

DahiyeH: Not as Hezbollah as It Seems



There is today a less conspicuous effort by another cleric to form an opposing pole to Hezbollah, both politically and ideologically. (Photo: Haytham Al-Moussawi)

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Hezbollah might be popularly synonymous with Beirut's southern suburbs, known as DahiyeH, but a closer look shows that the area is a palimpsest of past and present political movements, religious congregations, and burgeoning ideologues.

Back in the 1950s, DahiyeH was a different place altogether: a well-to-do, semi-agricultural area that was the stomping ground of then President Camille Chamoun, a popular figure among the residents of the area until the onset of the civil war.

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By the end of the decade, the Chamounists began to retreat to the Burj al-Barajneh district and the suburbs began their gradual demographic transformation. Poor Shia from the South and the Bekaa poured into the Beirut area, displaced by poverty and, over the next few decades, war.

Today, two of the Hezbollah MPs that represent the suburbs, Ali Ammar and Bilal Farhat, hail from families with deep roots in the area, having experienced the many political transformations that have swept through Dahiyeh. The Ammars, for example, were well-known Chamounists before they were swept into Hezbollah's orbit.

Many political movements passed through here, but were not able to sustain their influence as Dahiyeh was flooded with displaced Shia. The Palestinian movement was welcomed by many of the suburbs' residents who joined the various factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in large numbers.

Even the Communist Party once had a presence here, only to be swept away by the sectarian polarization brought on by the civil war. They were followed by the Amal Movement under the leadership of Imam Musa al-Sadr, which continues to have some influence to this day. By the late 1980s, Hezbollah's hold over the area was near complete.

That is not to say that the powerful Shia party does not have its detractors who remain active in Dahiyeh, despite the party's overwhelming influence. Some, like former MP Bassem al-Sabaa, compete with Hezbollah politically, but it is the legacies of religious figures like Sheikh Mohammed Mahdi Shamseddine and Sayyid Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah that continue to carry more weight.

Shamseddine, who passed away in 2001, was close to Sadr and helped him found and run the Higher Islamic Shia Council. In 1978, Sadr disappeared in Libya under mysterious circumstances, so Shamseddine became the head of the council until his death.

Today, his son Ibrahim, a former minister, works out of his office on the edges of Dahiyeh, struggling to sustain his father's ideas. The charismatic and scholarly sheikh opposed Hezbollah ideologically, and had a different vision for the role of the Shia in Lebanon, but he was unable to compete with the party's all-encompassing ideology.

Sources close to Hezbollah insist that the party does not view Shamseddine as an opponent. They admit that there are important theological and intellectual differences between the two, but nothing that would make him a "competitor" for influence. They point out that he was not able to develop his own independent political current and Hezbollah today has long since adopted many of his views.

There is today a less conspicuous effort by another cleric to form an opposing pole to Hezbollah, both politically and ideologically. Sheikh Mohammad Ali Haj opened a seminary on the Airport Road in Dahiyeh in October 2011. Although he openly opposes the party – recently opening communication lines with the US embassy – he lacks the kind of support on the ground to pose any kind of threat to Hezbollah.

Such was the fate of two other clerics, Sayyid Hani Fahs and Sayyid Mohammad Hassan Al-

Amin, who openly challenged Hezbollah's approach to the Syrian crisis in a series of statements in the media. However, their "distance from the people," according to a critic of the party, meant that "they do not pose any kind of real threat to Hezbollah's popularity in Dahiyeh."

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Perhaps the only figure who can be considered a counterweight to the party's influence is the late Fadlallah. The influential cleric – at one time considered the spiritual guide of Hezbollah – left behind an extensive network of social services, particularly orphanages, and a substantial following in Dahiyeh.

In the mid 1990s, the liberal-minded Fadlallah fell out with Hezbollah when he declared himself a religious source of reference, thus competing with the leader of the Iranian revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was the party's guide on religious and political matters.

Today, his son Ali, who is also a cleric, does not compromise on his father's differences with Hezbollah, and continues down the path of the elder Fadlallah, who advocated Islamic unity and juridical reform. Nevertheless, Ali and his father's many followers see themselves as part and parcel of the Resistance and support it as a sacred duty.

They do diverge politically sometimes, as Fadlallah's followers tend to be more open about engaging with opposing political and religious figures such as Future Party partisan and former prime minister Fouad Siniora, and even Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, both of whom requested meetings with Ali, who readily obliged.

Although some Fadlallah supporters complain that since his death in 2010, no Hezbollah figure has visited his offices or one of his many institutions, they categorically refuse to be used as a tool against the party, all the while maintaining their independence.

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.