

LEBANON: THE CHIMERA OF A SHI'A 'THIRD WAY'

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As the wave of popular protests and armed uprisings in the Arab world reshapes regional politics, Iran's influence in the Levant is coming under enormous pressure as the Assad regime looks increasingly unable to better the armed opposition. But those who see a post-Ba'athist Damascus as the prelude to the isolation, if not demise of Hizbullah, will be disappointed. Both Lebanese domestic politics and Hizbullah's role within it are complex, and thoughts of a sudden shifting of support away from the Shi'a Muslim party by its base because of greater regional demands for political plurality misreads the domestic context within which the Party of God operates.

Of course, a post-Assad world is of concern to Hizbullah for several reasons. Syria has provided key logistic resupply routes and the diplomatic, and intelligence and security resources that only a friendly neighboring state can bring to bear. That having been said, the porous Lebanon/Syria border and Hizbullah influence over Rafiq Hariri airport's security apparatus mean that a great deal of the logistic support could continue although the heavier weaponry would be more difficult to move.

Assad's fall could also reduce Hizbullah's decisive martial edge over its political rivals. External training and logistic support from a Sunni-aligned Syrian government to the March 14 bloc or independent Sunni groups, or even the tacit acceptance of its conduct on Syrian soil could markedly improve the opposition's militia capability. A situation which has something resembling military parity between political groupings could destabilize the country, but a Hizbullah less sure of the cost to itself of armed action may also result in a party more likely to countenance negotiated settlements than is currently the case.

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Finally, the removal of Syrian 'Alawite support to Hizbullah could embolden Sunni and Christian political opponents of Hizbullah to act more coherently and decisively as a means of pressuring the party into making concessions. This pressure could include courting Hizbullah's political allies who may sense the winds of opportunity blowing away from Hizbullah, providing more public support to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in its prosecution of Hizbullah members for their alleged parts in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, or forcing a cabinet confrontation with the Hizbullah-aligned government in order to make their tenure completely ineffective, in much the same way that Hizbullah did the Siniora government.

But the reality of Hizbullah becoming marginalized in a post-Assad world should not be overestimated, given that Hizbullah's unique position makes it less susceptible to outside forces than many give it credit for. Its key strengths remain impressive – strong domestic communal support and lack of any communal alternative, and ideological and financial links with Iran that are deeper, and of more importance to its long-term survival than its mutually supportive relationship with the Assad regime. The party remains popular with large sections of the Lebanese Shi'a community, particularly in the south, the southern suburbs of Beirut and the Biqa'. Hizbullah's core supporters are appreciative of the role the Party of God has played in moving the Shi'a community from the periphery to the center of Lebanese political power.

The manner in which this political rise has been achieved however has meant that attitudes towards the party have become increasingly polarized amongst and between Lebanon's complex myriad of sectarian communities. There is a growing feeling amongst many non-Shi'a (along with some Shi'a) Lebanese, that Hizbullah regards itself as being beyond the rules of domestic political or legal accountability and too willing to resort to force, or the threat of it, to protect or advance its own interests. Their takeover of west Beirut in 2008, as well as threats against those involved in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon indictments, are cases in point.

For all the concerns about the power of Hizbullah, efforts to counter its influence in Lebanese politics have had little success to date. After five years of national dialogues the party has not shown any willingness to disarm. A militarily capable Hizbullah serves the interests of both Syria and Iran and, in the current regional environment, there remains strong support amongst the Shi'a community for Hizbullah to maintain its arms. In light of their own experience during the civil war and the Israeli occupation of the south, and the recent experience of Shi'a communities in Iraq and Syria, many Lebanese Shi'a see in Hizbullah's weapons a guarantee of their community's security.

Politically, efforts to weaken Hizbullah require viable alternatives to attract the loyalty of the country's Shi'a community that don't currently exist. Champions of this approach refer to it as the search for the 'Third Force' – a Lebanese Shi'a political grouping with sufficient credibility to attract non-ideological supporters of Hizbullah who seek an alternative model not so closely aligned with Iranian interest, and Amal loyalists who are disillusioned with the corruption associated with it. Splitting Hizbullah and Amal's domestic support base attacks the legitimacy of both parties and makes Hizbullah's argument for the retention of an armed wing that sits outside the Lebanese Armed Forces ring increasingly hollow.

First, Hizbullah's central role in the government now brings with it responsibilities that it has not previously had. Any continued inability on the part of the government to address Lebanon's national infrastructure, wage and debt woes has the potential to weaken Hizbullah's political support. Those directly beholden to the party through the employment, health care or education that it provides will maintain their loyalty regardless; however, a large proportion of the Shi'a population sit outside this bubble of protection and could be influenced by government performance. Next is the party's reliance on Lebanese political allies to maintain its pre-eminent political position. If it becomes isolated from these allies it is more vulnerable to political competition as non-Shi'a voters feel more ready to choose other electoral tickets. And although such an outcome appears remote at present, as the Arab political uprisings have demonstrated, political events can move quickly in the region.

Hizbullah's non-Shi'a political allies are political opportunists, not ideological fellow travelers, and as such are always open to deal-making depending on where they perceive the political advantage lies. Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement has effectively split the Christian vote and delivered power to the Hizbullah-led bloc in return for cabinet representation and the benefits that accrue from political power in Lebanon. But Hizbullah's recent public disagreement with the Aounists and its own uncharacteristic internal party indiscipline over the issue of Prime Minister Mikati's proposed minimum-wage increase were a preview of the way in which political disagreements can lead to long-term fissures in strategic political relationships of convenience. Other non-Shi'a allies such as the Armenian Tashnaq party or the Druze in the Lebanese Democratic Party under Talal Arslan have similar pragmatic calculations in deciding where their political loyalties lie.

Even Hizbullah's main political ally, the more secular Shi'a Amal, is allied for purely pragmatic reasons. The further that Amal moves from its founding ideals of probity, equality and political empowerment espoused by its founder Musa Sadr, the more peripheral it becomes to Shi'a politics. Hizbullah acts as the senior partner on whom it relies for its electoral relevance. As the Arab Spring

has shown, political systems are never static forever. In the case of Lebanon however, if the political representation of the Shi'a community is ever to aspire to plurality, then credible alternatives for the political loyalty of the community need to emerge.

In Search of a Third Force

The constraints facing the establishment of a 'third force' are significant. To begin with, any alternative political party requires significant funding and a broad organizational base. Hizbullah has access to hundreds of millions of dollars of direct funding annually from Iran, but also understands that this largesse can never be guaranteed. As part of efforts to increase its financial independence from Iran, Hizbullah possesses an impressive investment portfolio¹ along with an overseas support network that raises funds through voluntary contributions and, if reports are to be believed, some criminal activities.

Amal, although very much the junior partner in the political alliance, also has a broad organizational structure even if much of its income comes through its access to government funds via The Council of the South. The Council controls significant sums of official funds designed for emergency aid, poverty alleviation, and reconstruction and development. A dispute between Amal leader Nabih Berri and then prime minister Fouad Siniora over the amount of funding for the Council showed how important the income was to Berri (particularly in an election year) and was enough to block the budget for months in 2009.

Without access to government (Amal) or Iranian (Hizbullah) funding, political alternatives face a difficult choice. New political groups need to access private funding either from within the country or from overseas. While *émigré* Lebanese can be useful sources of funds, overseas contributions from non-Lebanese donors leaves potential rivals open to criticism that they are little more than the tools of foreign interests – breathtakingly hypocritical given Hizbullah and Amal's close relationship with Syria and Iran, yet an effective political tactic locally.

Even if a financially solvent, independent and organizationally efficient national Shi'a political movement were to emerge, there is one last obstacle: an

¹ Matthew Levitt, 'Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2005.
<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-finances-funding-the-party-of-god>

electoral system that appears impervious to substantive change primarily because it ensures the dominance of the major blocs, the very same people whose approval is required to amend it. Despite these challenges, some Shi'a political opposition is developing, although none can be described as mature, let alone competitive, at this stage. The groups have emerged from three different, but occasionally overlapping areas: communal political parties intent on competing in national elections, clerical activists and grassroots secular Shi'a movements.

Rival Political Parties

In the Lebanese context there is really only one group that has serious intentions to develop the resource and organizational capacity to challenge Hizbullah nationally. Ahmad al-Assaad formed the Lebanese Option Party in 2007 (now known as the Lebanese Option Gathering) and claims a national political structure. But for an organization that seeks to represent a 'new way' for Shi'a politics in Lebanon, the antecedents of its founder and head are very much old Lebanon. Ahmad is the son of long-time Speaker of the Lebanese parliament and traditional leader (*za'im*) Kamal al-Assaad. As such he suffers from stigma associated with the 'old system' of Shi'a political patronage.

The issue of financing is another challenging issue for the Lebanese Option Gathering. Ahmad al-Assaad freely admits that he has accepted foreign funds, including from Saudi Arabia, arguing that it is necessary in order to counter the influence that Iranian money buys for Hizbullah². But it has still found the going tough. In the 2009 parliamentary election, the Lebanese Option Gathering fielded twelve Shi'a candidates in seven districts in Lebanon. In all cases the candidates were trounced by the March 8 coalition electoral lists. In the district of Marjayoun-Hasbaya where two Shi'a seats were contested Ahmad al-Assaad gained a respectable 16% of the vote, which still left him a long way behind the Amal (74%) and Hizbullah (72%) candidates. Other candidates fared less well than al-Assaad.

Given the difficulty in establishing alternative Shi'a political parties, another avenue may be to build on disaffected elements of Hizbullah and Amal. Neither of these parties however, is likely to stand idly by and allow their supporters to defect to a rival, and nor are external patrons such as Iran going to allow their influence to be weakened. As a consequence, those looking to attract supporters from Hizbullah or Amal are either such minor actors that the concerned parties see no real threat in their actions (in the case of Sheikh Subhi

² Interview with author, Beirut, May 2011

Tufayli) or they remain so cautious in their approach that they are aspirational actors only.

Given its reputational issue, Amal is the more likely source of disaffected supporters. Accusations of institutionalized corruption and nepotism under the leadership of Nabih Berri abound, and concerns about how far the party has strayed from the intent of its founder Imam Musa Sadr would appear to make it vulnerable to a schism. Reports of Berri's demise, however, have often been greatly exaggerated. To a large degree the critical role that he plays for both Syria and Hizbullah ensures his political survival. Despite claims that younger Amal members are leaving in large numbers for Hizbullah, that Amal is becoming little more than the center of a patronage network and that other members are being recruited for a new third force, the status quo has remained. Former Amal members such as Muhammad Obeid, who confidently predicted the structural weakening of Amal in a 2006 US Embassy cable³, have proven to be over optimistic in this regard.

Clerical Activists

From the time that Musa Sadr arrived in southern Lebanon in 1960 the role traditionally occupied by Lebanese Shi'a clerics, that of quietist scholars dealing mainly with personal status issues, was over. From Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah's prototypical Lebanese Shi'a religious nationalism to the current Hizbullah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's less scholarly and more forthright oratory, clerical political leadership has been at the forefront of Lebanese Shi'a political discourse for the past three decades. As a consequence, clerical leaders willing to speak out against Hizbullah have been proffered as a potential foil for the Islamist leadership of Hizbullah. But once again, while there are clerics who are willing to oppose Hizbullah politically there remains no one with sufficient popular or organizational support, or the political will, to seriously challenge Hizbullah and Amal.

There are, of course, a number of other obstacles to would-be clerical leaders. One is the theological debate as to whether scholars should provide moral or political guidance. Perhaps the best-regarded independent cleric in scholarly terms, Sayyid Ali al-Amine, is firmly of the quietist tradition. He has never sought to build a political opposition to Hizbullah, merely to criticize it and to advocate political alternatives to it from amongst the Shi'a community. Sayyid

³ US Embassy cable dated 7 April 2006, 'Amal-Hizbullah Marriage Weakening Amal but may Open a Way for Other Shi'a', <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2006/04/06BEIRUT1090.html>, accessed 10 December 2012

Hani Fahs is another scholarly cleric whose is regularly accused of being pro-Western rather than independent. The potentially dangerous ground that these clerics occupy though, was illustrated when Sayyid al-Amine's offices were occupied by Amal members and he was removed from his official position as mufti of Tyre and Jabal Amil by the Higher Shi'a Council, and replaced by Sheikh Hassan Abdallah, an Amal-aligned cleric following his criticism of Hizbullah's takeover of west Beirut in 2008.⁴ The message from Hizbullah was clear – some criticism is allowed, however there are well-defined limits to what those may be, even for highly-regarded clerics.

Another cleric who has fallen foul of the entrenched Shi'a parties is the former secretary-general of Hizbullah from 1989-91, Sheikh Subhi Tufayli. A hard-liner, he was eased out of the party after refusing to support participation in national elections following the Ta'if Accord-inspired national reconciliation. He launched a political movement, the Revolution of the Hungry (*Thawra al-Jiya*), which led to clashes with the Lebanese Army in 1998.⁵ While the movement had some success at the municipal election in the Biqa' that same year, these were confined to the two villages Brital and Tariyya, where the strength of tribal influence and Tufayli's long-standing family links make him a respected figure. Despite occasional attempts by self-interested Lebanese parties to make the case that Sheikh Tufayli could prove to be a useful foil against Hizbullah, his limited appeal and outstanding arrest warrants for treason and murder make him an unlikely candidate to challenge Hizbullah.

Other clerics of lesser standing have criticized the political dominance of Hizbullah and urged the development of alternative voices. These attempts, however, have ranged from the ineffectual to the bizarre. Groups such as the Free Shi'a Movement present a responsible and independent face through their founder Sheikh Muhammad al Hajj Hassan, although their close connections with the March 14 bloc make their claims of true independence ring somewhat hollow and likely preclude them from being a serious electoral threat.

At the other end of the spectrum was the Islamic Arabic Council, an aspirational organization headed by a little-known cleric, Sheikh Muhammad Ali al-Husseini. He took the long-term view of building a support base through youth programs, and insisted that communal leadership was the preserve of a *sayyid*,⁶ but failed to offer any candidates for elections. His claims to head a

⁴ US Embassy cable dated 16 May 2008, 'Key Independent Shia Cleric 'Fired' from Post', <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2008/05/08BEIRUT710.html>, accessed 10 December 2012

⁵ Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 110-111.

⁶ Interview with author, Beirut, May 2011

1,500-strong Arab Islamic Resistance movement that had launched a rocket attack against Israel and to have started a television station transmitting from Dubai were fabrications, while he also claimed to have close relations with Saudi Arabia, leading some to conclude that he was an anti-Hizbullah construct of the Saudis. In May 2011 Sheikh Husseini was arrested and charged with spying for Israel⁷, spelling the end of the Arab Islamic Council.

Grassroots Movements

An alternative model in its early stages of development represents an indirect and long-term approach, based on the current impracticability of competing against the party machines of Hizbullah and Amal. The concept is to incrementally build support networks utilizing NGOs as a means of encouraging political diversity amongst the Shi'a community and as a locus for political loyalty, in much the same way that Hizbullah's social services and local dispute resolution mechanisms do currently. Lokman Slim's *Hayya Bina* (Let's Go) conducts a range of educational and advocacy programs throughout Shi'a areas of Lebanon, including the Citizen Lebanon program conducted in conjunction with the National Democratic Institute.

Riad al-Assaad, another prominent figure in this movement of independents, is a grandson of the assassinated former Prime Minister Riad al-Solh and a successful businessman. He believes that this type of approach is the only way to change the political dynamic amongst the Shi'a community. The institutional and financial strength of Amal and Hizbullah is simply too strong to be challenged directly.⁸ Despite his high-profile reconstruction work in the south of the country, his experience in three legislative elections illustrates the enormity of the task. In the contest for the two Shi'a seats in Zahrani during the 2009 election he was only able to garner 7% of the vote against the might of Nabih Berri (90%) and the long-term MP and Amal ally 'Ali Osseiran (87%).⁹

⁷ 'Lebanon Arrests Sheikh on Charges of Spying for Israel', *The Daily Star*, May 24, 2011, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/May-24/Lebanon-arrests-sheikh-suspected-of-spying-for-Israel.aspx#axzz2EAyA3sDZ>, accessed 9 December 2012.

⁸ Interview with author, Beirut, May 2011.

⁹ International Federation for Electoral Reform (IFER) Report, 9 June 2009, 'Lebanon's 7 June Elections: The Results', http://www.ifes.org/~media/Files/Publications/SpeechCommentary/2009/1460/IFES_LebanonReview060709Results.pdf, accessed 10 December 2012.

Systemic Challenges

On the face of it, there should be room for independent Shi'a political voices to emerge, given the degree of voter apathy. Between 1996 and 2005, voter turnout had hovered around 45% (likely reflecting the Syrian occupation, when voters believed that results were more or less predetermined), but reached nearly 54% in the first post-withdrawal election in 2009. Despite the large numbers of non-voters who could potentially be mobilised, until there is significant reform of the electoral process then there can be no so-called 'third force', regardless of the individual popularity of independent Shi'a candidates. Such is the degree to which the present electoral law favors the established Shi'a political groups that there is little point in Shi'a candidates running unless they are on a Hizbullah-supported ticket.

There are two main impediments to overturning the monopoly that Hizbullah and Amal have over any putative political rivals; the majoritarian electoral system and the non-standard electoral ballots. The dominance of electoral lists in determining the outcome of parliamentary elections is evident from the 2009 election results. The six MPs elected from the pro-Hizbullah March 8 ticket in Baalbak-Hermel district (four Hizbullah, one Amal, one Ba'th) all received between 102,000 and 109,000 votes, while the five unsuccessful Lebanese Option candidates received between one and 13, 200 votes. In Tyre district the successful March 8 candidates (two Amal, two Hizbullah) received between 90 and 93% of the vote, in Bint Jbeil (two Amal, one Hizbullah) it was between 92 and 94%.

Such lopsided results are perpetuated by the lack of a genuinely secret ballot. Currently, votes can be cast on a blank piece of paper issued at the voting station or using a pre-prepared ballot issued prior to the election by activists or community leaders. Both of these practices allow the voters' actions to be scrutinized by party members to ensure that the ballots are cast as they were meant to be.

Following the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, the Lebanese government instituted a National Commission for a New Electoral Law under the chairmanship of former Foreign Minister Fouad Boutros.¹⁰ The Commission developed a draft electoral reform law that addressed many of the inadequacies of the present system. In particular, it recommended the creation of a mixed parliamentary election system that maintained confessional quotas

¹⁰ IFER Briefing Paper 'Electoral Reform in Lebanon', December 2007, <http://aceproject.org/regions-en/countries-and-territories/LB/reports/IFESLebanon%20Briefing%20Paper%20Electoral%20Reform%20dec07.pdf>, accessed 9 December 2012

but called for 51 members to be elected by the proportional system at a provincial level, with the remaining 77 members to come from a majoritarian vote at the smaller *qada* level. It also called for the adoption of uniform official ballots to be used during elections.

These two reforms could have opened the way for the emergence of credible opposition Shi'a voices in parliament, however the reforms were never enacted. The report was tabled in 2006 but the war with Israel and subsequent political standoff between March 14 and March 8 forces meant that parliament never met to discuss the report. By the time that it did reconvene and discuss the report in September 2008, any impetus that may have existed for real change had disappeared and only a few select elements of the Boutros Commission's electoral reforms were accepted. Attempts to resurrect the issue of electoral reform remain stymied in the Lebanese parliament as communal interests prove an insurmountable obstacle in getting agreement to a reform bill.

Even with deep political change changing the face of Arab countries and Hizbullah's close Syrian ally under enormous pressure to survive, the likelihood of a Shi'a third force emerging to politically challenge the dominance of Hizbullah is virtually non-existent without such electoral reforms. Even if Hizbullah's pro-Iranian allies in the Assad regime fall, such is the party's dominance of Lebanese Shi'a politics that its position, for the immediate future at least, appears assured. Not only does Lebanon remain an uneven playing field electorally, Hizbullah has been willing to use force against its political opponents when its core interests have been threatened and will likely do so again in the future.

But without developing political pluralism amongst the Lebanese Shi'a, the political field is abandoned to Hizbullah and Amal. A viable Lebanese Shi'a third force may appear as a chimera at present, but alternatives need to be developed, so that the Shi'a community has the ability to take advantage of changed political circumstances if and when they present themselves. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria may help those who seek to develop these alternatives, but the event will not be sufficient in and of itself to lead to a more diverse Shi'a political discourse. The impediments to creating such a situation are far more significant than simply who controls Syria. Those who seek to politically challenge Hizbullah will, for the foreseeable future, face an unenviable task with little likelihood of short-term success. As the former Ambassador to Lebanon and now Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman observed "...the deck is stacked against independent Shi'a."¹¹

¹¹ US Embassy cable dated 20 February 2007, 'Independent Shi'a Organising Slowly, Independent of Each Other', <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=07BEIRUT269>, accessed 9 December 2012