

The “Hezbollah Complex”

Lebanese Shia caught between megalomania and self-depreciation

By: L. Slim

A few days ago, I attended a seventh-day commemoration held at a *Husseiniya* in the neighborhood of Hay es-Sollom.^{1,2,3} As the guests were taking their seats before the ceremony started, a bearded fellow commandeered the podium and began shouting to the crowd. "My brothers! Let us implore God to grant victory to our brothers in the jihad arenas." The crowd responded to his entreaty by chanting "Ya Allah...Ya Allah" (Hear us, God), whereupon the fellow exhorted the crowd to redouble its efforts. "Louder! Louder!" Of course, the audience responded to that call as well.

Once the fellow was certain that he had "warmed up" the crowd sufficiently, he retired from the podium. Obviously, the bearded man didn't actually need to identify which "jihad arenas" our "brothers" were fighting in since it was already common knowledge. Less than ten minutes later, someone else seized the lectern. "We ask all among our brothers with blood type AB negative to identify themselves. One of our mujahedeen brothers wounded on the battlefield is in urgent need of blood." Contrary to the previous announcement, this one changed the audience's mood dramatically. The crowd that had just been whipped into something approaching a frenzy fell silent and gloomy. After all, the "jihad arenas" in which our "brothers" are fighting are neither virtual nor unassailable. In fact, they are quite different from those depicted in *al-Manar's* clips, which always

- 1 Within the Lebanese Shia community, the seventh-day commemoration of the deceased is as important as the burial ceremony. While it may be seen as serving a specific social need (wherein the family of the deceased receives condolences), the commemoration can also assume a distinctly theatrical appearance by including speeches and recitations of para-religious texts.
- 2 Though the word *Husseiniya* derives from the name Husayn (the fourth Shia Imam killed in Karbala, Iraq more than 1,300 years ago), and despite the fact that a *Husseiniya* is (at least theoretically) dedicated to the annual commemoration of the Passion of Hussein, it means something more to Lebanese Shia. In that context, a *Husseiniya* is something of a community meeting space, which is often connected to a mosque. Exerting control over existing mosques and *Husseiniya* and constructing new partisan oriented meeting places constituted a masterstroke in Hezbollah's strategy to dominate the Shia community and its methods of worship. This is particularly important since going to a *Husseiniya* is a normal social duty among Shia, regardless of whether a religious observance is involved.
- 3 A quarter located south of Beirut's southern suburb (Dahiyeh).

portray our "brothers" as the strongest and toughest warriors on any battlefield, fighters who are *always* victorious. In that instant, the crowd's exuberant cries of "Ya Allah" were replaced with whispers about the *shaheeds* (martyrs) and others who had gone missing or been wounded. The abrupt emotional shifts among the crowd were nothing short of dramatic.

In general, the scene I described is an accurate representation of the mood that now prevails within the Shia community: fear and confusion covered by a thin veil of nostalgic pride. With all due respect to human suffering, it is safe to say that the number of "boys" who have been wounded,

killed or gone missing in Syria—and those who still face those risks—is the smallest challenge the Shia community must face. This paradox will become even clearer when (1) the real extent of those losses becomes known and (2) when they are assessed not only on a human scale, but also on an inter-communal and national scale. Further explanation is certainly in order.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria's war is not just another "proving ground" for its military might. First and foremost, it is an acid test of the image Hezbollah created for itself and propagated within the Shia community, throughout Lebanon and beyond, following the 2006 War with Israel. But that image entails more than Hezbollah's declaration of having won a "Divine Victory" in that conflict. It also involves the laundry list of other "victories" the organization has declared against the "enemies of the inside."

Chronological accuracy notwithstanding, the list of these "noteworthy" victories includes the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Hezbollah concluded with the Free Patriotic Movement of General Michel Aoun on February 6, 2006. For Hezbollah, that MOU guaranteed the support of a substantial portion of the country's Christians. Later, Hezbollah launched a withering military campaign against the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party in the aftermath of the July War. This was followed by the Doha Agreement of May 21, 2008, which offered Hezbollah a momentary acknowledgment of its upper hand (and that of its regional patron, Iran) by Lebanon's Sunni and Druze leadership (comprised of Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, respectively) and *their* regional patron, Saudi Arabia. After a cooling-off period that included many instances of turbulence, Hezbollah succeeded in ousting Prime Minister Saad Hariri through a constitutional coup. Interestingly, PM

Hariri's political demise occurred on January 12, 2011 just as he was entering the Oval Office to meet with President Obama. And as if ousting Hariri wasn't enough of a success, Hezbollah succeeded in convincing Najib Mikati, a "respectable" and exceptionally wealthy Sunni figure, to play the *quisling* and head its new government.

In addition to the "exploits" mentioned above, other efforts helped Hezbollah create an image of invincibility among friends and enemies alike. But beyond its self-professed dauntlessness, Hezbollah also touted its *infallibility*, an almost holy notion within the Shia socio-theological ethos, which holds that Imams are to be revered because of their infallibility. Thanks to this masterful two-pronged public relations blitz executed by a well-oiled propaganda machine that mingled religious and sectarian references with political platforms and enjoyed immense Iranian funding, Hezbollah's popularity soared.

Unfortunately, Hezbollah's organizational core is not the only portion of Lebanon's Shia community to have fallen prey to the organization's megalomania. Indeed, as its popularity soared, its ranks swelled. The community's hardcore supporters accepted Hezbollah's propaganda without any additional analysis while the greater Shia community greedily accepted the organization as the almighty, nuclear-backed, omniscient and infallible protector of everyone against everything, from the "Zionist conspiracy" to the Sunni neighbor!

The heyday of that enthusiasm for Hezbollah, however, has long since passed. In just the last few years, Hezbollah has cast a pall over its moral infallibility through several cases of financial corruption. It lost its security infallibility when "the Resistance" (the sobriquet Hezbollah employs when it needs to sell itself as a puritanical and altruistic

entity) admitted having been infiltrated repeatedly by foreign spies. Its political infallibility proved laughable when the government Hezbollah installed on January 25, 2011 and headed by Najib Mikati, failed to please even its staunchest supporters and eventually collapsed on March 22, 2013. It also fell markedly short of being infallible in its sociopolitical calculations. After all, its brutal and arrogant practices succeeded only in instilling a sense of "victimization" among Lebanon's Sunni community, which responded by embracing a radical and sometimes jihadist strain of Sunni Islam. But beyond all of this, Hezbollah gradually—finally—admitted what everyone has long since suspected: it has been involved directly and indirectly in Syria's war since the very first shots were fired. That admission, given under a variety of pretexts—such as the need to defend Shia holy places, the need to defend the Lebanese Shia in the border regions and

the need to overcome the Salafi threat; more realistically, the need to defend Hezbollah's weapons supply routes is putting Hezbollah and its almost supernatural image to a hard test.

Without doubt, the longer the fight continues in Syria, the more it will stoke Lebanese tensions. Under those conditions, Hezbollah's image will be tarnished further and its reputation as a "maker of miracles" will certainly fade. To alter that outcome, Hezbollah's only option will be to invent increasingly "convincing" arguments that it is engaged in a just war and that Lebanese "boys" are not dying without a cause. In the meantime, these "conditions" will probably be long and agonizing, and Lebanon's Shia community will likely suffer more than ever before due to its "Hezbollah Complex," which swings from megalomania to self-deprecation and back again.

Translated from Arabic and edited by [Inga Schei](#) and [Kelly Stedem](#)
