor area of Laylaki in Dahiya. He joined Hezbollah in 2014 and went straight to Syria, as did most of his friends and relatives in the area. He receives \$800 per month, in addition to bonuses and social services. As a new fighter, however, Ali did not have time for religious and ideological training. He did

receive brief military training: forty-five days of general training followed by ten days of specialized training. Ali was chosen to specialize in cannon shooting.

"I have lost hearing in my right ear. You have to speak closer to my left ear so I can hear you," Ali told me. In 2017, he was injured by a rocket strike during battle, after which he spent a total of four months in a military hospital in Damascus and a Hezbollah hospital—al-Rassoul al-Azam—in Dahiya. As soon as Ali was back on his feet, Hezbollah got him a bride, a small apartment, and a congratulations and thank-you card signed by Hassan Nasrallah himself. Then the group sent Ali back to Syria.

Ali spoke openly about Hezbollah's recruiting techniques: how it targets the poor and the needy, how it offers money blatantly, and how it offers the fight as a job, with a contract and benefits. He spoke about his individual achievements and victories in Syria as a cannon shooter, but not

once about Hezbollah's "glorious victories," which one usually hears about when talking to a Hezbollah member or supporter. I sensed neither pride nor humility in Ali. Neither remorse nor piety. No guilt, no fear, and certainly no doubt. Ali is not religious, but he is a Shia at his core. He is not the typical Hezbollah member I grew up observing, but he is typical of the new Hezbollah fighter: nonreligious and nonideological, but sectarian. Not disciplined, but precarious.

After our meeting in Hamra, I went to see Ali's neighborhood. From Haret Hreik, the middle-class neighborhood where I met Qassem and his family, I went south to Laylaki. As you travel through Burj al-Barajneh and closer to Laylaki, you start to feel the impact of the war in Syria. Walls and walls of martyr posters fill narrower

streets, which are occupied by smaller and more modest houses and buildings. In fact, the poorer the neighborhoods and streets are in Laylaki, the more martyrs there are on the walls.

Beyond the endless shades of gray on the walls and unfinished buildings, black Hezbollah banners and yellow flags seem to provide the only color. For a moment, you would think you had been transported from the Beirut suburbs to the middle of a Syrian war zone. So many death announcements. So many women in black. I suddenly understood why Ali—a young man with no interest in ideology, politics, or religion—is fighting in Syria. I left with a feeling of compassion for Ali, but also fear—fear of all of the surrounding poverty and loss, and of what those could do to people and their collective memories.

Ali and many new Hezbollah fighters constitute a serious challenge for Hezbollah, as they are changing Hezbollah's fighting force in terms of discipline and military capacity. According to a number of Hezbollah members interviewed for this study, many new fighters are involved in smuggling activities across the Syria-Lebanon border; they make money by selling weapons and bullets in Syria, sometimes to the same people they are fighting.¹⁷ Hezbollah has tried to filter out these disorderly and disruptive members, but Syria's war and internal struggles have made it difficult for the group to fully control the situation.

The entry of more new, undisciplined, nonideological fighters and the loss of older, disciplined, trustworthy elites—through war casualties, old age, or refusal to go to Syria—has transformed Hezbollah's fighting force from a homogenous, disciplined, and reliable body into one that presents more challenges than leverage. According to one Hezbollah commander who stayed back in Lebanon, Hezbollah “will need many years to reorganize itself and its fighting force.” He believes that Syria ultimately cost Hezbollah its robust fighting capacity.

The changes within Hezbollah's fighting force have had grave impacts on the Shia community. Given the Syrian war's general unpopularity and severe economic consequences, Lebanese Shia have struggled to accommodate new fighters returning from Syria, who often create problems in their hometowns, whether by behaving aggressively, attempting to dictate local lifestyles, or generally fomenting chaos. Recent government statistics show historically high rates of drug use, petty crime, and unemployment, especially in Dahiya.¹⁸ Even more disturbing is the absence of serious measures to counter these social problems. Lebanese authorities cannot do anything in Dahiya without Hezbollah's cooperation, but the group has seemingly done little itself to address the prevailing social issues. In short, although many Shia still view Hezbollah as their only protector and provider, they have not felt well protected or provided for in quite some time.

Recently, Hezbollah has decided to pull back some of its troops from Syria in response to military and logistical shifts;¹⁹ these shifts stem from Iran's financial crisis, as well as the fact that military operations have subsided somewhat in Syria and are now limited to certain areas. Most of these fighters

are new recruits—or what Hezbollah calls “contract fighters,” because they sign a two-year contract to fight for the group.

In the past, Hezbollah provided jobs and salaries for its fighting personnel between campaigns, mainly because the group knew it would need their service at some point in the future. The new generation of Hezbollah fighters, however, is proving to be more problematic than advantageous.

According to a number of sources within the fighter community, Hezbollah has brought back to Lebanon most of those fighters who were recruited between 2013 and 2019. The group has asked those fighters to return to their towns and villages; when they have done so, the fighters have received their salaries in devalued Lebanese lira after years of being paid in U.S. dollars. Hezbollah, for its part, is trying to reorganize its fighting force by weeding out the problematic elements.

For example, volunteers and members of Hezbollah’s nonmilitary sectors are now being scouted by the group’s military commanders, who will pick and train the next generation of Hezbollah’s fighting force. “This, however, is going to take a few years,” a Hezbollah fighter indicated. He continued, “And that’s only if and when the dollars are back in the coffers.”

The main dilemma for Hezbollah is that these new recruits tend to come from the poorest neighborhoods and Shia families in Dahiya. Their newly unemployed status, combined with their recent traumatic but socially elevated fighting experience, makes them more prone to aggressive and abusive behavior. A number of recent clashes between these new fighters and other youths have been reported in Dahiya’s poor areas.²⁰ Given the deteriorating financial crisis in Lebanon and a sharp increase in unemployment, these economic gaps will likely remain one of Hezbollah’s main challenges.

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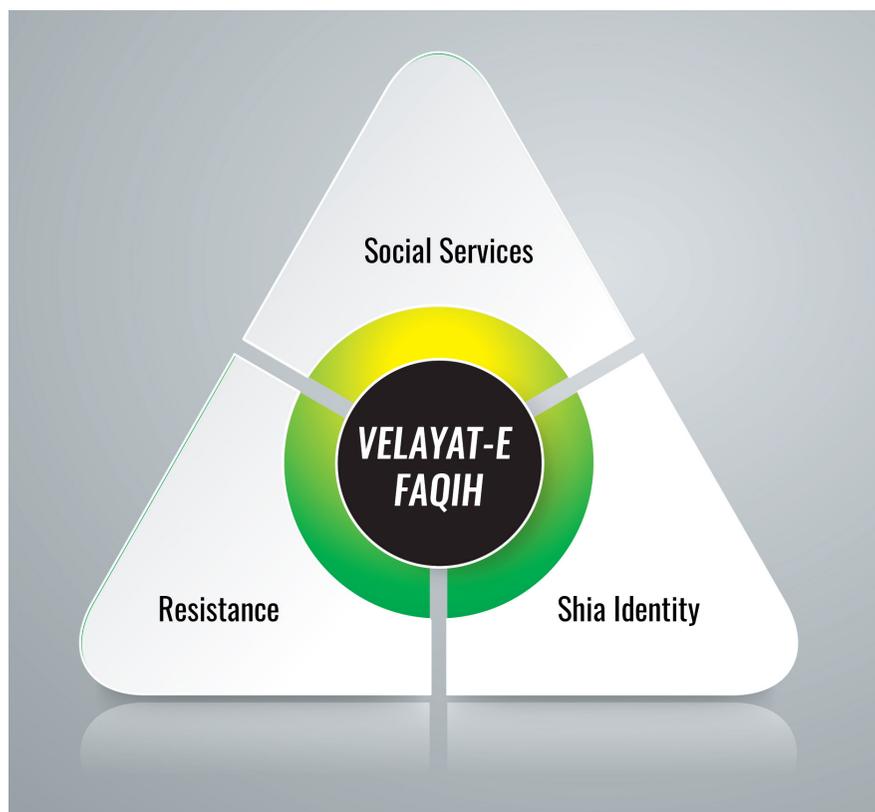
5

Challenges to the Three Pillars of Hezbollah's Popular Support

Hezbollah's many shifts in political and financial strategy have strained its relations with the Shia community in general. The main reason behind the increasing mistrust toward Hezbollah involves the faltering of its three main pillars of popular support. Evidence of these pillars—provision of services, resistance, and Shia identity—is visible all over Lebanon's Shia towns and cities. Hospitals and schools are emblazoned with religious slogans, religious occasions brim with resistance rhetoric, and funerals for individuals feature sectarian narratives and political discourse.

Since its inception, Hezbollah has invested significant resources to earn the support of the Shia community. With its large Shia support base in Lebanon, Hezbollah built a robust and dedicated fighting force, formed a loyal electoral bloc, and claimed credible representation of the Shia community. Such success required a strategy built on pillars that presented the group as both protector of and provider for the Shia community—a “father figure” that would replace the state and fulfill the collective Shia desire for Lebanese identity. All three pillars were organically linked to Iran's *velayat-e faqih* ideology, the ultimate state alternative for Shia in Lebanon and in the rest of the region.

Figure 5.1. Visualizing Pillars of Popular Support for Hezbollah



Social Services

Hezbollah's service system is made up of a Social Unit, an Islamic Health Unit, and an Education Unit. The Social Unit comprises four organizations: the Jihad Construction Foundation, the Martyrs Foundation, the Foundation for the Wounded, and the Khomeini Support Committee. Hezbollah's Islamic Health Unit operates three hospitals, twelve health centers, twenty infirmaries, twenty dental clinics, and ten defense departments.¹ The unit

also offers free health insurance and prescription drug coverage through a network of local pharmacies.

Through its Education Unit, Hezbollah operates a number of primary and secondary schools for fees far below those of most other private schools. Hezbollah's schools reportedly serve approximately twenty thousand students.² In addition to education, Hezbollah provides low-income students with scholarships, other forms of financial assistance, and books.

Compared to the general Shia population, a small number of Shia send their children to other private, charity/political, or public schools, depending on their economic status. A family's choice of school is also an indicator within the Shia community—either of hesitation to indoctrinate their children or of full dependence on Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's youth and educational initiatives are not limited to schools. Indeed, more young Shia are members of the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts than are students in Hezbollah's schools. It is estimated that the Mahdi Scouts have around sixty thousand children and scout leaders—six times the membership of any other Lebanese scout group.³ Many of these children end up joining Hezbollah's ranks, and their religious and political indoctrination, in addition to their military training, starts as soon as they join the Mahdi Scouts.

The large amount of money Hezbollah spends on social support reveals the significance of this tool for the group. By September 2006, Hezbollah had reportedly spent \$281 million on rehabilitation and compensation following the 2006 Israeli bombardment of Lebanon.⁴ In addition, Hezbollah's service institutions are under the direct control of the party's executive council and occupy a relatively high position within the organization's hierarchy.

Providing these social services to the Shia community is Hezbollah's means of replacing the state. Hezbollah tells Shia they do not need the Lebanese state, as the group and Iran will provide for them. The party successfully replaced unavailable state services and converted Lebanese Shia citizens to Shia devotees of Hezbollah—that is, until Hezbollah was hit by a severe financial crisis in 2019 following U.S. sanctions on Iran and a shortage of hard currency.

Hezbollah's finances worsened because of (1) the U.S. “maximum

pressure” policy under President Donald Trump’s administration and (2) the cost of the group’s involvement in Syria. With sanctions imposed on Iran’s oil industry, Hezbollah’s revenue from Iran decreased. It is estimated that the group’s annual funding of \$700 million was cut by \$280 million. The impact of this decrease has pushed Hezbollah to revisit its budget and to make serious spending cuts, most of which have affected the services sector.⁵

At first, employees of Hezbollah’s media, education, medical, and military systems complained of deep pay cuts, with some individuals reportedly receiving only 60 percent of their original salaries. Later, nonessential employees started to be laid off, and fighters and their families saw further pay cuts—a largely unprecedented development. Married fighters started to receive only half of their salaries (which normally range from \$600 to \$1,200 per month), and single fighters received only \$200 per month. Hezbollah also closed around one thousand offices and apartments throughout Lebanon, merged many of its institutions, and froze all hiring. And its social services budget decreased yet again, following a previous reduction in 2013.⁶

As Hezbollah’s social services started to cater to a smaller sector of the Shia community—mainly the fighter community and its military commanders—others within the Shia community started to speak out. Indeed, with the Lebanese economic crisis continuing to deteriorate, many residents from Dahiya’s poor areas joined the protests that erupted on October 17, 2019. Despite heavy security measures by Hezbollah to prevent any gatherings inside Dahiya, a number of protests took place along Airport Road and in Ghobeiry, Ouzai, and Sfeir.⁷

Resistance

Hezbollah presented itself as the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon. The group told the Lebanese Shia that it would liberate their lands and homes from the Israeli occupier, and it dedicated most of its resources to that goal. With “resistance” as its aim, Hezbollah effectively won the hearts and minds of the Lebanese Shia, and also created a conflict with Israel—sometimes on behalf of Iran.⁸

Before 1982, the general mood among the Lebanese Shia community was anti-Palestinian; that is, the Palestinian factions that dominated Shia areas in the South of Lebanon acted with power and hegemony. That Palestinian domination alienated the Shia, who publicly celebrated the Israeli invasion of 1982 by throwing rose petals and rice on Israeli tanks. But the Israelis overstayed their welcome, imposing curfews, implementing aggressive security measures, and forming alliances with Christian militias. Thus, the Shia's welcoming mood was quickly replaced by hostility toward the Israelis, a stance that Hezbollah exploited in its resistance narrative. From the early 1980s until 2006, resistance was the most significant pillar of Hezbollah's political rhetoric. Without question, Hezbollah's claimed successes and victories against Israel—despite the loss of Lebanese life and property—earned the group the support and allegiance of many Lebanese Shia and non-Shia.

Shia support for Hezbollah's resistance efforts peaked in 2000, when Hezbollah claimed it had liberated the South of Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Hezbollah's divine victory rhetoric kept the group's support relatively strong after the July 2006 war, despite a decline in overall support throughout the Middle East, attributable to Hezbollah's clear backing of the Syrian regime, assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, and aggression against the March 14 political alliance. But Hezbollah's entry into Syria shifted its military priorities, forcing the group to pause its resistance against Israel. In an interview on May 26, 2020, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah differentiated between the group's strategies in Lebanon and in Syria.⁹ Since involving itself in Syria, Hezbollah's go-to response when attacked by Israel has been threats and intimidation, accompanied by the standard line, "We will retaliate at the right time and place." Nasrallah adopted a different tone, however, when asked about Syria. He said, "So why aren't we retaliating against Israel's strikes in Syria? Why don't we create the same equation in Syria as in Lebanon? Because our mission in Syria is not over—we are still trying to defeat armed groups. This is our priority." Nasrallah added that Hezbollah is employing "strategic patience."

Hezbollah had no immediate plans to retaliate against Israel in Syria—whether through a military aggression across the Golan or by firing its

missiles at Israeli jets. Such a stance marks a significant shift from the group's longtime noncompromising rhetoric against Tel Aviv. Indeed, Nasrallah's claim that fighting armed groups in Syria is more of a priority for Hezbollah than resisting Israel was seen by the Shia community as a major pivot in the party's rhetoric—one that had major costs for its support base.

Many Lebanese Shia began supporting Hezbollah because (1) resistance against Israel was its main objective and (2) the group delivered on that objective, especially in 2000. When Hezbollah first went to Syria to support Bashar al-Assad's regime, the group's leaders told their constituents that Hezbollah's involvement was required to defend Lebanon and safeguard the resistance. But when Nasrallah said that resisting Israel was not a priority in Syria, while Israel continued to strike Hezbollah's military positions, the resistance rhetoric lost its appeal and rationale.

Hezbollah's own dilemma with resistance is more complicated. Even if the group were to retaliate against Israeli strikes in Syria or Lebanon, it would face multiple challenges. In fact, the potential consequences of a war scenario would be dire for both Hezbollah and Lebanon. Hezbollah lacks the resources to fund a war or even to restore its fighting force to continue fighting the current war. Such a scenario would mean significant losses of personnel and equipment for Hezbollah that it currently lacks the funds to replace. The group would barely be able to compensate its constituents for their personal losses and reconstruction costs.

Shia residents in southern Lebanon, the Beqa Valley, and South Beirut would not be able to flee the next conflict as they did the 2006 war, as Syria is now off limits and sectarian tensions would make it difficult to shelter in other parts of Lebanon. The Shia community would likely blame Hezbollah for the destruction caused by such a conflict if the group were to initiate an attack on sensitive Israeli targets. In short, Lebanon would be devastated. Further, reconstruction funding would not be as abundant as it was in 2006, given today's greater international pressure on Hezbollah and general donor weariness.

Hezbollah will probably go to war—and play the resistance card—only if it can guarantee that Iran is financially capable of replenishing the group's arsenal and compensating for its losses. Accordingly, the threat of Hezbollah's

missiles is greater than the missiles themselves. Once Hezbollah's weapons are used, Iran might be unable to reconstruct the group's arsenal as quickly as it had hoped. Hezbollah's missiles will thus be Iran's last resort, until the group can regain the resources—such as access to hard currency—to rehabilitate its military. Meanwhile, Hezbollah continues to use available resources to develop precision missiles and build necessary infrastructure, such as tunnels.

Shia Identity

Hezbollah's social services cater to the Shia community, and its resistance operations have always addressed Shia identity. Further, religious occasions are often used by Hezbollah to strengthen the links among the three pillars: (1) resistance, (2) social services, and (3) the ideology of *velayat-e faqih*. For example, Ashura,¹⁰ which symbolizes the Shia's collective history, links Shia identity both to the Islamic resistance and to *velayat-e faqih*. The evident parallels between the meaning of Ashura—Hussein's fight against oppression and injustice—and Hezbollah's resistance against the Israeli occupation add a sense of sacredness to the resistance and the Iranian regime's ideology.

In this sense, resisting Israel has become as sacred as Hussein's fight against injustice in Karbala, and both are sacredly tied to the Iranian regime. Therefore, opposing Hezbollah and Iran—and by extension their political and military operations in Lebanon—would be regarded as opposing one's collective memory and very identity. From a Shia perspective, it would be similar to blasphemy. Hence, Iran and Hezbollah have managed to impose themselves as a kind of paternal dyad for the Shia, acting as their provider, their protector, and the source of their collective identity.

As Hezbollah's social services have declined and its resistance rhetoric has faded, a sense of Shia identity has remained the only pillar on which Hezbollah can rely for constituent support. Thus, Hezbollah's media and political strategists have dedicated extra resources to boost the Shia identity and empowerment rhetoric, highlighting the significance of Shia shrines, historical figures, and current leaders. At the same time, those strategists

have amplified the hostility rhetoric against Saudi Arabia and the Sunni threat. Two of Hezbollah's challenges—its need for more fighters and its fear of the poor joining the uprising that began in October 2019—are particularly concentrated in Dahiya's poor areas; thus, these locales are the perfect stage for such identity efforts.

The neighborhoods of Hay al-Sellom, Laylaki, and al-Burj are the most challenging for Hezbollah. With Lebanon's economy further deteriorating, and Hezbollah incapable of offering any jobs or services, the group's only catchall solution was to promote the Shia identity and fear of the "other." From this perspective, everyone who opposes Hezbollah also opposes the Shia, their identity, and their empowerment. Accordingly, Hezbollah was able to maintain control over a crowd of loyal Shia, who often attacked protesters in the streets while chanting "Shia, Shia, Shia"—a slogan that can only indicate the community's fear of isolation and a weakened identity.

Beyond this loyal crowd, Hezbollah senses that the Shia identity pillar alone cannot maintain constituent support. Indeed, without money, jobs, the resistance goal, or the power of services, Hezbollah knows that it is losing traction. The first indications of Hezbollah's diminishing support appeared during Lebanon's most recent municipal elections in 2016.

The civil society group Baalbek Madinati, which was competing against Hezbollah and its allies in Baalbek, obtained approximately 45 percent of the votes, as rising independent Shia voices in areas controlled by Hezbollah and the Amal movement seemed to reach a crescendo. "Ghobeiry for Everybody," an electoral list comparable to Baalbek Madinati, was formed in an attempt to challenge Hezbollah and Amal in Dahiya. In fact, during the previous municipal elections in 2010, the Ghobeiry opposition list managed to obtain around 40 percent of the votes against Hezbollah and the Amal movement, indicating an early discontent among the Shia.

The Ghobeiry municipality has been controlled by Hezbollah-affiliated officials for more than twenty years. According to a number of Ghobeiry residents, the municipality attends to only some neighborhoods—those where Hezbollah officials reside. The rest are neglected.

The developments in Baalbek and Dahiya in 2016 foretold similar trends in the parliamentary elections in 2018, in which Hezbollah and Amal faced

opposing lists in almost all Shia areas. Although Hezbollah-Amal lists eventually won, the Shia turnout was lower than in previous contests, and Baalbek-Hermel proved to be more challenging than anticipated. Hezbollah pressured people as it forced the Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities to extend the deadline for voting in Baalbek, and a number of violations were reported by election observers.

To regain Shia community backing, Hezbollah will have to rebuild all three pillars of public support. It will have to tailor its services to all segments of the Shia community and restore trust in its resistance rhetoric—both of which will be difficult tasks to accomplish.

Notes

- 1 See Hanin Ghaddar, “Why Does Hezbollah Want Lebanon’s Health Ministry?” PolicyWatch 3027, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-does-hezbollah-want-lebanons-health-ministry>; and for an earlier perspective, “The Many Hands and Faces of Hezbollah,” *New Humanitarian*, March 29, 2006, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/26242/lebanon-many-hands-and-faces-hezbollah>.
- 2 “Hezbollah Operates Networks of Private Schools Indoctrinating Shiite Youth in Lebanon with the Ideology of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and with Loyalty to Hezbollah and the Path of Terrorism,” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 20, 2019, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2019/07/E_142_19.pdf.
- 3 Robert F. Worth, “Hezbollah’s Foundation Is Built on Youth,” *New York Times*, October 20, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/20/world/africa/20iht-lebanon.4.18015370.html>.
- 4 “Hezbollah Completed the Rehabilitation and Sheltering Program,” *an-Nahar*, August 27, 2006.
- 5 Thomas Harding, “Hezbollah Suffers Blow to Funding from Iran amid Pandemic,” *National*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/hezbollah-suffers-blow-to-funding-from-iran-amid-pandemic-1.1009925>.
- 6 Hanin Ghaddar, “U.S. Sanctions Are Hurting Hezbollah,” PolicyWatch 3090, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 6, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-sanctions-are-hurting-hezbollah>.
- 7 “These Are the Roads Cut Off in the Suburb,” Janoubia, October 18, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3xMI3tA>.
- 8 Hanin Ghaddar, “Hezbollah-Iran Dynamics: A Proxy, Not a Partner,” PolicyWatch 3104, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-iran-dynamics-a-proxy-not-a-partner>.
- 9 “Nasrallah Mocks Defense Min. Gantz for Army Role During Lebanon Pullout,” i24 News, May 26, 2020, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/1590523451-nasrallah-mocks-defense-min-gantz-for-army-role-during-lebanon-pullout>.

- 10 For Shia Muslims, Ashura is a religious commemoration of the 680 A.D. martyrdom of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Hussein's killing at Karbala led to the split in Islam into two main branches—Sunni and Shia—after Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and fourth Muslim caliph, did not ascend as leader of the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet.

6

Hezbollah's Eight Historical Stages and Relations with the Shia Community

The three pillars of Hezbollah's popular support have varied in significance and strength throughout the group's eight stages. Sometimes, mainly in the beginning, resistance prevailed. Other times, mostly after wars and conflicts, services were given more significance. More recently, Hezbollah has been focused on Shia identity and empowerment, but only because it lacks the resources to sustain the other pillars. As Hezbollah prepares for its next phase, it is worth considering Shia community reactions to Hezbollah's priorities throughout the group's history.

1. The Nameless Years, 1979–85

Before Hezbollah issued its first political manifesto in 1985, the group had informally built up support within the Shia community. During this phase, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps fostered the formation of Hezbollah through religious schools (*hawzat*) and military training. IRGC officials—such as Mostafa Chamran, who served as Iran's defense minister after the fall of the shah—worked closely with Musa al-Sadr. Sadr had already established the infrastructure for Shia politicization and militarization, having managed to get the Palestinian factions in Lebanon, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, to provide military training to Amal members and fighters. Most of this activity took place in the Beqa region but ultimately infiltrated the rest of the Shia community as Hezbollah became more of an official entity.

Figure 6.1. Stages of Hezbollah

The Nameless Years

1979–85

Several Amal leaders form a new group, Islamic Amal, which is supported by IRGC elements in Lebanon. The IRGC continues its efforts, along with Amal founder Musa al-Sadr, to build support for the new movement by politicizing, militarizing, and providing services to segments of the Shia community.



Islamic Amal gains international notoriety with its 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy as well as American and French military barracks in Beirut.



Soul-Searching

1992–96

Hassan Nasrallah is appointed Hezbollah secretary-general in 1992. After the end of the Lebanese civil war, Amal finally accedes to Hezbollah's increasing influence in the Shia community and the two groups form an alliance. Also in 1992, Hezbollah participates in Lebanon's parliamentary elections to broaden its support base and influence the government's decisionmaking apparatus. The group gains many positions in the government and therefore can deliver more services to the Shia community. Hezbollah also focuses its messaging on resistance operations and Shia empowerment over religious practices and ideology.



1985–92

Subhi al-Tufayli and Abbas Musawi

Islamic Amal changes its name to Hezbollah and publishes its manifesto in 1985. While competing with Amal inside Lebanon for Shia support, Hezbollah creates its External Security Organization and begins launching attacks outside Lebanon's borders. The group also increases its provision of social services in the Shia community to build a base of support for its cause. Poor and religious Shia constitute its biggest support group. This era sees a peak in the importance of religious ideology and practices.

Resistance and Power

1996–2000



After Israel withdraws its forces from southern Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah gains widespread support among both Sunni and Shia Muslims. Hezbollah leans further into its resistance narrative, drawing most support in this effort from Lebanese Shia.

Post-Liberation and Expansion to Iraq

2000–2005 ●

Iran bolsters its influence in Iraq through Hezbollah, ramping up its efforts after the 2003 U.S. invasion.

Shortly after former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri is assassinated in 2005, Syria is pressured to withdraw its forces from Lebanon. A number of Shia become disillusioned with Hezbollah after the assassination.



2005–11 Inheriting Lebanon

As the March 14 coalition gains momentum at the expense of Hezbollah, Nasrallah and his forces go to war against Israel in 2006. The battle boosts Hezbollah's morale but badly damages southern Lebanon. Iran steps in with reconstruction funds, which allows Hezbollah to rebuild Dahiya as it wishes. In response to the March 14 coalition's election victories, Hezbollah militarily invades Sunni neighborhoods in Beirut and other areas. The Doha Agreement that follows this violence creates a national unity government that includes Hezbollah, despite its election losses. Shia discontent with Hezbollah and its tactics grows, and more Shia become outspoken in their opposition.

Syria I, Budget Shifts and Discontent

2011–16 ●

After the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Hezbollah intervenes on the side of the regime. Growing shares of its budget go to the war effort as well as to services for its fighters and their families. The group's identity as a resistance movement deteriorates as it sends ever higher numbers of Shia men to fight in Syria. Hezbollah's service provision to the Shia community also shrinks as a result, leading to increased Shia discontent.

This widening gap between Lebanese Shia and Hezbollah prompts more of the community to vote against Hezbollah and Amal in the 2016 municipal elections.



2016–21 Syria II, Sanctions and Financial Crisis

U.S. sanctions against Iran squeeze Hezbollah's finances, forcing the group to introduce austerity measures and sparking disillusionment among its members. Employees of Hezbollah-linked institutions see budget and pay cuts. For the first time, Shia residents of Dahiya openly protest against Hezbollah, which they blame for their poor economic situation and lack of services. Residents of Shia areas note rising wealth disparities, leading to greater frustration with Hezbollah, whose leaders are viewed as prospering while others suffer.

After the 1982 Lebanon war, and because of rising anti-Israel sentiment among the Shia, a number of Amal movement leaders split and formed a new, more militant movement—then known as the Islamic Amal. IRGC officials, who were already present in Lebanon, supported the basic infrastructure of the Islamic Amal to form Hezbollah as it is known today. The group first attracted international attention with the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and the American and French military barracks in Beirut.¹

During these early days, the Shia community remained divided among leftist groups, Sadr, and affluent families. Social services were still mostly provided by Amal, and the group's resistance rhetoric had not yet been developed. Iran was still planting the seeds for popular support among the Shia. Hezbollah's network of services started to grow alongside its military infrastructure and resistance rhetoric.

2. Subhi al-Tufayli and Abbas Musawi, 1985–92

In 1985, Islamic Amal published a manifesto under its new name, Hezbollah, outlining several key goals: to destroy Israel, to expel Western influence from Lebanon and the wider Middle East, and to combat enemies within Lebanon, particularly the Phalange Party. Hezbollah asserted that an Islamic state was the only legitimate option for the Lebanese government. The manifesto also denied Israel's right to exist.²

The manifesto marked the official launch of Hezbollah as an anti-Israel, anti-America, and anti-West militia. During this nascent period, Hezbollah pursued its goal of combating Israel and the West through militant means. The group also started to compete with Amal for leadership status within the Shia community. Hezbollah and Amal engaged in bloody clashes from 1985 to 1989; these were further instigated by political tensions between Syria and Iran, as Syria supported the Amal movement and Iran worked to maximize Hezbollah's power. Around that time, Hezbollah also activated its global presence.³ The group's External Security Organization (ESO, aka Islamic Jihad Organization) was responsible for planning and executing attacks worldwide. Among the ESO's first missions were the 1983 Kuwait

bombings, followed by the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847 after takeoff from Athens.

Hezbollah's social services network grew exponentially, and military operations against Israel increased. The goal was to expand and preserve Hezbollah's military structure, protecting it by lobbying the Shia community's support for Hezbollah's *raison d'être* and ideology. This phase, which witnessed the leadership of both secretaries-general Subhi al-Tufayli and Sheikh Abbas Musawi, is considered Hezbollah's strictest ideological era, a time when religious practices and rhetoric were of utmost importance.

For example, women were actively pressured to wear the black chador, and religious occasions followed conservative guidelines. Despite the increase in social services, the abundance of jobs and financial opportunities, and the appeal of its resistance rhetoric, Hezbollah's ideological regulations kept some at bay. Indeed, Hezbollah's strict redlines did not appeal to many within the Shia community, including (1) those who were either ideologically opposed, such as the leftists, or otherwise affiliated with Najaf, such as the affluent religious families (e.g., al-Amin, Shamseddine, and Sharafeddine), and (2) highly educated Shia who were more inclined to travel and open up to the West.

In terms of Hezbollah's popular support, the social services pillar was growing stronger, attracting a large number of poor and marginalized Shia and their families. The resistance, however—though expanding in terms of rhetoric and operations—had not yet achieved its desired “victory” or “liberation.” Further, Shia identity and empowerment were still developing. Therefore, during this phase, Hezbollah relied heavily on social services to strengthen its ideological and political narrative.

In terms of public support, the poor, who needed the services and jobs, and the ideological and religious Shia supported Hezbollah and its growing power. Both Amal and affluent Shia families felt that they were losing power to Hezbollah; consequently, they kept to themselves, knowing that any kind of opposition would be met with an aggressive response. Indeed, the War of Brothers (*Harb al-Ikhwa*) with Amal was still fresh in the Shia collective memory.

3. Soul-Searching, 1992–96

After Musawi was assassinated in February 1992, Hassan Nasrallah was appointed secretary-general of Hezbollah. The first few years of Nasrallah's reign were characterized by a slow transition, whereby Hezbollah—via Nasrallah—was looking to strengthen its popular support not only among the Shia, but across Lebanon. Hezbollah had realized that it might need to shift its strategy in order to appeal to the wider community and attract solid, sizeable support.

Hezbollah's goal was to cut into Amal's remaining influence and exercise complete hegemony over local Shia affairs. Rather than establishing an official Islamic state, the group would be able to informally control the Shia community. This goal was eventually realized after the civil war with the 1992 establishment of the "Shia duo," as the Hezbollah-Amal political alliance is known. In reality, however, the alliance was Amal's final surrender to Hezbollah's growing power and control. In return, Amal's leader, Nabih Berri, was appointed speaker of the house.

Hezbollah eventually decided to experiment with internal Lebanese politics, making the choice to participate in the 1992 parliamentary elections after realizing that only representation in state institutions could solidify the group's public support and access to decisionmaking. For that reason, the years 1992–96 were vital in terms of shifting the rhetoric to highlight resistance and Shia empowerment over ideology and religiosity. Prior to the 1992 elections, Hezbollah replaced the slogan of the "Islamic Revolution" with that of the "Islamic Resistance." The group also engaged in open dialogue with other Lebanese parties, and tried to reach out to alienated Shia by watering down its religious rules and redlines in Dahiya, the South, and the Beqa.

The Shia duo started to make gains in the Lebanese government. In addition to public posts in parliament, it took positions within security institutions, such as the State Security Service (Amn al-Dawlah), the General Security Service (al-Amn al-Amm), the Council for South Lebanon, the National Social Security Fund, the Lebanese University, and the ministries of information, health, and energy.⁴

With this access, Hezbollah was able to control compensation for displacement and damages resulting from Israel's attacks on Lebanon's South in 1993 and 1996. The Shia community also benefited from roads, public schools, and sanitation services, among other state-provided services. Hezbollah took credit for these services, even though they were funded by the state.

This effort, combined with a clear cutback in ideology, worked. The Shia community started to benefit from the group's power, and Dahiya—along with Shia communities across Lebanon, despite their demographic and ideological differences—began to converge around Hezbollah. From Amal's Chiyah to the tribes in Hay al-Sellom, Hezbollah's power and popularity grew. More Amal and leftist Shia migrated to Hezbollah in pursuit of jobs, benefits, and a fascination with a resistance movement that had proved more successful and organized than any other in Lebanon.

4. Resistance and Power, 1996–2000

All that power and confidence likely allowed Hezbollah to focus its energy and resources on Israel and to step up its military operations in Lebanon's South. Hezbollah's military media and well-managed communication strategy earned support for the group among the Shia community and beyond. This support peaked after the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, for which Hezbollah was considered an Arab hero (even by Sunni Arabs).

The withdrawal of Israeli forces was widely seen by Arabs as the first military gain in Lebanon's conflict with Israel. Consequently, Hezbollah's Shia affiliation became a minor detail in the eyes of the group's non-Shia supporters. Hezbollah recognized this dynamic, which it made sure to highlight in its official discourse and media propaganda. For example, as researcher Ziad Majed explains, al-Manar TV adopted the common Muslim (Sunni) call for prayer for its broader Arab viewers, but kept the Shia call on its national channel.⁵

But the empowerment of the Shia community never reached such a high point, and resistance remained the strongest pillar of popular support among

many Shia of all classes and political affiliations. Social services continued, but the spirit of resistance was the driving force behind Hezbollah's rhetoric, which it expressed through media, cultural activities, school curricular and extracurricular programs, banners, and street displays. Hezbollah thus became the sacred, and resistance was unquestionable; and both sacredness and resistance were linked to Iran's *velayat-e faqih*.

5. Post-Liberation and Expansion to Iraq, 2000–2005

The withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000 was a highlight for Hezbollah in terms of popular support and its reputation. Immediately afterward, however, the party was confronted by critics who questioned Hezbollah's need to keep its arms following Israel's withdrawal. Popular support for Hezbollah among the Shia community continued to grow, but the group's internal politics became more complicated.

Real tensions surfaced in 2004—after the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 in September and the extension of President Emile Lahoud's mandate by Lebanon's pro-Syrian parliament that same month. Conflict erupted after the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, which was followed by assassinations of other political and public figures.

From 2000 to 2005, Iran used Hezbollah's power and success to magnify its influence in Iraq, especially after the United States entered Iraq in 2003. Iran thought—and rightly so—that a U.S. presence in Iraq could jeopardize Iran's and Syria's power in Lebanon. That fear materialized when the Syrian army was forced to withdraw from Lebanon a few months after Hariri was assassinated.

During these years, the majority of the Shia—still intoxicated with liberation and power—took Hezbollah's side. Despite their ideological differences, the leftist groups decided to view Hezbollah through the resistance lens, ultimately making peace with the fact that Hezbollah had hijacked the

national resistance movement from the leftist parties back in the 1980s. That said, Shia discontent started to emerge after Hariri's assassination. Indeed, a considerable number of Shia participated—though unrepresented by parties or political leaders—in 2005's March 14 revolution, which was a response to Hezbollah's demonstration on March 8.

6. Inheriting Lebanon, 2005–11

Hezbollah started to feel threatened in 2005, when the opposing March 14 political camp grew more powerful after gaining regional and international support. In an attempt to counter this rising threat, Hezbollah decided to join the government. March 14 won the parliamentary elections in both 2005 and 2009, but Hezbollah chose not to give in to democratic choices. The group used force against the Lebanese for the first time—a decision that marked the beginning of Hezbollah's popular decline.

From 2005 to 2011, Hezbollah made a number of defensive moves in an effort to protect its arms and authority as the March 14 coalition gained strength and access to decisionmaking power. After several March 14 leaders were assassinated, Hezbollah entered the 2006 Lebanon war against Israel. The fighting, though it ended with what Hezbollah called "divine victory," caused significant damage and death. Iran rushed to the rescue with money for compensation and reconstruction; those funds gave Hezbollah the opportunity to reconstruct Dahiya as the group saw fit—that is, through Jihad al-Binaa's foundation and with a focus on Dahiya's three municipalities: Ghobeiry, Haret Hreik, and al-Burj.

Reconstruction funds reportedly reached \$300 million, channeled to Hezbollah through the Iranian embassy in Beirut. Many Shia residents of Dahiya gave Hezbollah's foundation, al-Waad al-Sadiq (The Truthful Promise), power of attorney to manage their property and compensation, which came from Iran, the Lebanese government, and other Arab states. Doing so made Hezbollah both the donor and the controller.⁶

As money flooded Dahiya, Hezbollah wanted residents to have access to

more than the necessities, though the group preferred to personally offer leisure and luxury amenities, thereby shielding the people from Beirut's temptations and other outside influences. So Hezbollah embarked on developing a new service—entertainment. The area referred to by residents as “downtown Dahiya” is home to a half million people.⁷ There are dozens of cafés and restaurants, along with amusement parks, sports centers, private beaches for women, wedding halls, exhibition centers, and summer youth camps.

Hezbollah wanted to offer the Shia community a space to recover and forget without having to leave Dahiya. To accomplish this, Hezbollah needed the Shia's collective memory of the war both intact and unified. It also needed to prevent the Shia's exposure to other versions of history and to the growing tension with the Sunnis.

Tension with the Sunnis reached a boiling point in May 2008, when Hezbollah and its allies invaded Sunni neighborhoods of Beirut and the Druze Mountains following a government decision to dismantle Hezbollah's airport security camera and communications network. This happened after an eighteen-month-long sit-in that Hezbollah had organized in downtown Beirut, blocking the roads to the parliament and other government buildings. The events of May 7 eventually led to the Doha agreement, which resulted in the first-ever “national unity government.” This act stripped the March 14 coalition of power granted by democratic elections and provided Hezbollah with a precedent to control the government, whether it won or lost elections. That was the moment when Hezbollah took over Lebanon by force.

That moment was also a crossroads for Hezbollah's popular support. Despite its empowerment and isolation of the Shia community, the events of May 7, 2008, took everyone by surprise, including the Shia. Hezbollah's justifications to the community were merely superficial; they kept the community intact and silent but failed to suppress the overall feeling that something had changed—that Hezbollah was willing to (1) use its arms against other Lebanese, and (2) work with militias such as Amal, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and the Baath, which many Shia loathed.

Although this phase marked the beginning of Shia discontent, such feelings were still very new. A number of Shia activists, writers, and journalists

started to speak out, forming an informal but resilient opposition group with two goals in mind: (1) reveal the diversity of the Shia community and (2) provide a Shia alternative to Hezbollah. Some renowned individuals, such as Lokman Slim (who was assassinated in February 2021), Ali al-Amine, and Sayyed Hani Fahs, were among these outspoken figures.

Three problems faced this group: First, Hezbollah used systematic violence against the group's members, even threatening their families. Second, the March 14 political camp—which was still practicing politics along sectarian lines—did not know where to place an opposing Shia voice and thus could not incorporate Shia opposition. Third, the group's attempts to form a unified movement failed. While its members were united over their opposition to Hezbollah and the Iranian regime, they had very different opinions on secularism versus religious institutions, regional alliances, and U.S. support. Age-old tensions among traditional families heightened these differences further.

7. Syria I, 2011–16: Budget Shifts and Discontent

Hezbollah enjoyed its gradual takeover of Lebanon's state institutions and resources, providing its Shia constituents with both services and empowerment—that is, until the Syrian war required the party's involvement. At the beginning, Hezbollah did not publicly announce its involvement in Syria. The group, which felt that fighting the Syrian opposition could not be more complicated than fighting the Israeli forces, believed it would go in, end the revolution, and return to Lebanon without anyone noticing.⁸

Hezbollah's initial calculations were wrong. That its participation in Syria would take longer than anticipated became clear during the al-Qusayr battle.⁹ Indeed, from that moment on, Hezbollah had to shift its priorities, its strategies, and its narrative. The group's budget was dedicated primarily to military operations in Syria; funding for social services continued during this phase, but most of these funds were allocated to families and institutions linked to Hezbollah's military infrastructure.

Once considered by Arabs a force that won quick, decisive victories against

Israel, Hezbollah became a force that ships home the bodies of “martyrs” killed while fighting a foreign war. Slowly but surely, Hezbollah transformed from a “resistance movement” into more of a corporate employer of young Shia men who come from poor neighborhoods, are looking for stable income, and desire some kind of status. Fighting for Hezbollah became a job, with a two-year contract and a salary between \$500 and \$1,200, plus benefits.

In addition, the sectarian rhetoric that heightened the Sunni-Shia rift in the region led to further isolation of the Shia, depriving them of job opportunities in the Persian Gulf countries. Fighting in Syria has become almost the only source of income for many young Shia men. Indeed, many Shia fighters and nonfighters interviewed for this study said they would not consider the war in Syria if they had access to jobs or loans to start small businesses. The problem is that they are too financially dependent on Hezbollah and have no other options.¹⁰

Doubts about Hezbollah’s capabilities—both military and financial—started to rise within the community, albeit discreetly. The substantial loss of men and reduction in services rendered Hezbollah’s small military triumphs in Syria insufficient. For the first time, the Shia felt that they were giving without receiving anything in return. Popular support for Hezbollah started to shrink, but not to an extent that was alarming for Hezbollah. After all, the community had no alternative but to wait for the next divine victory.

During these years of shifting goals, geographic focus, and budgetary priorities, Hezbollah started to force the Shia to pay for all of the services and benefits they received in advance. In addition to the young men who were recruited to fight in Syria, Hezbollah started to exploit their families, mainly women. It was against this background that many fissures in the Shia community began to come to light. Those who needed it—mainly young men from poor families and neighborhoods—took Hezbollah’s offer to fight in Syria, but the gap between Hezbollah and the fighter community widened. Also, within the fighter community itself, differences became more apparent in salaries and benefits received by veteran fighters and new recruits.

More significantly, the layers within the community became more visible. Amal refused to officially send fighters to assist Hezbollah in Syria, while the families and figures affiliated with Najaf started to be more outspoken against

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. Although the leftists remained more or less silent, a sense of discontent was growing among them. This discontent was evident in the 2016 municipal elections, when many Shia voted for leftist and communist parties that decided to run against Hezbollah and Amal.

8. Syria II, 2016–21: Sanctions and Financial Crisis

Things were already not looking good for Hezbollah when the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—and slap Iran with sanctions. These sanctions had a direct impact on Hezbollah's finances.

Hezbollah realized that more budget cuts were needed if the group was to survive the maximum pressure campaign. The party implemented harsh new austerity measures, which gradually became more severe as Lebanon entered its own financial and economic crisis in 2019. Many Hezbollah members and supporters were shocked by the measures, including rank-and-file fighters who had largely been shielded from past budget cuts.¹¹ Most significantly, the austerity campaign shook the group's image as a "father figure" within the Shia community.

Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah stated on August 14, 2019, that Hezbollah would face a financial problem "as long as U.S. president Donald Trump is in power."¹² Yet while Nasrallah assured listeners that the group's strong infrastructure would allow Hezbollah to persevere, officials have so far been unable to deliver on such promises. As the fighting has subsided in much of Syria, Hezbollah has brought many of its personnel home, apart from the combat troops and logistics forces stationed in the Damascus area, Deir al-Zour, and southern Syria. In particular, Hezbollah has redeployed many of its newer fighters, whom it recruited during the war on a contractual basis and is no longer obligated to pay now that they are back home.

Meanwhile, according to a 2019 report by Sky News Arabia, employees of Hezbollah's media, education, medical, and military systems have complained of deep pay cuts; some employees reportedly received only a

percentage of their salaries, which decreased as months passed.¹³ Fighters and their families have complained about lost wages as well—a largely unprecedented development.

In other sectors, Hezbollah sources quoted by local media reported that employees of its religious institutions have not been paid in months. The group has also closed around one thousand offices and apartments throughout Lebanon, merged many of its institutions, and frozen all hiring.

These austerity measures eventually took their toll on the relationship between Hezbollah and the Shia community; for the first time, Dahiya witnessed anti-Hezbollah demonstrations. For example, on October 25, 2017, Lebanese police raided unlicensed street vendors in Dahiya, which led to rare public expressions of discontent against Hezbollah.¹⁴ Internal security forces used bulldozers to take down shacks in the poor Hay al-Sellom neighborhood, where vendors mainly sold coffee and mobile phones. In response, dozens of citizens poured into the streets, where they burned tires and blocked roads—an act seen many times when state authorities have interfered in Dahiya. This time, however, protesters were caught on television badmouthing not the central government, but Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who they blamed for the loss of their livelihoods and the war in Syria. One woman addressed Nasrallah after she found her shop—her only source of income—flattened: “We all provided martyrs for you in Syria. I have three injured sons. And this is how you’re treating us?” Another man yelled at the camera, “Syria can go to hell, along with Hassan Nasrallah!”¹⁵

It is common knowledge in Lebanon that government security authorities never enter Dahiya unless they coordinate with Hezbollah officials. It is also widely known that the group often allows illegal ventures and hides criminals. The bulldozed shops, which had existed for decades, had previously been protected from Hezbollah raids. On October 25, 2017, however, Hezbollah did not even bother to inform locals that the raid would be taking place. It is no coincidence, then, that this exceptional act of revolt against Hezbollah occurred in one of Dahiya’s poorest neighborhoods. Class divisions in Dahiya are more drastic than ever—the poor neighborhoods are providing fighters while the upper-middle-class and rich neighborhoods

are benefiting from the war.

In Hay al-Sellom, posters of “martyrs” cover the walls, and funerals for young men have become a daily occurrence. The war is present in every home, where news reports and discussions center on Syrian battles and deaths. In other neighborhoods, however, the war is a very distant thing, in large part because wealthy Shia do not send their sons to fight. On the contrary, many Hezbollah officials have taken advantage of the war economy to expand their local investments. Shops, restaurants, hotels, and cafés are now booming in prosperous areas of Dahiya and the South.

The widening wealth gap helps explain the riot and others that followed in 2019 and 2020, with the poor expressing their frustration toward Hezbollah officials who live in fancy apartments, drive brand-new cars, and send their children to private schools and universities in other neighborhoods. Previously, this frustration had been contained because Hezbollah maintained its role as protector of all Shia, rich or poor. But this confidence in Hezbollah as protector has eroded over time.

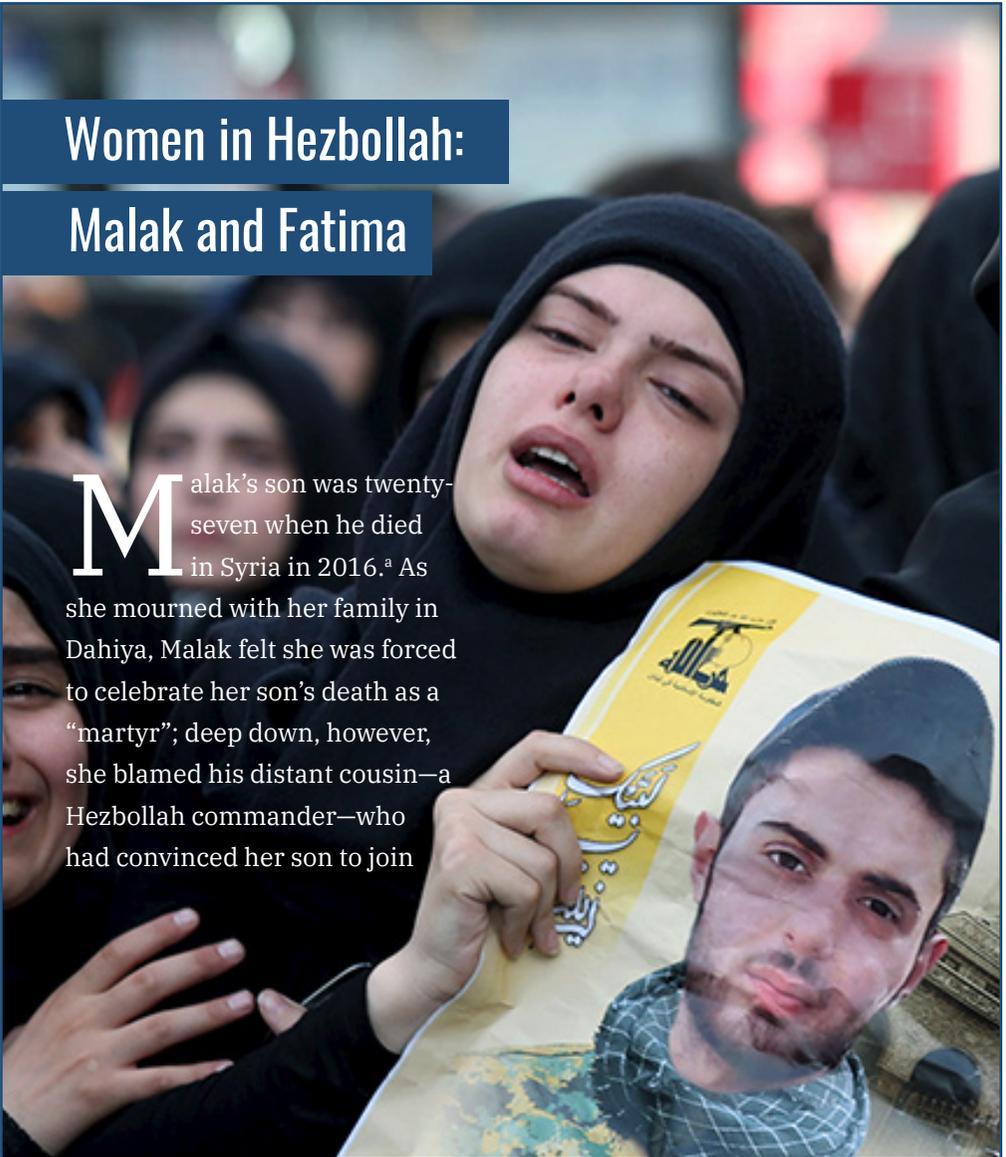
According to sources close to Hezbollah, leaders not only allowed the raid, they actually asked for it. Those same sources claim that bulldozing shops in Hay al-Sellom was part of a larger plan called Dahiya (My Dahiya), launched in September of 2018 by Dahiya’s three municipalities. The plan, which was based on an effort to beautify the area and make it more comfortable for residents, involves removing a chaotic network of illegal structures that cause traffic jams and overcrowding in certain neighborhoods. Dahiya residents, for their part, saw the plan as a distraction from Hezbollah’s main challenges in Dahiya: rampant small crime, drugs, and prostitution. Such problems have proliferated since 2011 amid both the war in Syria and Hezbollah’s neglect of internal social issues.

Once the group became consumed by events next door, it could no longer keep a lid on drug consumption, petty crime, and illegal construction back home. In Dahiya, Shia street clashes and complaints grew louder; indeed, maintaining their livelihood and basic services was significantly more important to locals than was Hezbollah’s prestigious new regional role. Families who could afford to do so began to leave the district, heading south or to other areas of Beirut.

Although outbursts from this incident and others were immediately contained—the people who badmouthed Hezbollah and Nasrallah were forced to apologize on camera—the deeper problems persisted. Those who were forced to apologize felt humiliated, for their apologies were based on fear, not genuine regret. Gradually, submission and fear replaced respect and allegiance—another major shift for Hezbollah.

Women in Hezbollah: Malak and Fatima

Malak's son was twenty-seven when he died in Syria in 2016.⁸ As she mourned with her family in Dahiya, Malak felt she was forced to celebrate her son's death as a "martyr"; deep down, however, she blamed his distant cousin—a Hezbollah commander—who had convinced her son to join



the fight in Syria. He had received barely two weeks of military training before he left. It took only four months for her son to return to Malak in a coffin.

Two days later, Malak received a visit from three Hezbollah officials, who spent twenty minutes lecturing her about the virtues of martyrdom and Sayyeda Zainab's role as a model for all martyrs' mothers. In Shia Islam, Sayyeda Zainab—the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad and daughter of Imam Ali, one of the few survivors of the Karbala battle during which Zainab's brother Hussein was killed—symbolizes grief, justice, and the fight for good over evil. For Hezbollah, she was the perfect vehicle to silence grieving mothers and lend a sacred element to unjustified death. The Hezbollah officials told Malak that she had now been elevated to the status of a martyr's mother and that Sayyeda Zainab would be looking after her.

A few days later, Malak received compensation, reduced from \$40,000 (the amount that martyrs' families had received before

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria) to \$20,000. She then was left to mourn in silence, while her son's image occupied a mere poster on a Dahiya neighborhood wall.

Fatima, Malak's daughter-in-law, had lost her husband and thus became financially responsible for the upbringing of their son. Hezbollah officials assured Fatima that she would be taken care of; that meant trying to make her part of Hezbollah's pool of brides—or temporary wives—for fighters, a reward given to those who return to Beirut for a respite from battle, or who are injured and deserve compensation. The prize is a temporary *mutah* marriage, organized by Hezbollah as part of the group's efforts to offer sexual services to its fighters. This incentive is also endorsed and authorized by Iran's *veli-ye faqih* (i.e., Ayatollah Ali Khamenei).^b

Among the services—or soft-power tools—that Hezbollah offers to the community are the “good wives.” A girl in Hezbollah's community is brought up in al-Mahdi's or al-Mustafa's schools (Hezbollah's schools). She is

expected to work in Hezbollah institutions, marry a Hezbollah fighter, and promote Hezbollah's values both within and outside her family. The Party of God knows that a disciplined and committed woman can raise disciplined and committed fighters. It is a system that reproduces itself.

But the endless war in Syria has produced cracks in the system, and women are no longer as engaged as they used to be; nor are they being compensated for their sacrifices the way that men are. The divide between old and new fighters is also growing wider. The old fighters and their families were—and still are—part of Hezbollah's community, which does not represent the Shia community at large. When they die in battle, their women are treated with more respect and receive more compensation. Already part of the Hezbollah system, these women enjoy a certain power and status. Services to the larger community may have been cut, but Hezbollah's inner circle is still taken care of.

A new problem is emerging,

however: the wives of the new recruits. These women, though not necessarily Hezbollah members and generally uncommitted to the group's ideology, are part of the community that the party allegedly protects. Most are from poor families, and without their husbands' income—and given lower compensation and fewer services provided—these women tend to suffer financially, despite all the talk about their newly elevated status and Sayyeda Zainab's protection.

Such dynamics have created a class problem within Hezbollah's community, with regard to how Hezbollah divides its budget: fighters versus nonfighters, old fighters versus new recruits. Employees in Hezbollah's institutions, around 65 percent of whom are women,^c are losing benefits, and their salaries are being cut and delayed. Meanwhile, the wives of new recruits have begun to feel neglected, and Hezbollah has started encouraging them to marry other fighters, even in temporary *mutah* arrangements.^d

Fatima talked about Hezbollah

officials who threatened to reduce her services and money if she did not agree to “private visits.” Some women, like Fatima, refuse such visits; others agree to them, citing the fact that temporary marriage is not only acceptable to Hezbollah, but also promoted as a sacred act that will be rewarded in heaven. By linking the sacred to such a practice, Hezbollah has managed to contain its losses and achieve a shaky equilibrium amid challenging circumstances.

When Fatima’s husband died, a delegation of Hezbollah officials visited her and gave her an envelope filled with money. One of the officials, a senior party member, visited Fatima again a couple of weeks later, allegedly to “check on her”; after that, his visits became

more frequent and he made advances toward her. Although Fatima is poor, she found the official’s demands demeaning. When she rejected him, he threatened to halt her benefits.

Fatima, who lives in the poor neighborhood of Hursh al-Qatil in Dahiya, comes from a very conservative tribe from the Beqa region. Although she went back to live with her parents after her husband died, they are already underprivileged and cannot provide for their daughter. Eventually, with her parents’ encouragement, Fatima accepted the marriage proposal of another fighter, whom she had never met. As soon as she married him, the harassment stopped.

a. This portrait is adapted from the author’s October 2016 essay in *Tablet*, “Hezbollah’s Women Aren’t Happy,” available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-women-arent-happy>.

b. Hanin Ghaddar, “The Militarization of Sex,” *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/25/the-militarization-of-sex/>.

c. According to a woman once active within Hezbollah’s women’s institutions.

d. Ghaddar, “Militarization of Sex,” <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/25/the-militarization-of-sex/>.

The Impact of Hezbollah's Syria Involvement on Its Fighting Force

Hezbollah's two Syria phases—in addition to U.S. sanctions—had the strongest impact on the group's relations with the Shia community. This impact was seen in the widening gap within Dahiya's neighborhoods: between rich and poor, between Hezbollah's community and other Shia communities, and within Hezbollah's own ranks. Services and jobs took a hit because of financial challenges—namely, sanctions and more spending on Syria and on regional operations—but for the Shia community, the resistance rhetoric also weakened dramatically. As Israel continued to target Hezbollah's positions and personnel in Syria, the group turned its arms against the Lebanese people—specifically activists and protesters during and after the 2019 protests. Hezbollah's arms thus became a tool for oppression and defending the political elite, rather than for fighting injustice or serving the resistance. In Syria, two major factors led to the Shia discontent—the dynamic in Aleppo and Idlib and Qasem Soleimani's influence.

Aleppo and Idlib

The longer Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, the more aggressive the financial and social repercussions felt in the Shia community. The huge and deeply felt loss of young men, services, jobs, and benefits could not be excused anymore. A number of crossroads in Syria highlighted Hezbollah's incapacity to maintain the resistance rhetoric, as well as the excuses the group used to convince the Shia of the war's sacredness. Hezbollah's main rationalizations were (1) protecting Lebanon's borders; (2) protecting Shia shrines in Syria; (3) protecting Shia communities in Syria; and, finally, (4) setting a "resistance" front on the Syrian-Israeli border to attack Israel.

The excuses worked for a while to placate both the fighter community and the Shia community at large. Thus, some sacrifices in services and benefits were acceptable. But two elements fomented a sense of increased doubt and frustration among the Shia: the length of the war and Hezbollah's

involvement in areas that did not match the group's justifications (including Aleppo in 2016 and Idlib in 2020).

There are no Shia shrines or populations in either Aleppo or Idlib, and neither city sits along the Lebanese border. In addition, Hezbollah lost many of its fighters and commanders during these two battles, further alienating the Shia community in Lebanon, whose members no longer understood the rationale behind Hezbollah's prolonged involvement in Syria.

Aleppo, in particular, was a major crossroads, not only for the greater Shia community (for the reasons just described), but also for Hezbollah fighters.

Soleimani's Influence

Relations between Hezbollah fighters and their commanders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps became more complicated, as well.¹⁶ Although Hezbollah remains Iran's most skilled militia, anecdotal accounts indicate that the war in Syria has uncovered—for many ideological fighters—Iran's true expansionist intentions, along with a Persian arrogance toward Arab Shia that Hezbollah fighters are not used to.¹⁷ Many Hezbollah members blamed former IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani for all the losses they suffered during the Aleppo battle.

After Soleimani was dispatched to Syria in the early days of the war, the Hezbollah-Iran dynamic changed quickly. Hezbollah's commanders had already been working under the IRGC's supervision for years, but Soleimani began micromanaging their military operations to an unprecedented degree. This shift, coupled with Soleimani's strict command over the consolidated Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia militias fighting in Syria, highlighted the complex relations between Persian and Arab Shia.

Frequent appeals to sectarian identity brought all Shia militias under the IRGC flag during the course of the war, but this unity has since been challenged by deep-rooted Persian-Arab tensions. Those who fought under Soleimani tend to remark on this tension: as one Hezbollah member told the author in 2016, "It was clear to many of us that [Soleimani's] priority was to protect the Iranians, and that [Hezbollah fighters] and all non-Iranian Shiites could be sacrificed."

Similarly, a number of other fighters have complained of being abandoned by their Iranian and Iraqi Shia allies on the battlefield. Such incidents apparently led to many losses among Hezbollah's ranks, and some fighters subsequently refused to fight under Iranian commanders. Likewise, many interviewees complained about the "stingy" and "arrogant" manner in which Iranians treat Arab fighters. As one fighter put it, "Sometimes I feel I'm fighting alongside strangers who do not care if I am dead...We should ask ourselves why we couldn't accomplish anything in Syria, although we have advanced weapons, while the old Hezbollah generation achieved so much with more traditional weapons. We are fighting in the wrong land."¹⁸

Soleimani seems to have had little tolerance for such criticism. According to one commander, "When complaints increased and the Hezbollah leadership stalled Soleimani's requests to send more fighters to Aleppo, he cut salaries for three months, or until Hezbollah did what he asked." Yet while many of the interviewees disliked Soleimani and his apparent disdain toward Arabs, they did respect and fear him, with the understanding that the relationship was that of a boss and employee rather than a partnership. As a result, many veteran fighters have come to believe that the notion of a "unified Shia identity" is fiction; they are returning home as disillusioned Lebanese Arabs rather than victorious pan-Shia warriors.

Although Hezbollah's leadership has sought to link the Syrian war to grander goals—namely, the longstanding posture of "resistance" toward Israel, as well as the more recent call to defeat *takfiri* (heretical) Sunni Islamist groups such as the Islamic State—many fighters are unconvinced. They are cynical about such rhetoric because most of their battles have been aimed at propping up the Bashar al-Assad regime, not fighting the Islamic State. Many fighters also believe that they are paying all the costs while Iran reaps the benefits of their involvement. As a result, significant numbers of veterans have been leaving Hezbollah, making room for a new and rather different crop of younger fighters.

According to some members who have taken leave from the war or quit entirely, the newcomers are not joining the fight for reasons of ideology or self-realization.¹⁹ They are there to collect a salary and secure their future. They are not particularly concerned about Hezbollah's broader mission,

and they tend to follow Iranian orders without complaining.

Several factors may help explain this trend, including Hezbollah's drastic rhetorical shift from "resisting Israel" to "fighting Sunnis," Lebanon's ever-worsening shortage of social services, Hezbollah's failure to achieve the promised "divine victory," and the "bossy" attitude of the group's supposed Iranian partners. Whatever the case, Hezbollah has lost some of its "sacredness" in Lebanon; thus, for many Shia, pursuing an alternative identity, narrative, or way of life was simply inevitable.

The 2019 targeted killing of Soleimani in Iraq by U.S. forces constituted a huge blow to Hezbollah itself. Soleimani had become the glue that held everything together on the military front, and the loss of his micromanaging approach left a major void.

After 2011, Soleimani's increased micromanagement of all Iran-backed militias—including Hezbollah—diminished Hezbollah's military and political maneuverability. When Hezbollah's last military commander—Mustafa Badreddine—was killed in Syria, allegedly by Iran's Qods Force, Soleimani insisted that Badreddine be replaced with four less senior commanders, partly because Hezbollah had lost most of its senior commanders and lacked an immediate replacement. But the main reason, according to a number of Hezbollah fighters, was that Soleimani wanted a more hands-on approach.

Hezbollah relied on Soleimani as a military commander, but the group eventually realized that it needed its own military leader before replacing Soleimani in the region. A proper replacement for Soleimani did not really exist, and Iran would struggle to fill that void. Meanwhile, Iran tasked Hezbollah official Muhammad Kawtharani, who was already based in Iraq, with taking over some of Soleimani's work in the country—mainly coordinating among the Iran-backed Iraqi militias. This proved to be a complicated task.

To the Iraqi militias, Kawtharani is a fellow Arab, and although he was appointed by Iran, he is still an employee. While Soleimani was the decisionmaker, Kawtharani could only follow orders and implement decisions. Sources within Hezbollah's command circles talked of Hezbollah's struggle to get the Iraqi militias in line after Soleimani's killing.²⁰ Meanwhile, new Qods Force commander Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani lacked the credentials of Soleimani—especially his understanding of Arab culture and language.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war took a toll on both the Shia community in general and the fighter community in particular. Despite Hezbollah's efforts to keep such developments under the radar, the conflict has taken a serious psychological toll on the fighters and their families, a fact that underscores the vulnerability of Hezbollah's fighting force. In fact, according to a number of fighters, many of those who fought for Hezbollah in Syria are receiving psychological treatment in three centers managed by the party—one in Dahiya and two in southern Lebanon.

Although psychological treatment is now more common among soldiers returning from war, it is still considered taboo within the Hezbollah community. Indeed, the typical Hezbollah fighter is portrayed as an unyielding and undefeatable warrior. Thus, Hezbollah tries very hard to conceal any weaknesses, physical or mental, among its fighters. The image of sacredness and omnipotence that Hezbollah conveys to its constituency cannot be challenged by any hint of fragility.

But Syria has transformed Hezbollah's image from one of sacredness and invincibility into one of vulnerability and exposure. There are no more divine victories, and the Hezbollah fighter image has lost its powerful aura. Thanks to social media, videos of Hezbollah fighters in Syria—mainly those not produced and packaged by Hezbollah—show real Hezbollah fighters; they are human beings, not gods, and they feel fear and shy away from death.

When Lebanon's financial crisis hit in 2019, Hezbollah continued to pay many of its fighters in U.S. dollars, and the group flaunted its ability to do so on social media for all of Lebanon to see. This tactic was an attempt by the group to demonstrate its strength and immunity; but the images and videos of boxes of dollars in what appear to be Hezbollah depots had the opposite effect on many Shia, who no longer had access to hard currency and were suffering from shortages of food, medicine, fuel, and other essential items. Thus, the group's image as a strong, invincible party shifted to that of an arrogant and insensitive militia.

Hezbollah's smuggling of food and essential items into Syria, when the Lebanese people were desperate to secure them at home, further diminished the Shia community's appraisal of the party. When people started to complain about the increased smuggling, Hezbollah tried to bring up the issue

of resistance, blaming a “U.S. siege on Lebanon” in new rhetoric highlighted by party leadership. One of the group’s officials, Sheikh Sadiq al-Nabulsi, even acknowledged the cross-border smuggling, saying such efforts were an integral part of the resistance.²¹

Notes

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Hezbollah's Shia Network Within State Institutions

State institutions are integral to Hezbollah's strength and decisionmaking power, in addition to its efforts to secure resources. When the group smuggles essential goods, those goods are usually subsidized by the Central Bank of Lebanon; thus, the group cannot facilitate smuggling operations or make money without the central bank governor, customs officials, and relevant ministries.

The Ministry of Public Health—which until recently was headed by a Hezbollah minister—is just one example of how the group uses state resources. Hezbollah has used Lebanon's health budget to disproportionately fund its own medical institutions, according to a leaked document issued by the ministry after the Beirut port explosion.¹ For instance, the main Hezbollah-backed medical institution, al-Rassoul al-Azam, received 14.7 billion Lebanese pounds for 2021 (close to US\$10 million at the official rate), a 5.5-billion-pound increase from the prior year, despite not being affected by the explosion. The total allocation for three other prominent hospitals affected by the blast did not exceed 16.4 billion pounds, effectively flat from the prior year.

In Dahiya, Hezbollah works through the municipalities, whose funding it uses—along with state money—to serve its constituency. For example, during the month of Ramadan in 2019, Hezbollah relied on Dahiya municipalities to

pay for its own charity initiatives, including nightly iftar repasts. According to opposition groups in Ghobeiry, the Dahiya municipalities function as security, political, and financial arms for Hezbollah.²

In previous years, especially after the 1989 Taif Accord marked the official end of the Lebanese civil war, Hezbollah decided to enter Lebanon's political arena through participation in parliament. Taif made the Assad regime Lebanon's protector, and allowed Syria to send its troops next door—supposedly to oversee a two-year transition period and ensure the implementation of the agreement's terms—before withdrawing. However, Syrian forces did not withdraw until 2005, after the killing of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the succeeding Cedar Revolution.

Instead of abiding by the terms of the agreement, the Syrian regime imposed its hegemony over Lebanon via violence, coercion, and control over state institutions. Back then, the agreement between Iran and Syria was that they would share Lebanon: Syria would control politics, and Iran—via Hezbollah—would control security and military decisions and operations.

The Syrian regime was thus in charge of appointing ministers and state officials, and the idea was to get Hezbollah into parliament only to formalize its representation of the Shia community—beyond that of Amal, which had been allocated most Shia state positions and jobs by the Syrian regime. One of the main institutions that allowed Amal and eventually Hezbollah to channel state funding was the Council of the South, a body established in 1970 by Musa al-Sadr to force the state to address the needs of the southern Shia communities.

Nabih Berri, however, used the council to enforce a culture of clientelism and channel state funds to Amal officials. Along with the council's jobs, Amal enjoyed around 95 percent of the state jobs allocated for the Shia.³ Hezbollah did not mind, though, as it was more focused on establishing its military and security apparatus in Lebanon; the money the group received from Iran was more than enough to satisfy the Shia, as it funded Hezbollah's parallel structure of jobs and services.

Hezbollah's official entry into Lebanon's state institutions was in 1992, when it won 12 of 128 seats. In 1996, it won 7 seats, and in 2000, it won 10. The group's participation increased after the 2005 withdrawal of the

Syrian regime from Lebanon, when it won 14 seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections, 12 in the 2009 elections, and 13 in the 2018 elections. But Hezbollah decided to officially enter the government only in 2005, following the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Of thirty cabinet positions, Hezbollah had two ministers.

In 2000, when Bashar al-Assad took over the Syrian presidency after his father, Hafiz, died, the dynamics between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime in Lebanon also changed. Bashar put most of his trust and political decisionmaking power in the hands of the Iranian regime, probably fearing the U.S. presence in Iraq next door. This stance affected Lebanon as Hezbollah's role and power grew. Further, opposition to Syria's hegemony over Lebanon matured, highlighted by two opposition groups: the Bristol Gathering and the Qornet Shahwan Gathering. The groups were eventually endorsed by Hariri in 2005,⁴ and many believe that his endorsement led to Hariri's assassination that same year.

Following Hariri's assassination, the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the Cedar Revolution, the formation of the March 14 alliance, and the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, the future looked too dangerous for Hezbollah to stay on the margins of the political scene. So the group did what it does best: it used arms and violence to take over.

Hezbollah's efforts started with a series of political assassinations targeting the group's main and most credible opponents. The 2006 war with Israel followed, which allowed the group to declare a "divine victory" that was ultimately leveraged to sideline opponents of Hezbollah and overthrow the March 14 majority government. After the 2006 war, Hezbollah signed a memorandum of understanding with the Free Patriotic Movement—one of two major Christian parties in Lebanon—allowing its leader, Michel Aoun, to become president in October 2016.

On December 1, 2006, Hezbollah closed off downtown Beirut, setting up more than six hundred tents around government buildings and demanding that the government of Fouad Siniora resign. After eighteen months of a total shutdown of the city center, followed by a shutdown of parliament by Berri, Hezbollah used its arms for the first time against the Lebanese people on May 7, 2008.

This direct violence against the Lebanese people was a major crossroads for Hezbollah, as it marked the group's first step toward dominance over Lebanon's political scene and state institutions. The "short war" of 2008 ended with the Doha agreement, which established the first—albeit unconstitutional—national unity government. The results of the 2005 elections, which had ushered in a March 14 majority government, were completely undone. At that time, Hezbollah introduced its new political formula, which guarantees Hezbollah a "blocking third" of any cabinet, regardless of the results of parliamentary elections. With its blocking third, Hezbollah can veto any government formation, mission statement, or decision, as well as vital security, military, and financial appointments within state institutions.

This was the beginning of Hezbollah's growing control of the state. Hezbollah not only inherited the Syrian regime's authority over Lebanon's political and state institutions, it also enforced this power via arms and security measures. And that control came in handy when Hezbollah entered the Syrian war, essentially guaranteeing uninterrupted transport of fighters and weapons from Lebanon to Syria and vice versa. Hezbollah also used its access to political, security, and military institutions to (1) ensure Lebanon's foreign policy supported the Syrian and Iranian regimes, (2) crack down on Syrian opposition figures who fled to Lebanon, and (3) ensure the Syrian regime could benefit from Lebanon's economic and financial systems, until both collapsed in the fall of 2019.

When new U.S. sanctions hit the Iranian regime, Hezbollah started to feel the financial pain. As its access to state institutions widened, the group looked for ministries that could help compensate for losses in social services. After winning the elections in 2018—with its allies—Hezbollah made sure that most sovereign ministry appointments were allocated to its supporters, including Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement. But Hezbollah wanted the service ministries for itself, especially the Ministry of Public Health. (The body commands Lebanon's fourth-largest budget, which is channeled directly to the public.) Amid Lebanon's financial crisis and the shortage of U.S. dollars affecting the import of medicine, Hezbollah leveraged the Public Health Ministry to direct funds to its community and loyal supporters. Most important, increased tensions with Israel over Hezbollah's precision missile

program in Lebanon are fueling fears of a new war. Because of sanctions, Iran could not compensate for such a war's significant destruction and losses with fresh hard currency as it did in 2016.

With their own financial difficulties, Hezbollah's services will not be able to deliver, either. For example, the Martyrs Foundation was established in part to provide financial assistance, health, and social support to relatives of those killed in combat, while the Foundation for the Wounded was formed to help civilians injured during hostilities with Israel or other operations. Today, however, Hezbollah's health services—which include five hospitals and hundreds of medical centers, infirmaries, dental offices, and mental health providers—can barely meet the needs of wounded soldiers and their families. The average ratio of killed to wounded in modern combat is such that the group may have upward of nine thousand casualties from Syria to care for.

That number could increase in the case of a war with Israel. Having direct control over the Public Health Ministry, Hezbollah thought it would be able to use any assistance or funds the ministry received, thereby enabling the group to run its own “veterans affairs” health system even if Iranian support is curtailed because of sanctions.

Hezbollah's access to all these institutions also benefited the loyalists within the Shia community, and thus strengthened their relations with both Hezbollah and Amal. Indeed, it created a vicious cycle wherein Hezbollah and Amal appoint prominent loyalists (not necessarily official members) to positions within state institutions, thereby guaranteeing that those loyalists will return the favor by giving preference to the duo's lower-ranking supporters and members.

In addition, by utilizing the Shia grade 1 posts within state institutions, Hezbollah exerts control over the state's decisionmaking mechanisms. Of the 157 grade 1 posts, 33 are allocated to Shia. Alongside the speaker of the house and the president of the Council of the South, Hezbollah and Amal control a number of significant security, financial, and political posts. Both parties have members in the following posts: head of the military court, president of the Lebanese University, director-general of social affairs, president of the Audit Bureau, director-general of the National Social Security

Fund, president of the Regie (Lebanese tobacco bureau), director-general of technical and vocational training, chairman of the Intra Investment Company, president of the Lebanese Customs Administration, and vice president of the Banque du Liban, among others.

When Hezbollah was forced to suspend its social services and could no longer offer jobs within its own institutions, the group started looking into state institutions as an alternative. According to Amal sources, Hezbollah officials had informed Berri in early 2019 that they would be taking 50 percent of the jobs allocated to Shia within state institutions. In addition, Hezbollah might eventually seek to abandon Berri. Doing so would allow the group to achieve two goals in one step: (1) proving to the Shia community that it will no longer protect corruption—one of the main issues voiced during the 2019 protests; and (2) taking over Berri's share within state institutions and Shia business networks. Efforts to replace Berri as speaker have been in the works for some time, with two candidates leading the pack: Jamil Assayed, the former head of the General Security Directorate and a close ally of Syria's Assad regime, and Abbas Ibrahim, the current head of the General Security Directorate.⁵

Such developments have proven very lucrative for Hezbollah, even as state funds have lost value amid the country's financial collapse and the central bank's stoppage of subsidies.⁶ Thus has the Lebanese state functioned as a vehicle to protect Iran's interests in Lebanon. Functioning through a failed state is better for Hezbollah than functioning without a state at all, and it is certainly a better option for the group than resolving the national crisis or saving state institutions.

Notes

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8

The October 2019 Protests

One of Hezbollah's bitterest blows came on October 17, 2019, when the Lebanese people, including members of the Shia community, took to the streets in anti-government protests. The protesters thereafter delegitimized two of Hezbollah's main allies inside the government: Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and former foreign minister Gebran Bassil. Meanwhile, large swaths of Hezbollah's Shia constituents joined demonstrations in Lebanon's three main Shia cities: Nabatiyah and Tyre in the South and Baalbek-Hermel in the Beqa. Many smaller Shia towns in both the South and the Beqa witnessed similar demonstrations. Hezbollah's response to the protesters was generally violent,¹ but it was exceptionally aggressive toward Shia demonstrators and in Shia towns and cities.

Hezbollah sided with the government and the political leadership against the protests, simply because when the group won the parliamentary elections in 2018 (for the first time) and formed its own government, it became the authority. In addition, Hezbollah had focused on military might since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, and then again after Lebanon's July war with Israel in 2006. But the group failed to translate its military victories in Lebanon and Syria into a socioeconomic vision for Lebanon and public well-being.

Shia activists were beaten up, arrested by authorities, threatened,² and fired from their jobs. Gradually and quietly, Shia areas grew isolated from the rest of Lebanon.³ The message was clear: those who oppose the authorities

will pay. The Shia were to remain united around Hezbollah, whether through love or fear. Protests in Shia areas started to subside, until Covid-19 temporarily put a stop to protests in Lebanon. The main reason for the initial de-escalation, however, was fear—not renewed trust in Hezbollah and the political elite.

As the economic crisis has deteriorated in Lebanon, Hezbollah's alternatives are looking less and less appealing, both to Lebanon as a whole and to the Shia community specifically. For example, Hassan Nasrallah's appeal in July 2019 to join the "resistance" in its new campaign to strengthen agriculture and manufacturing, in an effort to promote self-fulfillment, was met with both criticism and humorous taunts.⁴ People want their savings back—not to become farmers with no access to electricity, water, or education.

Hezbollah also created the Social Security Unit, a new entity intended to coordinate with municipalities across Lebanon to provide food, fuel, and medicine for families in need.⁵ However, according to residents of towns across the South and the Beqa Valley, Hezbollah has been distributing this aid—mostly boxes full of Iranian products—to its own members and their families.⁶ Such discriminatory practices are compounded by Hezbollah's payment of its employees in U.S. dollars, while other Shia lack access to hard currency or have lost their jobs in the wake of Lebanon's economic crash. In 2021, the group also devised a scheme to import Iranian fuel to Lebanon to firm up its public stature.⁷

This ever-expanding gap between Hezbollah's community and the Shia community has pushed more people to speak up and participate in protests once again. But it took one assassination to truly reestablish fear in the hearts of the Shia.

On February 4, 2021, Lebanese activist and writer Lokman Slim was found dead in his car, left for all to see, in the city of Nabatiyah in southern Lebanon. His assassins were very clear in their message: any critic of Hezbollah will be silenced, and assassinations will continue. Slim had been at the core of the 2019 protests and much of the activism that followed. He had established the Hub, which hosted panels, discussions, and debates at the protesters' base camp in Beirut's city center. In December 2019, Hezbollah burned the tent that hosted the Hub and threatened Slim and his colleagues.

That night, pro-Hezbollah activists gathered in front of Slim's house in the southern suburbs of Beirut, where they painted slogans on the walls that read, "Lokman Slim is a traitor and infiltrator," "Hezbollah is the honor of the nation," and "Glory to the silencer."

Slim's work within the Shia community was not a secret.⁸ He had helped many young people understand and express themselves—without judgment and without fear. These young people formed a strong network that remained even after Slim's killing. Slim knew it would not be easy for Hezbollah to recover from its financial challenges, the loss of its allies, and the discontent of the Shia community. Indeed, he was at the heart of that discontent, and he rallied groups of Shia youth, businesspeople, intellectuals, and journalists to it. But most importantly, he helped the Shia overcome their fear.

Slim knew that Hezbollah's main weakness lay within its own community. Hezbollah knew this as well. The assassination of Slim was thus an outward sign that the group's leaders will double down on Shia discontent: Hezbollah's arms will be used against the Shia community, and not for its protection. The tools that fostered fear among the Shia community did not quell the Shia's dissatisfaction with Hezbollah. On the contrary, fear and anxiety fed the Shia's discontent, and only public expression of those sentiments subsided. In terms of the protests' scope, all major Shia cities and towns witnessed continuous demonstrations from October 17, 2019, until the protests in Beirut dwindled.

Baalbek-Hermel

The Baalbek-Hermel governorate is predominantly Shia, with pockets of Christians and Sunnis. According to the United Nations, 416,427 people live in Baalbek-Hermel, including 137,788 registered Syrian refugees.⁹ Because of its proximity to the Lebanon-Syria border, as well as the political dynamics among its clans and Hezbollah, Baalbek-Hermel has suffered a great deal in terms of both security and finances. It is also one of the largest host communities for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Until 2017, Baalbek-Hermel witnessed major clashes between (1) the

Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hezbollah and (2) Islamist armed groups, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.¹⁰ But despite its instability and Hezbollah's strong influence, the governorate witnessed 147 demonstrations across 21 distinct locations between October 2019 and October 2020.¹¹ Many of these protests took place in public squares. Others took place outside private banks, central bank branches, and state institutions (such as Ogero, responsible for the country's telecommunication and broadband infrastructure; the Justice Palace; and currency exchange offices) or within individual municipalities.¹² Protests condemned inflation and the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions, and also demanded the enactment of the general amnesty law. That the main slogan used elsewhere in Lebanon—"All of them means all of them" (*Kelun yani kelun*)—was also used in Baalbek-Hermel is extraordinary, as it implies that Hezbollah is not excluded from blame.

The South (Nabatiyah and Tyre)

Nabatiyah and Tyre, two Shia-majority governorates, recorded forty-eight locations throughout the protests. Demonstrations happened every day, despite the incomparable violence used against the protesters and the casualties it caused. Like in Baalbek-Hermel, the protesters in these governorates gathered outside Banque du Liban branches, private banks, and state institutions such as ministry buildings and municipality offices, but some have even dared to voice their anticorruption demands outside official Hezbollah and Amal buildings.

Beyond the cities of Nabatiyah and Tyre, another town stood out. Kfar Reman is known for its historic ties with the leftist and communist parties and for its love-hate relationship with Hezbollah, which completely contradicted the leftists' secular politics. The protests in Kfar Reman were directed more toward Hezbollah and the political crisis than they were toward the financial crisis.

Demands in the South focused on the deteriorating economic situation, discrimination against women, inflation, and eventually the use of force by both Amal and Hezbollah.

Dahiya

Although it represents families and clans from all of the aforementioned governorates, Dahiya was a clear redline for Hezbollah, which relied on heavy security measures such as setting up additional checkpoints and deploying Hezbollah's security apparatus (the forces locally known as the "black shirts"). Still, a number of protests erupted. Most of these protesters came from poor areas in Dahiya, including Ghobeiry, Chiyah, Airport Road, Ouzai, Sfeir, and Hay al-Sellom.

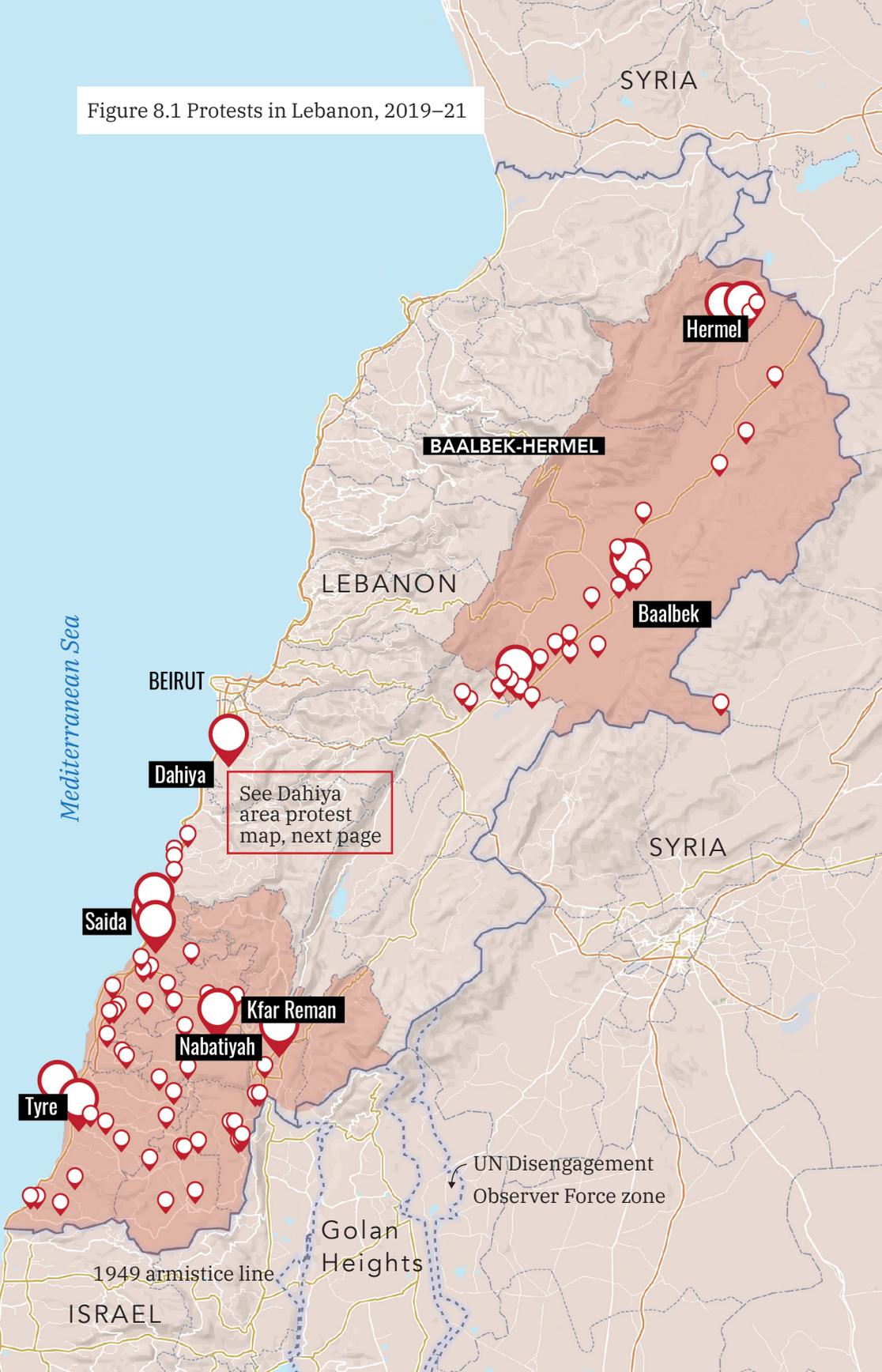
In Dahiya, south of Beirut, and the Beqa Valley, eastward of the city, two socioeconomic factors are behind the Shia's participation in the protests. First, Dahiya and the Beqa are the main urban centers of the Shia governorates; accordingly, the combination of middle-class Shia, leftist groups, businesspeople, and unemployed, often poor young people often fuels protests more so than in rural areas. Second, these areas have a history of nuanced and complicated relations with Hezbollah, and those dynamics have played out in municipal and local elections. To understand the pulse of the Shia community, one ought to consult the patterns, alliances, and results of municipal elections—certainly more so than polls, as local elections reflect the sociopolitical reactions of the community rather than its views.

Elections in these areas over the years have certainly been telling. In Baalbek, in both the 2010 and the 2016 municipal elections, Hezbollah and Amal—who formed a joint list for fear of competition—received around 55 percent of the votes, even with numerous electoral violations recorded by election monitoring groups. Many of the opposition figures were organized under the Baalbek Madinati group, which got around 35 percent of the vote; and that was before Lebanon's financial crisis, the 2019 protests, and Hezbollah's recent socioeconomic challenges.

In the Nabatiyah governorate, the results were just as revealing. Opposition lists—comprising leftists, big families, and political opposition figures—penetrated the joint Hezbollah-Amal lists in many towns and villages. The opposition increased its share of municipal council seats from two to six in Srifa, from zero to three in Kfar Reman, and from zero to four in Ansariyya.¹³ It is not surprising that these towns also witnessed protests in 2019.

Figure 8.1 Protests in Lebanon, 2019–21

Mediterranean Sea



Protests in Dahiya





Hussein

Hussein, who was born in the Beqa, had received his military training in the area as well, under the supervision of an Iranian commander.^a According to Hussein, it was unfathomable to regard the mission as anything but sacred. The Iranian commander used to tell the young men, “I am the representative of Imam [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini here...and those of you who oppose my command will be opposing Khomeini’s command, and those who oppose Khomeini’s command will be opposing Imam al-Mahdi’s command, and thereby God’s command.”

Once he joined Hezbollah, Hussein felt watched. He described feeling “as if they skies had turned into big eyes staring at me and monitoring my every move.” Hussein continued:

“BUT ALL I EVER WANTED WAS TO BE A LOYAL SOLDIER IN HEZBOLLAH’S RESISTANCE. I JUST WANTED TO BE PART OF THE LIBERATION OF MY LAND FROM THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION.”

In addition to his military training, Hussein was part of Hezbollah’s “Israa” band for Islamic chanting, and he played the clarinet in

Hezbollah's Imam al-Mahdi Scouts. When he went to the Lebanese University in 1996, Hussein became Hezbollah's representative.

"I joined the Hezbollah *hawza* [religious school] in 1997 and did everything I could to support Hezbollah and its ideological and resistance messages," Hussein said. But in 2000, when Hezbollah announced the liberation of the South, Hussein started to think about next steps: "Now that the South is liberated, what can the resistance do? How can we help people and rebuild the South? However, I was disappointed to see Hezbollah discarding the message and becoming involved in Lebanon's political scene, working for control instead of helping people."

Hussein's doubts vanished when the 2006 war happened. As he put it, "The revolution and the resistance are back, and we have to support it without questions. Even after the war, I participated

in the sixteen-month sit-in [2006–8], which Hezbollah had organized to pressure the March 14 Fouad Siniora government. But then I realized that this whole sit-in was only for Hezbollah to enter the same government, with a bit more control."

That was the first crossroads in Hussein's relationship with Hezbollah. The second but clearer crossroads was the October revolution of 2019. For Hussein, it was very easy to choose justice over injustice and reform over corruption. Hezbollah chose injustice and corruption. As Hussein said, "For me, Hezbollah's excuses of pragmatism and political maneuvers that [it describes] in our private meetings are no longer plausible. No excuses can be made for protecting corrupt politicians and those who are responsible for the poverty and starvation of the Lebanese people. Today, there is a big difference between Hezbollah and the resistance. I am still with the resistance, but I am no longer with Hezbollah."

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Notes

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9

Conclusion

Hussein's story, relayed in the previous chapter, reveals a spreading phenomenon of doubt among Lebanon's Shia community. But not all Lebanese Shia have the same questions or share the same displeasure. Hezbollah's many phases of existence have indicated multiple "layers" within the community, which is more diverse today than ever before. As changing demographics alter Dahiya's neighborhoods, residents have been rethinking this space and how it might better reflect the community at large. Indeed, one of the main shifts that Lokman Slim seemed to uncover a few months before his assassination was the community's possible transition from a Shia "malaise" to a Shia renaissance.¹

Throughout Hezbollah's stages, including the recent ones involving the Syrian war and domestic protests, the Shia community has consistently revisited its collective identity and priorities. Among Lebanese Shia, two major shifts are apparent: (1) a move from a sectarian identity toward a national identity, marking a response to the hardships endured by the collective Shia community over the past decade; (2) a widening departure from the resistance narrative of war and Islamic indoctrination in favor of a narrative focused on the economy, basic human rights and needs, and citizenship.²

Although the ideas of resistance and the antagonism toward Israel are still deep-seated, resentment of war and of Hezbollah's efforts to continue

its militarization of the Shia community is even stronger. Today, the concept of Shiism as a militarized and warmongering reality is being challenged by the desire of many Lebanese Shia for better living standards, financial stability, and security. In this sense, citizenship—and an eagerness to be part of the Lebanese people—is becoming more important than is upholding sectarian identities.

These shifts have been underway for a while, but they are very complex and gradual; they ebb and flow depending on political and economic circumstances. And while the course of change is steady, it is still difficult for the Shia—as a community—to express their opinions about a process that has not been fully realized.

Today, more than ever before in the modern history of Lebanon, it is evident that a cohesive Shia community does not exist. The community has gone through waves of identity shifts and conflicts, acquiring layers of nuance that make categorizing its members a difficult task.

Incidents of discontent and expressions of disagreement by Shia individuals who joined the protests in Lebanon, shared an anti-Hezbollah recording via WhatsApp, or even stole a moment on TV to complain are not unusual. Rather, they are signs of a hidden reality that has started to sprout through cracks in the community's front as propagated by Hezbollah.

For some, Hezbollah could mean resistance; for others, it could mean protection. For some, Iran means empowerment; for others, it means financial support. Many Shia still see Hezbollah as a father figure; consequently, they feel a sense of obligation or duty to protect the group from outsiders. But that does not mean Hezbollah is a father figure the Shia admire.

Attempting to label the community could serve Hezbollah and other sectarian leaders who prefer to hide the community's nuances, its identity layers, and the reality that lies somewhere between them. Indeed, Hezbollah's main narrative is that it represents the majority of the Shia in Lebanon, but the reality is more complicated than a simple black-and-white classification.

From Musa al-Sadr's Amal movement to the domination of southern Lebanon by the Palestine Liberation Organization until 1982; through the civil war and the leftist movements that relied on the Shia for its wars; and against the recent backdrop of Iranian hegemony of Shia agency, many

Lebanese Shia have developed multiple identities. A Shia could be pro-Palestinian and anti-Palestinian, pro-resistance and anti-resistance, even pro-Lebanese and anti-Lebanese—all at the same time. These seemingly opposing views are just now rising to the surface.

Such layered views are also characteristic of Hezbollah's support community. Every Hezbollah supporter and fighter interviewed for this study revealed rather dichotomous beliefs: They are tired of wars and ideologies, yet they are deeply rooted in an identity that glorifies bygone victories. They are torn between a lifeless leftist idea of liberation—one based on the national resistance movement that predated Hezbollah—and an ideological resistance that Hezbollah has enforced through its meticulous cultural appropriation and provision of services to a community that has suffered decades of deprivation.

A Shia can be pro-Palestinian—as a cause—but also look down on the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as burdensome, a lesser community in terms of rights and freedoms. A Shia might want Hezbollah to go back to the resistance and even criticize Hezbollah for abandoning it; yet that same Shia might also fear resistance because resistance means another war. A Shia might want to fight injustice, but Hezbollah's allies are the most corrupt political figures in Lebanon. Further, a Shia might be frustrated with Hezbollah's wars in the region, its isolation of the community, and its increased corruption and failures. That Shia, however, might fear losing the father figure and becoming a lonely orphan in a country where each community has its own paternal model.

The layers and nuances of the Shia community are Hezbollah's main internal challenge. The Shia are Hezbollah's strength and its weakness. Losing Shia loyalty could commence a series of losses that could undermine Hezbollah's control, authority, and war and peace decisions.

The gap between Hezbollah and the Shia community has widened dramatically, and the multilayered crises that Hezbollah is facing will have long-term effects on the dynamics within the Shia community. Hezbollah has decided that managing Lebanon's crisis is better than resolving it because the group believes the crisis is temporary. If the sanctions on Iran are lifted—as the result of a potential future reworked nuclear deal with

the United States—Hezbollah’s access to hard currency will resume. As all institutions in Lebanon collapse (the state, the private sector, the banking sector), Hezbollah will become the only party in Lebanon with financial power.

But rifts within the Shia community will take time to heal. Meanwhile, the international community still views Hezbollah and Lebanon’s Shia people through the traditional lens, in which supporting political alternatives is the go-to policy. However, it is worth noting that the traditional political alternatives within the Shia community—and in other Lebanese communities in general—are no longer viable. After the 2019 protests, political alternatives are taking even more complex shapes and forms, and this is especially true within the Shia community.

Traditional families—such as the al-Asaad, al-Amine, and al-Husseini—traditional opposition figures, and Najaf religious figures still have the ability to strengthen the anti-Hezbollah rhetoric. That said, the influence of those traditional figures is subsiding while that of nontraditional players is becoming more instrumental. These younger, entrepreneurial, more social media-savvy parties—most of which are leaderless and less hierarchal than traditional political groups—are not a single coherent entity. On the contrary, they represent various groups and layers within the Shia community.

Such groups constitute the business network that wants to set itself apart from Hezbollah—students who participated in the street protests, social media activists who can organize online campaigns, and young professionals who did not live through the civil war (and therefore did not witness Hezbollah’s “divine victories”). These groups do not have deep connections to the collective memory of the Shia, but rather look to a future away from the ideology of *velayat-e faqih*. Their concerns are more economic and social than political or ideological. Traditional political parties do not convince the groups, though they do want to be part of change. Most of the groups are not represented by leaders or a party in the traditional sense, but channels of communication among them have been activated since the protests. Channels between the groups and the international community, however, have not yet been cultivated.

The international community has always used established communication

channels to support the Shia opposition and alternatives, specifically by backing opposition figures and creating traditional mechanisms that do not cater to the new trends within the Shia community.

Much of the recent U.S. policy on Lebanon has focused on security and humanitarian assistance—that is, on non-soft-power assistance. Other efforts have focused on sanctions against Hezbollah and some of its allies. Previous investments in soft-power initiatives have helped anti-Hezbollah groups counter the party’s narrative and political rhetoric, but such efforts were channeled through conventional “old-school” figures and groups and based on short-term plans that aim for immediate results. Thus, what has been lacking in the U.S. policy toward Lebanon are tools to counter Iran’s soft power.

U.S. assistance to Lebanon since 2010 has amounted to more than \$4 billion—most of it in support of Lebanon’s security agencies, economic resilience, good governance, and some services such as water sanitation and education. The United States has provided more than \$2 billion in bilateral security assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces since 2006, and \$2.3 billion in humanitarian assistance since the beginning of the Syria crisis to refugees and host communities.

In addition, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Washington has provided immediate assistance of \$41.6 million throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. It also provided \$18 million in humanitarian assistance following the Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020, including more than \$15 million from USAID to support emergency response efforts.

Iran, however, does the opposite—that is, build roots, using long-term soft-power tools to establish trustworthiness and project reliability and consistency. Throughout Hezbollah’s many phases, and despite all of its shifts and challenges, one concern has remained constant: maintaining the trust, loyalty, and dependability of the Shia community. Most of Hezbollah’s nonmilitary efforts have been aimed at creating and maintaining soft-power initiatives. Iran understands that soft power forms roots and is difficult to contain by wars or sanctions, and that the only reason the Hezbollah-Shia dynamics are shifting is because its soft-power tools are being challenged.

In addition, Iran has understood since long ago that military might and money alone do not build roots; thus, it learned how to invest in nontraditional groups and channels within the Shia community. While the United States and Europe were investing in the old-fashioned political opposition, development programs via municipalities, and security assistance, Iran was funding tuition for students at private universities, building a large and effective social media army, and hiring educated professionals to create more sustainable economic alternatives, thereby enriching its own business community.

Containing Hezbollah in Lebanon will require both (1) new approaches to contain the soft-power tools that foster Hezbollah-Shia closeness and (2) further investments in the nontraditional mechanisms that have been recently empowered by the protests, Lebanon's economic crisis, and Hezbollah's financial challenges.

Notes

- 1 “Shia malaise” particularly was Slim’s term.
- 2 Hanin Ghaddar, “What Does It Mean to Be a Shia in Lebanon Today?” *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 12, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fkraforum/view/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-shia-in-lebanon-today>.

“Never before has a scholar laid out the breadth and depth of Hezbollah’s on-the-ground presence in Lebanon as Hanin Ghaddar does here. Uniquely qualified to pen such a study, Ghaddar takes her readers on a geographic and ethnographic journey through Hezbollah’s social, communal, economic, and militant power bases.”

MATTHEW LEVITT, director of the Jeanette and Eli Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, Washington Institute, and author of *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God* (2013)

“Hanin Ghaddar’s new work on Lebanon focusing on the role of Hezbollah is superb. This author, despite threats, has succeeded in going behind the scenes in Lebanon’s Shia community to explore the roots of Hezbollah’s success, and the risks to it. Any effort to reverse the tragedy that is today’s Lebanon must start with courageous analysis such as hers.”

JAMES F. JEFFREY, former Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Iraq, and Albania

“Hanin Ghaddar’s research, culminating in this book, is essential to understanding and exposing Hezbollah’s tools—including its resistance narrative—to gain control over the Shia community and eventually Lebanon. This book includes substantial research on Hezbollah’s guiding principles, evolution, and challenges.”

MONA FAYAD, writer on politics and professor of psychology, the Lebanese University

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