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Revisiting Karbala in Syria

Hezbollah promises another “divine victory” in Syria



Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stated clearly in his **recent speech** that his party has and will continue to fight in Syria next to the regime forces. His reasoning remained purely political: he linked it to Syria's role as a strategic regional partner. However, within the Shiite community in Lebanon, this political rhetoric has no real value, as more dead bodies of 'martyrs' come back from Syria.

A different kind of narrative was needed to convince Hezbollah's constituency why the enemy is now on the other side of the border. In Shiite villages and towns, the rhetoric has little to do with "foreign powers aiming to destroy Syria as a country, people, and army, and canceling its regional role," as he mentioned in the speech. Hezbollah's leaders managed to quell public discontent by adding a sacred element to their involvement in Syria: Karbala. The divine narrative has been invoked, yet again.

In the beginning of the 1980s, Hezbollah built its rhetoric to tie together political and historical narratives to gradually form a Shiite collective memory. The Party of God employed the memory of the **battle of Karbala**, when an army sent by the Sunni Umayyad caliph Yazid I defeated Al Hussein bin Ali, grandson of the prophet Mohammad. This battle marks the root of the historical schism between Sunnis and Shiites.

When Hezbollah decided to take over resistance in Lebanon and eliminate the **National Resistance Front**, the act of resisting Israel was intertwined with Hussein and his family's resistance to Yazid.

The family Hussein suffered and were eventually martyred in order to preserve the Shiite faith, and Hezbollah invoked this martyrdom in reference to its 'divine victory' in the 2006 July War. In fact, tales of Hussein and his family's spirits helping Hezbollah fighters in the battles against Israeli soldiers are still told and have been merged with the collective Karbala memories.

Today, as Hezbollah's involvement in Syria can no longer be kept secret, this memory is being exploited again. Many of its symbols are being used by Hezbollah's leaders to tie their fight in Syria to a sacred mission. This time, it is not only to defend Shiites in Syria, or Lebanese on the borders, or even Shiite shrines for that matter; the real mission Hezbollah is marketing to its community is to save the Shiite existence exactly as Hussein bin Ali did in the year 680.

"It is a sacred battle and a religious duty," their leaders tell them. "The Shiites in Syria are suffering death, torture, and thirst, exactly as Hussein and his family suffered before them. Their fault is that they loved Hussein," states many of their Facebook **pages** and websites.

Recently, whenever Syria is mentioned, Hussein bin Ali and his family are brought up. Syria is no more a war between the regime that supports resistance and fighters that wish resistance to end. Instead, this war is painted as a divine battle to defend the Shiite faith and pave the way for the appearance of the “awaited” **Al Mahdi**, the twelfth Imam for the Shiites. People are recounting old forgotten tales of Mahdi’s appearance and now it is believed that he and his army are going to **appear** soon in Damascus with **yellow flags** to conquer and restore peace.

Hezbollah has realized that this collective memory is the only way to drag the Shiites again to a battle decided by Iran, which serves only Iran. But when more dead bodies come back from Syria and the promised “victory” is not fulfilled, Shiites will eventually realize that the divine narrative is not always a guaranteed recipe for power and victory. Hezbollah will then lose its last recourse, and eventually the collective memory will probably collapse and take down both the party and its popular base. Unfortunately, it will be too late for the Shiites as they will be in a bloody and violent confrontation with Sunnis in Syria and Lebanon.

But Hezbollah seems to have dropped Lebanon from its strategic map. In his speech, Nasrallah cast off all Lebanese-related issues and stated before he concluded that there is no time to discuss these as they are not significant. Lebanon is not important to the Party of God. When he declared war against the international community by saying that “Syria has real friends in the region and across the world that will not let the country fall into the hands of the US, Israel, or *takfiris*,” Nasrallah certainly did not have Lebanon’s interest in mind.

If Lebanese Shiites do not realize that they are being exploited in a war that serves Iran, not Lebanon, then they will have to face a civil war in which neither Hussein bin Ali, nor his family, can save them.