

Shiites against Hezbollah

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Articles & Testimony

Hezbollah rockets stopped raining on Israel nearly two months ago, but the Shiite organization's onslaught continues. Today, instead of directly attacking Israel, the Party of God is targeting Lebanese intellectuals and politicians who have the temerity to question Hezbollah's hegemony over local Shiite politics.

There's no debating that Hezbollah is a popular organization in Lebanon and particularly among Shiites. Not only does the organization provide health, welfare, and education services to its constituents, its military prowess is a source of honor and pride for the community.

But not all Shiites support Hezbollah. Some have been voicing their opposition to the "resistance" agenda, and not surprisingly, Hezbollah is attempting to strong-arm these dissidents into line. The intimidation has not yet degenerated into violence, but, given Hezbollah's track record (the terrorist organization is, with Syria, a leading suspect in several political assassinations in Lebanon since 2005), it is certainly wont to.

Hezbollah's quest for hegemony—and its efforts to enforce party-line discipline over all the Shiites in Lebanon—predates the summer war with Israel. Eleven months ago, in December 2005, Hezbollah and Amal ministers bolted from the government cabinet to protest consideration of an international tribunal to prosecute the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. Closely allied with Syria, the lead murder suspect, Hezbollah opposed the notion of an impartial tribunal.

The ministers' departure brought government business to a standstill, but set in motion even more Hezbollah mischief. Worried that the government might appoint non-Hezbollahis to the apportioned Shiite cabinet seats, cleric Afif Nabulsi issued a fatwa "forbidding any Shia to enter into the cabinet." This ominous "warning" set off a tempest among the Lebanese intelligentsia. Adonis, aka Ali Ahmed Said, Lebanon's most prominent man of letters (who happens to be a Sunni), described the fatwa as an "act of aggression." The most aggrieved party, however, were clearly the Shiites themselves. So incensed was one Shiite lawyer, Mohammed Mattar, that he brought a class action lawsuit against Sheikh Nabulsi.

Mattar's lawsuit, filed in January 2006, was joined by five prominent Shiites—some of whom had the legitimacy of being direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad—and three Christians. Over fifty intellectuals, including Sunnis, joined a follow-up case. For the plaintiffs, the action was a clear case of church-state separation: Hezbollah,

via Sheikh Nabulsi's threatening fatwa, had deprived Shiite Lebanese of their constitutional right to participate in public life. Mattar et al were not looking for damages or jail time, but rather, for a well-reasoned and widely promulgated court ruling preventing further Hezbollah encroachment on Shiite political expression.

It is open to question whether the judge—a young Sunni hailing from the Hezbollah stronghold of Bekaa—can be counted on for an impartial ruling. Reaction to the case, which has been well covered in the media, has been fierce. Hezbollah has launched a countersuit. Meanwhile, pro-Hezbollah weblogs in Lebanon have savaged Mattar, alternately describing him as a CIA agent, a Mossad agent, and an employee of the U.S. embassy in Beirut.

More recently, in the aftermath of fighting between Hezbollah and Israel, perhaps the highest profile Shiite refusenik in Hezbollah's sights is Mona Fayyad, a professor of philosophy at The Lebanese University. On August 8, Fayyad penned an acerbic op-ed in Lebanon's paper of record, *An-Nahar*, assailing Hezbollah's political and intellectual dominance over her confession. In her widely translated article, "To Be a Shiite Now," Fayyad questioned the imposition of Hezbollah's ideology—and the consequences of Hezbollah's authority—over Shiites and Lebanon.

For Fayyad, to be a Shiite means that "you do not question the meaning of resistance." Instead, you defer to the leader of the resistance, General Hassan Nasrallah, in "his role as a loyal hero to the cause of the Arab nation." As a Shiite, "you can only thank Hezbollah for its heroism and sacrifice—it is not your role to contribute to 'weakening' it. . . . That means never to question whether pride takes precedence over the lives of others." You are simply obligated, she quips, to "incapacitate your mind and leave it to [Iranian Supreme Leader] Sayyid Khamenei to guide you." Finally, "if you are a Shiite and you dare write such writings and think such thinking, then you must be a foreign agent and a traitor. . . . You must be with the Zionist and Israeli projects."

Following her controversial op-ed, Fayyad gave a lengthy and courageous interview in September to the Kuwaiti political daily *As Siyasah*, where she criticized Hezbollah's alliance and allegiance to Syria and Iran. She was also critical of Hezbollah's continued possession of weapons, saying "Hezbollah's arms provide it with a type of hegemony . . . inspiring fear for security among all the Lebanese." Fayyad was also one of the signatories to the lawsuit against Sheikh Nabulsi.

While they do not represent majority sentiment in Lebanon's Shiite community, Mohammed Mattar and Mona Fayyad do represent an important and apparently growing segment of the population—Shiites who have no use for Hezbollah, Amal, or Iranian or Syrian suzerainty over Lebanon.

Lokman Slim, a Shiite who runs a Beirut-based, European-funded NGO focused on diversifying political representation of the Shiite community, is another outspoken critic of Hezbollah. Slim, who speaks critically about the "monopoly on representation," claims Hezbollah has "undermined" the level playing field among Shiites by preventing moderates from emerging. Slim's point, of course, is that such moderates could play a role in Lebanese politics if the intimidation stopped.

This raises an interesting point: Hezbollah was indeed elected to the Lebanese parliament, but the organization is not constrained by the precepts of democratic government. Rather, it demonstrates nothing but contempt for democracy, operating instead within a theocratic-autocratic context. Nasrallah himself feels no compunction to abide by even the bylaws of his own party. He is now serving his fifth three-year term, exceeding Hezbollah's two-term limit on secretary generals. And if Hezbollah's leader won't even respect his own party's rules, how is the party going to be persuaded to observe all the niceties of multiparty democratic government?

Achieving pluralism within Lebanese Shiite politics is a long way off. In addition to being the leader of the "resistance," Hezbollah represents the culmination of years of Shiite effort to have a significant role in Lebanon's political system. Convincing the long-suffering Shiites in Lebanon that they can remain influential without Hezbollah is going to be a tough sell.

Lebanon's Shiite community is not monolithic: There are alternative voices, articulating moderate agendas. And if Hezbollah is ever going to be stripped of its dominant power over the Shiites in Lebanon, these voices will have to be promoted and encouraged. But in the current environment of intimidation, the hope that moderates like Mona Fayyad, Mohammed Mattar, and Lokman Slim will emerge to seriously challenge Hezbollah dictates sadly remains a distant dream.

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