

A person wearing a dark balaclava and a military-style jacket stands with arms crossed. The background is a dark blue world map with several bright orange and yellow flames scattered across it, suggesting conflict or terrorism.

The Lebanese Shiite Against the Hegemony of Hezbollah in Lebanon

Dr. Michael Barak

The Lebanese Shiite vs. Hezbollah's Hegemony

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The popular protests the Lebanese regime in condemnation of its corruption and the economic crisis, which started in October 2019 however paused due to COVID-19 and resumed in June 2020, includes, in addition to Sunni and Christian protesters, a growing number of Shiite protesters. Shiite clerics, journalists, intellectuals and social activists active on social media assign direct liability to the deteriorating economic, moral and social situation in Lebanon to Hezbollah and Amal, as the latter are part of the corrupt leadership of Lebanon and the ones who do Iran's bidding to undermine the stability of Lebanon. It seems the pandemic exacerbates the social and economic maladies in Lebanon and with them intensifies the voices of the Shiite critics.

The popular uprising first erupted in October 2019, triggered by the government's intention to tax the use of WhatsApp, but in reality, was aimed against the governmental corruption, the growing unemployment rate and the rising cost of living. In response to the protesters demand to replace the corrupt government, premier **Saad al-Hariri** resigned in October 2019 to be replaced by **Hassan Diab** who is close to Hezbollah. The protests intensified in January 2020 after the Lebanese security forces cracked down heavy handedly on the protesters and used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the protesters. That said, in light of the spread of COVID-19 the protests subsided temporarily on the street but not on social media where allegations were made against Hezbollah. In June 2020 the protests returned to the street due to the crumbling Lebanese Lira and the decline of many to poverty on the brink of starvation.

It should be noted, this was the first time the protests erupted in three cities with a Shiite majority: Tyre, Nabatiyeh and Baalbek.

Hanin Ghaddar, a Lebanon researcher at the Washington Institute pointed out two possible factors that caused to the weakened linkage between the Shiite and Hezbollah: (i) the alliance Hezbollah had arrived at with corrupt politicians such as Nabi Berri (Amal leader and head of the Lebanese parliament); and (ii) Hezbollah's difficulties to meet payroll and fund social services for the Shiite due to the reduction of the Iranian funding due to the sanctions on the latter¹. To above one needs to add the anger within the Lebanese public on Hezbollah's demeanor at the outset of COVID-19 pandemic when it allowed Iranian planes to land in Beirut knowing full well passengers on board have been infected with the virus. The above served as proof for many that Hezbollah prioritized the Iranian interest over the Lebanese one².

¹ Hanin Ghaddar, "The Shia vs. the 'Shia Crescent'", *The Washington Institute*, March 5, 2020; Marilyn Stern, "Hanin Ghaddar on Weakening Hezbollah's Control of Lebanon", *Middle East Forum*, April 21, 2020.

² Some Lebanese, including Shiite accused Hezbollah of being responsible to the spread of the pandemic by cowering to the pressure to let Iranian planes to land in Beirut when they knew that passengers were carriers of the virus which meant that Hezbollah preferred Iran's interests over the Lebanon's. for expansion see Michael Barak "Hezbollah and the Corona Crisis", *ICT*, April 4th, 2020

Fragile Shiite Opposition

The Lebanese Shiite criticism of Amal and Hezbollah isn't new. The first attempt to organize a Shiite opposition to the latter organizations was in 2005 when **"The Lebanese Shiite Meetup"** (*al-Liqa al-Shiiti al-Lubnani*), headed by the Shiite cleric **Muhammad Hassan al-Amin**, was founded. Upon formation it had some 300 members however over the years it weakened and wasn't able to extend its base, inter alia, due to internal conflicts and inability to collaborate with the March 14th faction (led by Saad al-Hariri)³. The second attempt occurred in October 4th, 2017 (when various Shiite opposition figures formed **"The Voice of the State and Citizenship"**). The founders were some 50 Shiite public figures from various walks of life, liberals, former communists, intellectuals from large family in the Beka and south Lebanon and even some former Hezbollah members. All defined themselves as Lebanese first and Shiite second⁴. That organization wasn't able to rally the entire Shiite community in Lebanon, but its formation indicated a growing trend among this religious group that a real alternative to Amal and Hezbollah should be found and that they should strive to integrate with the other religious groups in Lebanon. Since 2017 additional attempts to replace Amal and Hezbollah were made. The most recent one at the end of July 2019 with the formation of the **"The Shiite Reform Movement"**. Sheikh Muhammad al-Haj al-Aamli, one of the founders as well as other members clarified that the organization would strive to end the Hezbollah hegemony, disengage from the Irani levers of influence, promote a more tolerant interpretation of the scriptures and reinforce the democracy in Lebanon⁵.

Sayed Ali al-Amin as a Symbol of Resistance to Hezbollah

Sayed Ali al-Amin, a senior Shiite cleric one of the founders of the **Voice of the State and Citizenship** opposition organization, is one of the most vocal critics of Hezbollah and the Iranian involvement in Lebanon and has significant support from the younger Shiites as is reflected on social media. He has been criticizing Hezbollah since the 1980s when they have abducted foreigners and continues to be an opposition today. In 2016 he demanded that Hezbollah and Iran cease their military involvement in Syria and withdraw their forces because such an involvement goes against the legacy of the Imam Hussein and deepens the rift between Shiite and Sunni. He even urged other clerics around the Muslim world to issue fatwas that prohibit the fighting in Syria in order to force them to withdraw from Syria.⁶

Al-Amin is also known for his fierce resistance to the Wilayat al-Faqih idea, developed by the ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, i.e. theocracy and allegiance to the supreme religious leader of Iran. Per him, allegiance to the state is paramount to the allegiance to the religious leader⁷.

³ Qassim Qasir "A Belated Review of the Shiite Meetup's Fate", *Asas Media*, February 16th, 2020.

⁴ Salwa Fadhel, "The Voice of the State and Citizenship: The Voice of the Homeland or the Voice of the Religious Group?", *Al-Janubia*, October 6, 2017.

⁵ Nahad Tobalian, "The Launch of the Shiite Reform Movement to Fight Hezbollah in Lebanon", *al-Mashraq*, August 14, 2019

⁶ Hamza Takhin, "The Lebanese Shiite Cleric Ali al-Amin Calls Iran and Hezbollah to Withdraw From Syria", *Wikalat al-Anadul*, May 29th, 2016.

⁷ Ali al-Amin was born in the town of Qalaouiye in southern Lebanon in 1952 and resides in Beirut where he serves as lecturer on Shiite Muslim religious principles. A prominent cleric who has been calling for co-existence among all religious groups in Lebanon. A member of the Muslim

As the popular protest erupted in October 2019 and COVID-19 crisis hit in the beginning of 2020, al-Amin escalated his tone and supported the protestors in their demand to replace the government and disarm Hezbollah from. In December 2019 he warned that Iran and Hezbollah's effort to bring Lebanon closer to the Iranian axis would cost dearly to the Lebanese Shiite and may even deteriorate to bloodshed and clashes with the other religious groups in Lebanon⁸. In an interview he granted in March 2020 to "Lubnan Arabi" newspaper he accused Hezbollah and Amal of high-jacking state institutions and condemned the use of weapons against civilians just because they disagreed with their policy⁹.

Per al-Amin the popular Shiite protests in Iraq and Lebanon signify a welcome trend of Arab Shiite resistance to the Irani involvement in Arab countries. Per him, even in territories controlled by Hezbollah there are encouraging signs of a popular Shiite movement wishing to reinforce the Lebanese national identity rather than the religious one, shake off Iran's hold and establish a state where all its subjects are equal in the eyes of the law. That said, he complained that Amal and Hezbollah are an obstacle in the way of that popular movement. Further, Hezbollah wished to deter any and all opposition, as has happened in the bloodbath of May 7th, 2008¹⁰. Per al-Amin, such events managed to deter the Lebanese government and remain silent in the face of the military buildup of Hezbollah. He added that today with the expansion of the wave of protests Hezbollah the tides have turned. Hezbollah is threatened and concerned of losing its stature and deterrence as well as other achievements either internal Lebanese ones or internationally and therefore wishes to oppress these protests however unsuccessfully¹¹.

It should be noted, al-Amin's criticism of Hezbollah came with a personal price. In 2008 he had to leave Tyre and move to Beirut following a shooting at his house due to his criticism of Hezbollah's actions on May 7th, 2008. At the end of 2019 he has suffered additional threats and harassment from Hezbollah that accused him of treason and promoting normalization with Israel after meeting an Israeli cleric in a conference to promote inter-faith discourse in Bahrain. Following that meeting, the **Supreme Shiite Council**, headed by sheikh **Abd al-Amir Kablan** who is close to Hezbollah, decide to terminate his position as a religious judge, even though al-Amin denied having met with Israelis. Per the council, al-Amin "incited an internal civil war in Lebanon because of his vision for normalization with the occupation [Israeli]"¹². In June 2020 he attended again the same conference in Bahrain and again suffered harassment and death threats. His son, Ali al-Amin Hadi, who lives in London broke his silence and clarified that Hezbollah was responsible for¹³ his

council of clerics headed by Ahmad Tayeb the leader of al-Azhar. A fiercely opposes the Wilayat al-Faqih concept, i.e. theocracy as developed by the ayatollah Khomeini and currently implemented in Iran.

⁸ Walid Sabri, "Shiite Authority al-Sayed Ali al-Amin in an al-Watan interview: Iran and Hezbollah Hurt Lebanon by Dragging it into the Iranian Axis", *al-Watan*, December 28th, 2019.

⁹ Mustafa al-Awiq, "Hon. al-Amin to Lubnan Arabi: Lawful State and Hezbollah Are Two Opposites That Would Never Meet", *Lubnan Arabi*, March 12th, 2020

¹⁰ On May 7th, 2008 Hezbollah took control of several neighborhoods in Beirut, shot at civilians and threatened the government to escalate the situation of the latter would not reverse its decision to shut down Hezbollah's dedicated communications network. The above claimed the lives of 81 and injured 250. For expansion see Nicholas Blandford, "Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player", *The Middle East Institute*, 2017.

¹¹ Mustafa al-Awiq, "Hon. al-Amin to Lubnan Arabi: Lawful State and Hezbollah Are Two Opposites That Would Never Meet", *Lubnan Arabi*, March 12th, 2020

¹² "Press Conference by Hon. al-Sayed al-Ali al-Amin Responds to the Lies Spread by Hezbollah", *al-Amin*, December 18th, 2019.

¹³ "Ali al-Amin's Son Charges Hezbollah with the Responsibility to His Father's Well Being", *al-Arabiya*, July 1st, 2020.

father's well-being. **The Council of Muslim Clerics**, an umbrella organization for Sunni and Shiite clerics to promote religious tolerance, led by **Ahmad al-Tayeb** (head of al-Azhar university) which al-Amin is a member of, condemned the above harassments and clarified that persecution of clerics, either Muslim or Christians, will drive Lebanon to a civil war¹⁴.

It seems that Hezbollah's smear and threats campaign did not achieve its goal. Many Shiite and Sunni harshly criticize Hezbollah's persecution policy and stress that al-Amin's activity to bring people closer together is important. In an op-ed titled "Sayid Ali... We Are ashamed for Our Silence", a southern Lebanese Shiite author praised al-Amin's courage to sounds a sober voice that is unburdened by a religious group thinking and cultivates co-existence among the various Lebanese religious groups. Per him, al-Amin has become a role model and symbol for all free people and an example that once should not be silent when facing evil and oppression¹⁵.

Shiite Activists – A Threat to Hezbollah

Since June 2020 the protests in Lebanon have picked up steam, inter alia to a wave of arrests of protesters and social media activists (from all religious groups) by the Lebanese security forces and Hezbollah. The Shiite journalist **Rabih Tlais**, a member of the "Shiite Reform Movement", wrote in his tweeter account that he was summoned for a hearing at the general security center and was given no reason however he assumed the reason was connected to his participation in the protests and expressed concerns for his life¹⁶. In response, Hezbollah opponents, Sunni, Shiite and Christians, launched a social media campaign against the scare tactics policy that focused on hashtags such as "down with the police state", "no to framing", "no to police oppression"¹⁷. **Ali Walaa Mathlum**, a Shiite tech professional whose father was a member of Hezbollah and left after being severely tortured wrote in his Facebook account that "it seems that the decision to silence the activists through framing them in order to pave the way to assassinate them socially has already been made, the courts and some of the security forces are being used to that end [...]"¹⁸. Other Shiite activists wrote that the above policy only sinks Hezbollah in a deeper mud and deepens the antagonism against it¹⁹. The Lebanese Shiite cleric, **Muhammad al-Haj Hassan**, founder of the "**The Free Shiite Current**"²⁰ (est. 2006), who currently resides in Michigan, USA and conducts a fierce campaign against Hezbollah on social media, condemned the heavy hand employed against the protesters and

¹⁴ "The Council of Muslim Clerics Worriedly Monitor the Campaign to Hurt Hon. Al-Sayed Ali al-Amin", June 30th, 2020

¹⁵ Amar al-Shaar, "Sayid Ali... We Are ashamed for Our Silence", *al-Shamal News*, July 8th, 2020

¹⁶ @rabihtlais, Twitter.com. June 23, 2020.

¹⁷ #تسقط_الدولة_البيوسية; #لا_لفيركة_الملفات; #لا_للقمع_البيوسية

¹⁸ @Fcbook.ali, Facebook.com. June 23, 2020.

¹⁹ #تسقط_الدولة_البيوسية; #لا_لفيركة_الملفات; #لا_للقمع_البيوسية

²⁰ #تسقط_الدولة_البيوسية; #لا_لفيركة_الملفات; #لا_للقمع_البيوسية

²⁰ "The Free Shiite Current in Lebanon... Failure and Blunders Overall", *al-Marja*, August 28th, 2018. Among the founders of that organization, one can count sheikh Subhi al-Tufayl, Hezbollah's first secretary general who left the organization following severe disagreements with Nasrallah and Hezbollah's way.

Lebanese opposition. He addressed Nasrallah and wrote “Are you not satisfied with [spilling] blood and hurting people’s honor and freedom?? Do you take pleasure in humiliating people, framing them and oppressing the innocents? Did the power blind you and harmed your wisdom? Do you understand that the people’s hatred of you is greater than their hatred of Nero and Cain? Stop the framing comedy of collaborators and silence your trumpets [...]”²¹. Per him, Hezbollah lost its popular support base and solidarity of over two thirds of the Lebanese people “and therefore Hezbollah needs to think about its future and quickly return to Lebanon as time is not on its side”²².



A photo posted by Muhammad al-Hajj on his Tweeter Account showing Nasrallah as using Lebanon to do Iran’s bidding

Summary and Assessment

The worsening economic crisis in Lebanon, the arrests of activists, the threats and harassment suffered by civilians by Hezbollah deepen the rift between the organization and the Shiite. Even among Hezbollah’s ranks there are some who express their despair of the current state of affairs. In December 2019 a member of the organization tore his membership card as protest against the economic crises he fell into. In an interview he gave to al-Arabia network he sadly mentioned that many Lebanese have deteriorated to the brink of starvation and are forced to forage food out of piles of garbage. He further said that without a connection to Hezbollah or Amal one cannot find employment²³.

Intellectuals and Shiite clerics have tried to challenge Hezbollah and Amal in the past through the formation of an organized opposition however this effort failed. It seems that in light of COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening economic and social crisis, Hezbollah’s critics gain ground. Shiite activists and even independent Shiite clerics in Lebanon dare to publicly encourage the protests to replace the government and fight the corruption and other social and economic maladies.

²¹ @elhajjhasan, Twitter.com. June 23, 2020.

²² @elhajjhasan, Twitter.com. July 5, 2020; @UCSMwnmwUoKIYNcX9bLg8mQA, Youtube.com. July 10, 2020.

²³ “Watch... A Hezbollah Member Tears His Membership Card on Camera”, *al-Arabia*, December 8th, 2019

It would also seem that Hezbollah's stature is declining. Its unwillingness to be receptive to the protesters demands and preserve its power bases at all costs just weakens that stature further in the eye of the Lebanese public. That said, for now there is no significant Shiite opposition that can provide a viable alternative or challenge Hezbollah. Yet, the continued protests and the worsening economic situation may back Hezbollah into a corner, threaten its achievements and lead him to initiate a provocation vis a vis Israel to avert the Lebanese attention from their internal problems. Therefore, Israel should be alert to such a scenario and avoid, as much as possible, of playing into Hezbollah's hands.

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