

Hezbollah: A State within a State

By Hussain Abdul-Hussain

ACCORDING TO THE MOST COMMONLY ACCEPTED VERSION OF ITS history, Hezbollah is a resistance movement. Yet that description fails to capture the true nature of this militant group. Hezbollah, in fact, wears three hats today. First, in its own words, it is a resistance movement. Second, it is also an Islamist political movement that engages in rounds of political bickering with rival non-Shiite parties within Lebanon. And third, it is a revolutionary movement formed around a special Shiite school of thought that seeks to establish an Islamic state based on the radical ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran: *Wilayat al-Faqih* or “rule of the jurist.”

Since its inception in 1982, Hezbollah has undergone several changes, metamorphosing from an Islamic resistance movement to a “state within a state” in Lebanon, committed to “liberation.” After the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, the now-irrelevant resistance movement struggled to maintain its self-identity and ideological agenda. It did so by launching random attacks within a disputed sliver of land along the Lebanese-Israeli border, as well as by abducting Israeli soldiers for prisoner swap deals. But after the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Hezbollah lost a vital political sponsor and was forced to deal with domestic politics in order to maintain both its regional agenda and its autonomy within Lebanon. Most important of all, Hezbollah still struggles to spread and impose an Islamic state based on the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* (or *vilayat-e-faqih* in Persian).

The Revolution within Shiism

IN THE SUMMER OF 1982, DOZENS OF PERSIAN-SPEAKING, BEARDED MEN wearing khaki uniforms, many of them mounted on motorbikes, could be seen roaming the streets and unpaved roadways in the foothills of Baalbek, in eastern Lebanon. Those men were members of the Iranian Revolution Guards, commonly known as the *Pasdaran*, and they had come to spread the Iranian revolution in Lebanon. Baalbek, a predominantly Shiite town surrounded by dozens of Shiite villages, proved to be a fertile ground for such an undertaking.

The original idea behind Iran's involvement in Baalbek was to create a Shiite movement that could emulate the Iranian revolution of 1979. This movement would struggle to replace the political order in Lebanon with an Islamic republic.

As had been done in Iran three years earlier, activists organized massive rallies in Baalbek to protest what they decried as the injustices of the Lebanese state. But in actuality, the "state" in war-torn Lebanon was, in those days, virtually nonexistent. This made the *Pasdaran*'s project of fomenting a revolution in Baalbek a relatively easy task. The *Pasdaran*'s Lebanese followers quickly seized the Lebanese Armed Forces' largest barracks in the country, which were located at the top of Baalbek's Sheikh Abdullah Hill. The revolutionaries also occupied the state-owned Teachers' House, situated in the upscale neighborhood of Rass al-Ein, and transformed it into the Imam Khomeini Hospital. They then invaded one of Baalbek's three hotels, al-Khawwam, also situated in Rass al-Ein, and turned it into their headquarters.

Since revolutions usually require propaganda machines and armies, the *Pasdaran* supervised the establishment of a radio station, calling it the "Voice of the Downtrodden." It also started training young men and organizing them in paramilitary groups.

Murals praising Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution in Iran, and banners with revolutionary Islamic slogans, could be seen on virtually every corner. The most important of the slogans summarized the new movement's vision for a united Lebanon. At the time, Lebanon was divided into East and West, and the movement's motto was: "No Eastern, No Western, an Islamic Republic." All banners were signed by a group, whose name was previously unknown to ordinary Lebanese: "Hezbollah," or the "Party of God."

This new Shiite movement did not perceive itself to be an independent political group or militia, but rather an extension of the Iranian revolution. In particular, the revolutionaries conceived of themselves as being the "Hezbollahis"—the same name given to activists who had formed a quasi-religious police force in Iran during the early days of the revolution.¹ Thus Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite movement modeled on Iran's revolutionaries, was born.

In September 1982, Ibrahim Amin al-Sayyed—a cleric and a Hezbollah recruit—presented the group’s earliest platform. The objective of Hezbollah, Sayyed said during a rally, was similar to that of the Iranian revolution: side with the world’s downtrodden against the oppressors. The movement’s stated enemies were America, Israel, Britain, France and the Lebanese Phalanges Party.

In other predominantly Shiite areas of Lebanon, and especially among the shanties in Beirut’s southern suburbs, an aggressively militant movement was being formed around the fiery, anti-imperial teachings of Lebanese cleric Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah. The young Shiite men who comprised Fadlallah’s movement had been trained by Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which had previously been ejected from Lebanon in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion.

The PLO leadership such as Khalil al-Wazir, known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Jihad, and his apprentice, the Sunni Lebanese Anis al-Naqqash, mentored the young Shiite fighters. The most prominent of these young fighters was Imad Mughniyah, who would later emerge as Hezbollah’s incognito military strategist. Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus in February 2008.

Anis al-Naqqash was imprisoned in France between 1980 and 1990 for his attempt to assassinate the former Iranian Prime Minister Shahbour Bakhtiar, and was additionally famous, along with Ilich Ramírez Sánchez (aka “Carlos the Jackal”), for his participation in the 1975 kidnapping of OPEC ministers in Vienna. In a 2000 interview, Naqqash said that the PLO enjoyed strong ties with the anti-Shah Iranian opposition. Naqqash argued that the formation of the Iranian paramilitary group, the Pasdaran, was his idea. This claim indicates that the partnership between those who formed the Hezbollah leadership in the 1980s and Iran’s revolutionary leaders actually predated the 1979 revolution. That partnership continues to this day.

While the PLO leadership, including Abu Jihad, made their exodus from Beirut to Tunisia in 1982, Mughniyah and like-minded militants stayed behind and organized themselves into militias that joined the fight against the Israelis in Beirut. It is widely believed that these militias were behind the attacks on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and against the French forces in 1983.

Also joining the fight in Beirut and southern Lebanon were militants from the Amal movement, another Shiite militia formed in 1975. By 1982, the Amal movement, under the leadership of Nabih Berri, had essentially become a Syrian proxy force and a number of its cadres, including men such Hassan Nasrallah and Hussein al-Moussawi, broke off and either formed small splinter groups or joined Hezbollah. By 1985, Baalbek’s Hezbollah merged with the Beirut militias and the combined movement announced its re-birth, with a slightly modified ideological platform and agenda.

Unlike Amal and other pro-Syrian militias, Hezbollah, in its earliest years, was not involved in anti-Israeli activities. In fact, the date for Hezbollah’s “resistance” against

Israel can be traced to 1989. This makes the group a latecomer to anti-Israeli operations, which were first launched by Palestinian militias and other Lebanese groups, such as the Lebanese Communist Party, following Israel's initial invasion of Lebanon in 1978.

Even though Hezbollah had not taken a stance on internal Lebanese politics, as opposed to the more domesticated Amal, clashes broke out between the two groups almost instantly. This was probably due to Syrian instigation, for Damascus strived to maintain the upper hand over Lebanon's Shiites through Amal. Fighting between the two groups continued even after the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. It went on until Tehran and Damascus reached an arrangement, toward the mid-1990s, over the status of Iran's satellite group, Hezbollah, in a country where Syrian influence reigned supreme. By the time Lebanon's warring factions arrived at an agreement to end the civil war in 1990, Hezbollah had not yet become involved with the country's domestic politics. The movement's main focus was on its anti-Israel operations in southern Lebanon and the consolidation of its mini-state within Lebanon.

The Islamic Resistance in Lebanon

MAINTAINING THIS MINI-STATE WITHIN LEBANON IN PEACE TIME PROVED TO BE a difficult task for Hezbollah, which increasingly began to style itself exclusively as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation in the south. By the end of Lebanon's civil war, Hezbollah had seemingly abandoned its dream of creating an Islamic state, and it began to concede to the government some of the facilities that it had occupied a decade earlier.

In 1992, following a complicated internal debate over its stance toward the Lebanese state, Hezbollah decided to form a political party and participated in elections in Lebanon. It managed to win a dozen seats in parliament, thereby forming a parliamentary bloc that was dedicated to supporting the group's military operations in the south. Hezbollah's literature also underwent a significant change during this period. On its yellow flag and underneath its AK-47 emblem, Hezbollah replaced its original motto of the "Islamic Revolution in Lebanon" with the motto "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon."

Through its allies in Lebanon's cabinet and parliament, Syria guaranteed Hezbollah's smooth operation, helping it to maintain security zones that were inaccessible to government forces, constantly replenishing its arms caches, and circumventing state laws as the group expanded its network of social services. With the Syrians watching its back in Lebanon's domestic politics, Hezbollah transformed itself into a purely anti-Israel force.

By focusing on Israel only, Hezbollah won enormous popularity with Sunnis throughout the Arab world, including in Lebanon, since the Palestinian cause had been traditionally a Sunni one. Meanwhile, Hezbollah's rival, the Amal movement, managed to thrive in Lebanese politics, presenting itself as the representative of the Shiites.

This Syrian-Iranian, Amal-Hezbollah state-resistance dichotomy lasted until 2000, when Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon. If Hezbollah was purely a resistance movement until 2000, it found itself unemployed thereafter.

Another loser in 2000 was the Syrian regime. After Hezbollah was placed on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations, Damascus discovered a new role for itself, playing mediator between the world and the group. Had Hezbollah gone out of business, Damascus would similarly have found itself increasingly irrelevant.

In order to keep Hezbollah's resistance scheme alive, the Syrians cunningly devised the so-called "Shebaa Farms excuse," which refers to a sliver of land on the foothills of the Golan Heights with undecided sovereignty between Syria and Lebanon. Syria invented the Shebaa Farms excuse to justify Hezbollah's continued fight against Israel. Without the Shebaa Farms, Hezbollah would have had no territorial claims against Israel and would have gone out of business as a militant organization. Likewise, the Syrians would have lost leverage; Damascus is only relevant in the region as long as it is able to cause trouble.

Between 2000 and 2006, Hezbollah executed random, small-scale attacks on Israeli outposts in the Shebaa Farms area. In 2000, it abducted three Israeli soldiers in the area, and kidnapped an Israeli businessman in 2001. The group then negotiated a prisoner swap deal with Israel through a third party. Hezbollah emerged victorious after this exchange in early 2004, but once again it also found itself irrelevant and unemployed. Without prisoner swaps or territorial claims, Hezbollah has little to do as a resistance group.

In 1998 Syrian President Hafez Assad started grooming his son Bashar for succession by commissioning him to run "the Lebanon file." After Hafez's death in 2000, politics in Lebanon took a different path. Bashar gradually phased out his father's old guard in both Syria and Lebanon and replaced them with his own people. In Lebanon, he launched a systematic process to undermine traditional popular heavyweights, such as Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and even Syria's staunch ally and leader of the Shiite Amal Movement Nabih Berri. Instead, Bashar chose previously unknown officers from the Lebanese intelligence service and the army.

In the eyes of Lebanon's traditional politicians, Bashar was cloning his autocratic Syrian system in Lebanon, and doing so against their will and best interests. It was only a matter of time before Hariri and Jumblatt broke with Syria. The breakup

happened toward the end of 2004, when Assad insisted on extending the mandate of his Lebanese puppet president, Emile Lahoud, a retired army general.

Meanwhile, through his international networks, Rafik Hariri lobbied for the approval of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559. In a short-sighted move, Washington and Paris led the council to approve the resolution, thus linking the fates of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon with that of Hezbollah's arms. Resolution 1559 stipulated the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon, and the disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. A strong case can be made that the resolution should have been split into two, one resolution forcing Syria to withdraw, the other demanding Hezbollah's disarmament. By lumping them in one resolution, the international community unintentionally strengthened the alliance between Damascus and Hezbollah, making it harder to deal with either one of them at a time. Hezbollah took Syria's side not only because Resolution 1559 linked their fates, but because with Syria out, Hezbollah lost a sponsor that had protected its interests in domestic politics.

The Lebanese Shiite Party

WITH SYRIAN INFLUENCE WANING IN LEBANON, HEZBOLLAH WAS FORCED TO STEP up to maintain the status quo. However, the party, which is trained for guerilla warfare and propaganda, proved to be ill-prepared for participating in Lebanese politics. Then, Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated. In February 2005, the majority of the nation's Sunni population took to the streets to protest his death and widely accused Damascus of murdering him. Hezbollah, for its part, defended the Syrian regime. On March 8, 2005, Hezbollah rallied close to half a million of its supporters and those of its allies in downtown Beirut. The theme of the rally, in which Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivered one of his provocative speeches, was "Thank you, Syria."

This profession of gratitude for Syria did not go down well with Lebanon's Sunnis, or for that matter, with other Lebanese sects. On March 14, provoked by Hezbollah's bullying and arrogance, more than one million Christian, Sunni and Druze Lebanese gathered in downtown Beirut, demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops. Coupled with growing international pressure, Damascus was forced to comply with UNSC 1559 and, after 29 years of occupying Lebanon, it withdrew in April 2005. Hezbollah could do nothing to prevent the Syrian withdrawal. Its rally had alienated the Sunnis, the Druze and the Christians, whose leaders isolated Hezbollah and created a new parliament along with their allies.

Before 2005, Syria had ruled Lebanon and backed Hezbollah, so there was no

reason for the party to get involved in domestic Lebanese affairs. In 2005, Syria was forced out, and Hezbollah had to take responsibility for itself. The 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon brought Hezbollah back, not into the resistance business, but into domestic Lebanese politics. Should Syria regain its influence over Lebanon, Hezbollah could then refocus its energy on anti-Israel activities alone.

In the meantime, since Hezbollah and pro-Syrian forces controlled the 2000 parliament, elections in 2005 would have been inconceivable without Hezbollah's consent. Therefore, to convince Hezbollah to enter the elections in spring 2005, the Sunni leader Saad Hariri, son of the slain prime minister, and the Druze leader Jumblatt, struck an alliance with Hezbollah and Amal. Hariri and Jumblatt and their allies won a majority in parliament and formed a cabinet giving Hezbollah one third of the seats. But with the Hariri tribunal processing, Hezbollah's alliance with Hariri and Jumblatt soon collapsed and Hezbollah was again isolated. This time, Damascus managed to maneuver its former opponent, Christian leader and former Army General Michel Aoun, to its side. Hezbollah found an ally in Aoun, who provided cover for the party's anti-state behavior and continuous armed bullying of political foes.

Hezbollah, however, still had to regain its support among the Sunnis. To do so, it played one of its anti-Israel cards. On July 12, 2006, the group launched a cross border attack into Israel, killing a few Israeli soldiers and abducting two others. Hezbollah's attack on Israel was unprecedented in its geographic location since, for the first time in six years, the group attacked outside of the Shebaa Farms region. Nonetheless, Hezbollah did not anticipate the full scale war with Israel that would follow.

On the day of the abductions, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah "advised" the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his Defense Minister Amir Peretz to act wisely and avoid war. The only way to retrieve the abducted sentries was through indirect negotiations, Nasrallah said. Not heeding Nasrallah's advice, the Olmert government launched a war against Lebanon which, despite its widespread destruction, failed to retrieve the kidnapped soldiers.

In the war's aftermath, Nasrallah said during a television interview that if he had known the war would be so devastating, he would not have ordered his party to abduct the Israeli troops. Nasrallah's statements indicate that the Hezbollah leadership did not foresee a full scale war with Israel in 2006. Hezbollah miscalculated, assuming that by abducting troops and forcing Tel Aviv to accept a prisoner swap, they could boost their floundering popularity among the Sunnis of Lebanon and the Arab world as they had successfully done in 2002.

Absent a prisoner exchange, and with the predominantly Shiite areas massively devastated, Hezbollah's popularity plummeted among both Shiites and Sunnis in Lebanon. A majority of the Shiites had lost not only loved ones, but their houses, their schools and their businesses, and for reasons that were unclear to them.

Hezbollah was losing ground with the Shiites and it had to find a way to regain their support. For this purpose, the ministers of Hezbollah and their allies walked out of the cabinet by the end of the summer of 2006, allegedly to dispute a cabinet vote endorsing the tribunal for the Hariri murder.

Not only did Hezbollah's ministers submit their resignations, but their supporters organized a massive rally in downtown Beirut and behaved as if they intended to invade the headquarters of Sunni Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and to forcefully unseat him. While Hezbollah's bullying escalated tension with the Sunnis, it won Hezbollah fame for emerging as the sole defender of Shiite interests in Lebanon for the first time in its history.

Nonetheless, Hezbollah's anti-government show still proved politically inadequate. While Nasrallah had promised his Shiite supporters a conclusive victory over the Sunni-led cabinet, Siniora stood his ground. He remained entrenched in his headquarters while Hezbollah's supporters spent months in tents outside his balcony. Meanwhile, Lebanon's Shiites were growing restless. Just as Nasrallah could not deliver on defeating Israel, despite all his later speeches claiming otherwise, Hezbollah was also unable to dislodge its domestic enemies.

By October 2007, the term of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud had ended. As he walked out of the presidential palace, his seat remained vacant. Hezbollah and its Syrian sponsors were determined to obstruct the anti-Syrian parliamentary majority from electing a president of its choosing. Yet Hezbollah, Syria and Iran combined were unable to force the election of a president of their own choosing.

The presidential vacancy and political stalemate persisted until May 7, 2008, when Hezbollah's fighters stormed the streets of predominantly Sunni Beirut and of the Druze in southern Mount Lebanon. Hezbollah's move was presumably in retaliation for earlier cabinet decisions to dismantle Hezbollah's private communication network and to replace the pro-Hezbollah Security Chief at Beirut International Airport. Yet the Hezbollah operation went far beyond forcing a government resignation. Its fighters invaded and torched the offices of the pro-Hariri TV station, Future TV, and newspaper, Al-Mustaqbal.

In Mount Lebanon, the Druze lived up to their reputation of being fierce fighters. They not only contained the Hezbollah attack, but also inflicted heavy casualties on the Shiite militia.

As time elapsed, Hezbollah's operation hit a political ceiling. The group stopped short of forcing its terms on its opponents and accepted a refereeing initiative by the League of Arab Countries. The parties met in Doha and signed an accord stipulating the election of Army Commander Michel Suleiman as president, the division of electoral districts along the lines of an old law drafted in the 1960s, and the end of offensive media campaigns against each other. The accord also mandated that the

parties re-launch national dialogue to debate, among other issues, the future of the Hezbollah militia's weapons.

The 2006 war with Israel had ended with UN Resolution 1701, which mandated the deployment of the Lebanese Army, along with a beefed up UN Interim Force in (southern) Lebanon (UNIFIL). Although the UN and a number of watchdog groups have reported that Hezbollah has replenished its arm caches under the nose of the UN force, many believe that Hezbollah's Shiite constituency has so far served as its first deterrence line against war with Israel. This was evident as Hezbollah practiced self-restraint during the Israel war on Hamas, in Gaza, in late 2008 and early 2009. Since the end of the 2006 War, Hezbollah has repeatedly sent envoys to Shiite villages to assure its supporters that war was behind them, and that the time has come for rebuilding.

The 2007 invasion of Beirut and Mount Lebanon ended with Hezbollah unable to force its political terms, despite its military advantage, over other Lebanese non-Shiite groups. With no resistance credentials to present to the Sunnis and no conclusive victories to present to the Shiites, Hezbollah has been domesticated and transformed from a pan-Arab movement into a Lebanese Shiite party pre-occupied with endless Lebanese political bickering.

Hezbollah's War within the Shiite World

SINCE ITS INCEPTION, HEZBOLLAH HAS SOUGHT TO EMULATE THE IRANIAN revolution and to implement the radical Shiite doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*. The theory is based on a series of lectures that the Ayatollah Khomeini delivered while exiled in southern Iraq in the mid 1970s. The lectures highlighted the different aspects of an Islamic (Shiite) government envisaged by Khomeini. His new vision undermined centuries of Shiite perspective on public life.

To the Shiites of the world—also known as the Twelver Shiites after their 12 successive imams who presumably ruled after the death of the prophet of Islam Mohamed in 632 CE—an imam is the shadow of God on earth, without which the believers cannot survive. The 12th Shiite Imam, Mohamed al-Mahdi, went into occultation in 941 CE. Since the disappearance of this Messiah-like figure, the Shiites have devised a system to deal with public life in his absence and until his return.

Shiites believe their infallible imams were, and al-Mahdi remains, the guide of the believers over both religious and worldly affairs. However in his absence, guidance on religious issues was delegated to Shiite scholars, who took the liberty of issuing edicts on various matters previously not addressed in the Shiite creed. Different interpretations by different scholars are known as *ijtihad*. A single scholar practicing such a prerogative is known as a *mujtahid*.

Believers are expected to follow one mujtahid only, of the several available ones, and are not to switch from one scholar to another until the original scholar dies. According to Shiite tradition, a mujtahid cannot claim monopoly over religious guidance, nor is he to become involved in worldly affairs, and most notably, he is not to engage in politics. Over centuries of their history Shiite believers have tried to minimize their dealings with the states that governed them, refraining from politics as much as possible. Instead, they await the Mahdi's imminent arrival to set all things right. In fact, until the mid-20th century, it was customary for a number of practicing Shiites in Iraq to bury what they believed to be the sum of their annual tax money in their gardens. They did so because they believed that the Mahdi could return from occultation at any time and ask for his taxes.

In another social practice, in both Iraq and Lebanon, every household was to have in its possession a quantity of swords equal to the number of able-bodied males, so that whenever the Mahdi returns, the Shiites will be equipped to fight at his side in his battle to "fill the earth with fairness and justice after it was filled with oppression and injustice." The custom of burying taxes has mostly faded away now, but visitors still might notice swords hanging on the walls inside Shiite houses, even though the sword custom has lost its religious significance and has simply become a matter of house décor.

Since the disappearance of the 12th imam, al-Mahdi, the Shiite perspective on religion, society and state was developed around the hope of his return. The dominating rule of the Sunni majority, which frequently oppressed the Shiites, forced them from time to time to conceal their beliefs and go underground. For centuries, the Shiites of the world endured oppression in the hope that there would come a time when their Imam would return and redress the injustices that had befallen them. The long periods of Shiite frustration produced a culture known for its melancholic practices, such as the processions of Ashura that commemorate the murder of the Third Imam, Hussain bin Ali, in 680 CE.

For a millennium of their history, the Shiites practiced patience and stayed out of public life and the quest for political power. By the mid 20th century, communism had already made its mark in several Arab countries and had found supporters among the masses, especially in Iraq. Meanwhile ultra-nationalist pan-Arab ideologies, imported from fascist Europe and adapted by native Arabs, were also winning popular grounds. These two ideologies and their supporters struggled for power several times in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Yemen.

Like other minorities in the region, such as the Christians, the Shiites found in the secular parties a vehicle for upward social mobility, especially when deprivation pushed rural residents to relocate in cities. Shiites dominated the leadership and the rank and file of the Baath Party in Syria and Iraq during its early days, and

even today still form the main bulk of the communist parties in Iraq and Lebanon.

Shiite mobilization along secular lines has marked a departure from their tradition of passivism. It has also undermined the influence of Shiite religious scholars, who until then had been the believers' sole leaders. Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran, known for their Shiite shrines and religious scholarship, suffered a decline in the numbers of their students, who had begun to enroll in modern schools and to join secular parties.

To live up to the challenges of the age, a few Shiite scholars sought to introduce a Shiite ideology with a platform capable of competing with other groups. Mohamed Baqer al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shiite scholar in Najaf, embarked on an ambitious project in which he outlined a platform for governance from a Shiite perspective. He authored two books, *Our Economy* and *Our Philosophy*. Al-Sadr founded the Islamic Daawa (Proselytism) Party in the late 1950s. Among al-Sadr's comrades was Lebanon's Sayyed Mohomad Hussein Fadlallah, who was a student in Najaf.

In the early 1960s, Khomeini and his firebrand speeches were making a mark in Qom, provoking Iranian authorities to send him into exile in Najaf. By the mid 1970s, Khomeini and al-Sadr were in accord over the principles of mobilizing the Shiites around the world along new religious lines, despite some differences in their understanding of the concept of the Islamic Government under a single leader-scholar (*wali faqih*).

Feeling threatened by his political aspirations, Sunni Saddam Hussein and his secular Baath Party deported Khomeini to Paris. A few years later, in 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran to preside over a victorious revolution that was executed by both secular and religious Shiites. Through his Hezbollah supporters and the Pasdaran, Khomeini was able to twist some secular arms and impose an Islamic government by 1980. Before fully consolidating his rule in Iran, Khomeini was already exporting his new brand of Shiism to Shiite communities across the region. Iraq, where the Shiites form a majority of the population, and Lebanon, where the Shiites accounted for at least one quarter of the Lebanese, topped the list of Khomeini's favorite destinations.

In Iraq, Saddam was quickly alerted to the new Shiite militancy, and accordingly executed al-Sadr and hunted down his followers, who took refuge in Iran. Saddam, however, found it easy to coexist with the Shiite spiritual leadership in Najaf, as long as this leadership upheld the traditional Shiite practice of maintaining its distance away from politics. While Qom saw a surge in importance worldwide, with Iran's resources at the disposal of its mullahs, Najaf was eclipsed by Saddam's tyranny. Khomeini believed he could knock out Saddam and extend his revolution into Iraq, but his scheme never materialized, even after eight years of a brutal war between Iraq and Iran that started in 1980.

In lawless Lebanon, the situation was different. Another scholar of the al-Sadr

family, Mussa, had been proclaiming the end of the Shiite political marginalization in the country. However, Mussa al-Sadr mysteriously vanished during a trip to Libya in 1978. His successors at the top of his Amal Movement, lawmaker Hussein Husseini and young lawyer Nabih Berri, were too secular for Khomeini's taste and thus were deemed unworthy of preaching the new Iranian ideology. Iran instead formed a new Shiite movement in Lebanon that would endorse the wilayat al-faqih principle.

Fadlallah emerged as a potential disciple of Khomeini and a new leader for Lebanon's Shiites. During the stages of Hezbollah's infancy, Fadlallah was perceived as its spiritual leader. But Fadlallah proved to be an independent thinker and scholar and he repeatedly refused Iran's diktats in religion and politics. He and Iran parted ways, and even today Fadlallah's relationship with Hezbollah remains tense, though it is never publicly discussed. Fadlallah opposes the concept of wilayat al-faqih, and rather subscribes to the more traditional Shiite view of ijtihad, having become himself a recognized mujtahid over the course of the past three decades. Yet due to his distance from his natural allies in Najaf, Fadlallah became disconnected from them and stood out as an ijtihad voice in the wilderness of wilayat al-faqih, despite his considerable following among the non-militant Shiites of Lebanon.

With the downfall of the Saddam regime in 2003, Najaf slowly started coming back into the fold of Shiite leadership. Ali al-Sistani, the most senior Shiite scholar there, maintained his distance from politics and undermined, to Iran's dismay, the concept of wilayat al-faqih. Iran, for its part, saw in the downfall of Saddam a good opportunity not only to instigate, train and fund Shiite insurgents in Iraq, but also to export its revolution and ideology to Iraqi Shiites. By the time of this writing, the warfare between the pro-Iran Iraqi Shiites and the anti-Iran Iraqi Shiites has not yet been resolved.

Also by 2003, Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah had lost interest in spreading their ideology because they had become totally immersed in regional politics. Iran at first feared the toppling of Saddam, and it was even reported that it sent Washington messages offering cooperation. Echoing Iranian policy, during the buildup of the US war in Iraq, Nasrallah called for Iraqi national reconciliation between the opposition and Saddam Hussein, a call that would have been inconceivable among the Shiites of the world during the first decade of the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Almost three decades after Khomeini's success in revolutionizing traditionally Shiite quietism in Iran, his ideology has made significant strides in Lebanon. Yet Khomeini's view of religion and the world still teeters in Iraq without any significant following, perhaps due to the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Najaf and Qom, who remain historic rivals over the leadership of the Shiites.

Today Lebanon remains lawless, and has proven malleable as most of its Shiites seem to have succumbed to Hezbollah and its Iranian masters. The party and its

Iranian sponsors have invested massively in social programs such as health care and education, seeking to outbid their Shiite opponents, the supporters of the more traditional version of Shiism and *ijtihad*, over whom a now-elderly Fadlallah stands alone.

Where carrots have proved unyielding among Lebanese Shiites, Hezbollah has employed coercion. With an unmatched paramilitary arsenal, Hezbollah has bullied its Shiite opponents, especially the notable traditional leaders. In Baalbek, for instance, Hezbollah and Iran confiscated a previously unnoticeable Shiite shrine, against the will of its historic and rightful custodians.

Sit Khawla was believed to be the daughter of the third Shiite Imam, Hussein. After the murder of her father in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, she was taken alongside the other women of the imam, to the Damascus court of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid bin Muawiya. According to the common myth, the little girl (other versions say unborn) died on the way and was buried in Baalbek.

No shrine ever marked this little saint's tomb. However, a couple of centuries ago, a member of one of the notable families of Baalbek—the Mortada family that claims descent from the prophet—saw Khawla in a dream and marked her tombstone accordingly. Ever since, the spot has been a minor holy place for local residents under the custody of a certain Mortada and his male line. The last of the Mortada custodians died a few years ago and was buried in the backyard of the shrine in observance of a Shiite practice of honoring shrine custodians for their service.

After the last Mortada's death, Hezbollah interrupted the old custody tradition, confiscated the shrine and transformed it into a grand mosque, featuring noticeably Persian architecture and colors. They even paved the shrine's backyard with tiles that covered the Mortada tombs, a symbolic simile to Iran and Hezbollah's effort to bury the Shiite past and replace it with a newer version of their own.

The Khawla shrine's confiscation exemplifies one of the many tactics Hezbollah has employed in its quest to undermine traditional Arab Shiite passivism in favor of Persian Shiite militancy. While funds and arms play a central role in Hezbollah's transformation of Lebanese Shiites, mobilization through Hezbollah-owned media and new religious and cultural practices have also been weapons of choice in Hezbollah's bid to fundamentally alter the Shiite heritage in Lebanon.

The struggle between the imported Persian theory of *wilayat al-faqih* and the traditional Arab *ijtihad* has reached a climax in Iraq and Lebanon. Iran and Hezbollah are using social networks, funds, weapons and propaganda, and against this radical assault, its Shiite opponents are clearly at a disadvantage. They remain unable to match Hezbollah's programs or to defend themselves against Hezbollah's harassment, which is protected by the regional power, Iran, and its nuclear ambitions.

Conclusion

Since its creation in 1982, Hezbollah has evolved and has played different roles at different times. With its previous assignments fulfilled, such as anti-Israeli resistance, the party is now left to play a role of defender of Lebanon's Shiites and as an Iranian pawn in the region.

But not all Shiites subscribe to Iran's and Hezbollah's militant agenda. And any effort to undermine Hezbollah's role as an Iranian proxy in the region ought to take into consideration the variations of Shiism. Should the world ever commit the mistake of lumping together all Shiites, vis-à-vis the Sunni world, they would further undercut the moderate Shiites, forcing them to tie their destiny to that of the radicalized Shiites of Iran and Hezbollah.

NOTES

1. It could be that the Iranian police force's title was originally meant to rhyme with the name of Iran's revolutionary leader Ruhollah Khomeini. In a chant that was imported to Lebanon from Iran, young men in Baalbek performed paramilitary marches during which their leader would shout: "Who are you?" The response of the revolutionary cadres would be, "Hezbollah [Party of God]!" The leader would then shout: "Who is your leader?" And the marching men would respond: "Ruhollah!" or the "Spirit of God."

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