What Does It Mean to Be a Shia in Lebanon Today?

by **Hanin Ghaddar (/experts/hanin-ghaddar)**

Dec 12, 2019
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/madha-yny-tkwn-shyyana-fy-lbnan-alywm) /
Farsi (/fa/policy-analysis/shyh-bwdn-dr-lbnani-amrwz-chh-mnayy-dard)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hanin Ghaddar (/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow at The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.

Brief Analysis

Among the Shia in Lebanon, two major shifts are taking place within the collective perception of the community. One, Lebanese Shia identity is moving from a sectarian identity to a national one, caused by the costs endured by the Shia community over the past decade. And two, there is a widening departure from the resistance narrative, which is increasingly seen as a narrative of war and Islamic indoctrination.

The ideas of resistance and the antagonism towards Israel are still deep-seated facets of Lebanese Shia identity. Yet growing feelings of resentment towards war and Hezbollah's efforts to continue militarizing the community are proving to be stronger. Today, the reality of a militarized and war-thirsty identity is being challenged by the desire of members of the community for better living standards, financial stability, and security. In this sense, national identity—and an eagerness to be part of the Lebanese people as a whole—is becoming more significant than the sectarian identities that have long been seen as dominating Lebanese politics.

These shifts have been taking place over a number of years, but such changes are very complex, gradual, and slow. They rise and fade depending on the political and economic circumstances, and while the course of change is steady, it is still uneasy for the Shia as a communal whole to express their opinions during a process that hasn't yet been completed or realized.

Surveying the Shia

Today—more than any time in the modern history of the Lebanon—it has become evident that a cohesive and monolithic Shia community does not exist. Rather, the constitutive elements of the community have been going through successive waves of identity shifts and internal conflicts that give the community multiple layers of identity, often overlapping within an individual. This makes categorizing this community a complicated matter.

What is clear is that Shia individuals expressing discontent and disagreement with Hezbollah by either **joining the protests in Lebanon (https://janoubia.com/2019/11/20/%d9%85%d9%86%d8%a7%d8%b7%d9%82-%d8%ad%d8%b2%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84%d9%87-%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%aa%d9%81%d8%b6-**

%d9%86%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%a1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ac%d9%86%d9%88%d8%a8-%d9%8a%d9%82%d8%af%d9%86/) , disseminating a WhatsApp recording against Hezbollah, or even stealing a quick moment on TV to complain are no longer unusual occurrences. Moreover, these events are illustrative of a deeper hidden reality that is managing to escape through the cracks of the very same layers that had previously masked the visibility of its development.

Moreover, these nascent moments of protest complicate the still supportive façade Shia present to outsiders. A recent poll published by Fikra Forum **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-lebanon-poll-despite-protests-most-shiites-still-back-hezbollah-and-ira)** shows that among Lebanon's Shia population today, 75% of respondents say they hold a "very positive" attitude toward Hezbollah—which is down only slightly from 83% in late 2017 and 77% in late 2018.

Although numbers do not lie, they can mask shifting realities on the ground that are difficult to capture in polling data. Unpacking the layers of Shia identity requires much more than blunt questions from outsiders about their opinion on Hezbollah and Iran. Identifying the real attitudes of Shia involves understanding these layers and looking into issues beyond Hezbollah and Iran, such as war and peace in Lebanon, Hezbollah's domestic allies, and the significance of the Shia center of Najaf in Iraq—where Ayatollah Sistani presents a notable challenge to the Iranian model of Shia community through *wilayet e-faqih*.

It also requires unpacking what these institutions represent to Lebanese Shia. Hezbollah could mean resistance for some; for others, it could mean protection. Iran, for some, can mean empowerment; while for others, it could mean financial support. Many Shia still see Hezbollah as a paternal figure and feel an obligation or a duty to protect the group from outsiders. However, this doesn't mean that Hezbollah is a father figure these Shia look up to internally.

Given these factors, attempting to label this community often restrains us from reading between the lines. And most importantly, this classification could also serve Hezbollah—and other sectarian leaders—who prefer to hide the nuances, the layers of identity, and the reality that lies in-between in favor of one monolithic entity. Hezbollah's main narrative is that it represents the majority of the Shia in Lebanon, despite knowing very well that this claim is inaccurate. Otherwise, they wouldn't have cracked down on Shia cities for the past two months of protests with such violence.

The Layers of a Shia

From Musa Al-Sadr's Amal movement to the PLO domination of the south of Lebanon until 1982, all through the civil war and the leftist movements that relied on Shia for its wars, and recently the Iranian hegemony of the Shia agency and identity, many Shia have developed multiple identities and layers in response to these different forces. A Shia could be pro-Palestine and anti-Palestine, pro-resistance and anti-resistance, and pro-Lebanese and anti-Lebanese, all at the same time. These concealed differences are on their way out to the surface, but have existed for a long time.

That also applies to members of the community who are Hezbollah's supporters. Every Hezbollah supporter or fighter I have talked to during my adult life has also described navigating these layers. 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—based on the national resistance movement that predated Hezbollah—and an ideological resistance that Hezbollah enforced through its meticulous cultural appropriation and services to a community that has suffered from deprivation for decades.

A Shia can be pro-Palestine—as a cause—but also look down on the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as a burden and a lesser community in terms of rights and freedoms. A Shia can want Hezbollah to return to its original mandate of resistance, and can be critical of Hezbollah for abandoning it, yet he or she can also be scared of resistance, because resistance means another war. A Shia can want to fight injustice while recognizing that Hezbollah's allies are the

most corrupt political figures in Lebanon.

Many Shia are frustrated with Hezbollah's wars in the region, its isolation of the community, and with its increased corruption and failures. However, they are also afraid to lose the father-figure that Hezbollah represents and be exposed to sectarian discrimination, and further isolation, in the process. Not all Shia believe in absolute w*ilayat e-faqih* ideology. Many—mainly those who are descended from the leftist and progressive parties—became Hezbollah supporters only because of Hezbollah's adoption of the resistance narrative rather than through any religious appeal.

Fears and Dilemmas

The taboos preventing the overt expressions of these doubts are strong, but the fear is even stronger. Among the Shia community, how can one freely or clearly express his or her ideas and desires—even anonymously—when Hezbollah intelligence have knocked on Shia protesters' doors every day in the past few weeks to inquire about their daily whereabouts and check their personal cellphones? Shia know that if one happens to be spotted in one of the protests squares, the interrogations start and will never end. Entire families are harassed, and many have been arrested.

In contrast to the Iraqi Shia, who have an internal religious establishment that is actually tacitly supporting the country's protests, the Lebanese Shia do not have a Najaf to turn to. They have no place to go if the protests fail and each sect goes back to its leader. This pushes the Lebanese Shia into a real dilemma: many are trapped between their desire to become Lebanese citizens and their fear of becoming exposed without protection were they to move away from the traditional sectarian model.

The Shia who live in fear or humiliation might not be aware of their own needs and longings. They might express their dilemmas in ways that others might misread or overlook. Therefore, what really matters is not what they think of Iran or Hezbollah. What matters is the context: of how and when they take to the streets, what flag they choose to raise, and, most importantly, if they manage to defy Hezbollah's cultural and social—rather than political—rules and red lines.

What is important to recognize is that people danced in Nabatiyeh, and that women took off their veils in the middle of the square in Baalbek. It is not strange that Hezbollah felt threatened enough by these actions to crack down on Shia protesters. In Lebanon, the cultural and social has always been the pathway to the political—and this has especially been the case within the Shia community. This is why Hezbollah felt the threat, and this is why the protesters' defiance is significant.

Given all these factors, it is probably unfair to ask the question of who is a Lebanese Shia today. But this very same question, with all its biases and complications, is more necessary now more than ever. The answers to this question need to address all the layers, the fears, and the unspoken truths lying behind the visible among the Lebanese Shia community. ❖

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)