Shia Unrest in Hezbollah's Beirut Stronghold

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Brief Analysis

The group is hoping to rein in rampant social problems by allowing government authorities to crack down on its poorest constituents, but the plan could backfire amid unprecedented anti-Hezbollah riots.

On October 25, Lebanese police raided unlicensed street vendors in the southern Beirut suburb of Dahiya, the main headquarters of Hezbollah, causing rare public expressions of discontent against the group. Internal security forces used bulldozers to take down shacks in the Hay al-Sollom neighborhood, where vendors mainly sold coffee and mobile phones. In response, dozens of citizens poured into the streets burning tires and blocking roads, an act seen many times when state authorities interfere in Dahiya. But this time 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!"

The shops had been there for decades and were previously protected from raids by Hezbollah. It is common knowledge in Lebanon that government security authorities never enter Dahiya unless they coordinate with Hezbollah officials, and that the group often allows illegal ventures and hides criminals. This time, however, it did not even bother to inform locals that the raid would be taking place.

BREWING CLASS WARFARE

It is no coincidence that this exceptional act of revolt occurred in one of Dahiya's poorest neighborhoods. As much as the Syria war has changed Hezbollah militarily and expanded its regional role, it has also changed the Lebanese Shia community and its perceptions of the group. 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-Sollom, 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 very distant, 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 cafes are now booming in prosperous areas of Dahiya and the south.

The growing wealth gap helps explain last week's riot, 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. So why did the group suddenly decide to step aside for a government raid?

"MY DAHIYA" PROJECT

According to sources in Dahiya, Hezbollah authorities not only allowed the raid, they actually asked for it. Bulldozing shops in Hay al-Sollom is part of a larger plan called Dahiyati (My Dahiya), launched in September. The plan is based on an effort by the three municipalities in charge of Dahiya to beautify it and make it a more comfortable place for residents. It includes removing a chaotic network of illegal structures that cause traffic jams and overcrowding in certain neighborhoods.

But Hezbollah's real objective is not beauty or comfort. Rather, many residents see the plan as cover for the group to confront the main challenges it faces in Dahiya: rampant small crime, drugs, and prostitution. These problems have proliferated since 2011 amid the war in Syria.

Hezbollah has dragged the Shia community into wars with Israel many times in the past, but these conflicts were relatively short, and local Shia were usually rewarded by ample money and services afterward. The Syria war is different, however. It has been dragging on for years, costing Hezbollah its image as a "resistance" group and its ability to provide social services, taking the lives of many young men in the process. Once the group became consumed by events next door, it could no longer keep a lid on drug cartels, petty criminals, and illegal construction back home. Shia street clashes increased in Dahiya and complaints grew louder, showing that livelihood and basic services are much more significant to locals than Hezbollah's prestigious new regional role. Families who could afford it began to leave the district, heading south or to other areas of Beirut. In response, Hezbollah felt compelled to act, hence the "My Dahiya" project.

A LAYER OF FEAR

Although last week's outbursts were immediately contained -- the people who badmouthed Nasrallah were forced to apologize on camera -- the deeper problems persist. These who were made to apologize are no doubt feeling even more humiliated than ever, and their apologies were based on fear, not regret. In addition, now that Hezbollah faces new U.S. sanctions, many local Shia believe they will be the ones to pay the price. In their view, sanctions will not stop the group from expanding its regional activities or operating in Syria, but simply force it to implement harsher economic measures at home, meaning poorer Shia might suffer the most.

Many locals are also afraid that if Hezbollah stops protecting them, they will become vulnerable to further crackdowns by state authorities. Still others fear that Hezbollah's status as the most powerful faction in Lebanon's government and institutions will make it more likely to crack down on discontent itself. Poor Shia are therefore caught in a dilemma: they do not want to provide more martyrs for the Syria war, but they do not want to be labeled as citizens who defy the authorities either, especially if doing so risks their chances of accessing services and

surviving.

After the Hay al-Sollom incident, the question is how authorities can deal with this discontent. Hezbollah and anti-Hezbollah groups alike are asking themselves the same question. For Hezbollah, this issue is now its most formidable challenge. The group seems to believe it can handle international sanctions and rival political pressure without changing its approach, but internal discontent within the Shia community could implode its support base.

For now, the "My Dahiya" project will probably continue, though Hezbollah may seek less severe ways of implementing it. But any such measures can still be expected to create more discontent and frustration, mainly in poor neighborhoods.

WORK WITH THE SHIA, NOT HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah has long rallied the Shia community around it based on a clear formula: "I am your protector and provider, but you have to embrace my ideology and my wars and forget you are citizens of the Lebanese state." This approach worked for decades -- until Hezbollah became a state with no services. Today, poorer Shia are well aware that "My Dahiya" is not really for them, but rather an effort to make the district more appealing to investors and less of a headache for Hezbollah. The gap between the group's wealthy officials and poor "martyred" foot soldiers is widening, leaving the people searching for an alternative it can no longer provide. In the end, the situation will likely develop in one of two ways: either public anger will be contained by force and the poor will simply surrender to the new rules, or their resentment will lead to more tension and clashes with the rich neighborhoods of Dahiya.

Whichever scenario unfolds, local Shia are primarily being driven by the fear of losing their livelihood. Rhetoric in the streets of Dahiya is now dominated by talk of employment opportunities, small loans for investment opportunities, and basic services. Poor Shia have come to realize that ideology and "divine victories" do not put food on the table, so the only alternative they are looking for today **is an economic alternative (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/economic-alternatives-could-help-split-shiites-from-hezbollah)** . If Hezbollah cannot provide it, they will look for it elsewhere.

At this point, anti-Hezbollah political alternatives supported by the West are no longer feasible. Western governments should therefore shift toward a longer-term strategy of using economic programs to give disillusioned Shia a viable means of meeting their basic needs, working with the Lebanese private sector and international organizations such as the World Bank and IMF. Favorable political rhetoric will follow.

Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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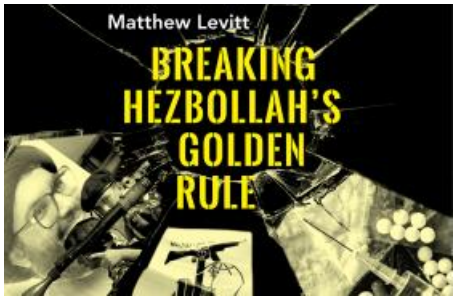

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