



NADINE ELALI
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A self-fulfilling prophecy

Hezbollah's fighting in Syria is grounded in religious scriptures



Hezbollah and Iran have been indoctrinating fighters to believe that they are fighting an End of Days war in Syria. Young Shiite men from both Lebanon and Iran believe that they are fighting inside Syria for the appearance of the Mahdi, a thousand year old ideology that the Iranian republic reinvented and promulgated through religious texts over the course of 30 years to advance its own interests in the region.

Early in the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah and Iran downplayed any involvement. Today, however, they are trumpeting their presence in Syria and offering sacrifices under the pretext of protecting Shiite interests. Near Damascus, Hezbollah members are fighting to defend the shrine of Sayeda Zeinab (revered by Shiite Muslims) from Sunni rebels. In the north, however, they are pushing more deeply into a very different fight.

During the assault on Qusayr, and as news emerges of more Hezbollah fighters in Aleppo, Facebook pages were flooded with pictures of young men who were pronounced martyrs. Their funerals received coverage previously reserved only for those fighting Israel. Photos of a certain Ali Hassan, who was proclaimed a martyr of Sayeda Zeinab and one of the strongest Mahdi army men, was shared among friends whose comments referenced paving the way for the appearance of Mahdi.

Islamic scholar Sheikh Abbas Yazbek, tells NOW that the party's fighting units are waging a battle driven by strong religious ideology. "After protecting [the] Sayeda Zeinab shrine," he explains, "Hezbollah fighters are speaking of the preparation for his occultation as they advance in their battles."

In Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi (i.e. the guided one) is the prophetic redeemer of Islam who will rid the world of evil and rule before Judgment Day. In Shiite Islam particularly, the Mahdi is believed to be the twelfth descendent of Imam al-Hussein (a.k.a Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi), who mysteriously disappeared at the age of five. The Mahdi is expected to return at the "end of time."

Yazbeck, a founding member of Hezbollah who resigned in 2000 over an ideological dispute, explains that Hezbollah has succeeded in controlling the majority of the Shiite community and their beliefs by holding the key to their way of life, their opportunities to make a living, and their education. "The community has been trained," he stresses, "to believe what Hezbollah and Iran dictates to them, especially the notion of the hidden Imam, while they pursue their political interests."

Nasser Ghobadzadeh, an Iranian professor at Sydney University, explains that for many centuries, the dominant interpretation of the notion of the hidden Imam included a passive approach toward politics, where sovereignty was believed to belong to the Mahdi

solely and that Muslims ought to wait for his return. However, following the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of Velayat-el Faqih signaled a landmark shift in Shiite political thought.

"Ayatollah Khomeini provided the conceptual framework by offering the notion of active waiting," says Ghobadzadeh. "Prior to the articulation of his doctrine, the notion of the clergy's direct governance was never part of the mainstream Shiite school. Indeed, no serious conceptual or practical effort was invested in the quest for political engagement of the Shiites. In this articulation, believers are not only waiting for the return of the Hidden Imam but also they ought to prepare for his arrival," said Ghobadzadeh.

The future approaching of the Savior is the most recurrently quoted topic in Lebanon among reverent Shiites. Dozens of books have been written about the end of time and the rising of the Mahdi. Although the date of the ultimate arrival of the Hidden Imam is unknown, these scriptures offer a look into the future that is foreshadowed by a number of signs - most notably, a war in Syria.

A Shiite woman, who preferred not to be named, told NOW that the majority of the Shiite community (her family among them) believes in these scriptures, even before the recent events. "As we were growing up, my mother would read us stories that signal the appearance of the Mahdi, some talked of a war in Syria that will extend to our Beqaa. The Mahdi will then appear to lead the fighting, but he will need an army to be prepared for him ahead of his arrival, and so for that reason many young men were encouraged to conscript in Hezbollah's army," she said.

Hajj Ahmad al Kharsa, head of sales at Dar al Hujah al Baydaa, a popular library in Dahiyeh (Beirut's southern suburb), tells NOW that the demand for such books has increased dramatically over the course of the last two years. Most notably he refers to two books, *al-Jafar* and *Aser al Zohour*. Al Kharsa says the latter book appears to have a higher demand these days because it references events that coincide with modern history.

"I have been in this profession for over 30 years. There has been a wave of demands. We saw demand rising during the war on Iraq in the 1990s, then during the 2006 July war. But today, we are selling an average of 500 books per month and the demand continues to increase as the crisis in Syria worsens," he said. "People buy the book to compare today's events to those mentioned in the scriptures."

Hossein Alizadeh, an ex-Iranian diplomat and opposition member, explains that these scriptures played a key role in the first decade of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, he says, they were used to misguide the

people to justify the war. It is within this context that the notion of the Hidden Imam has re-emerged in Shiite political lexicon.

“The regime in Iran is keen to emphasize that what is happening in Syria is not an extension of the Arab Spring, but [rather] a war against the Shiites and therefore the need to interfere. And given Iran’s vital role on the Shiite discourse in the region - particularly in Lebanon - the use of the notion of the Hidden Imam is also being used by Hezbollah,” he says.