

## SHIITES IN LEBANON START SAYING 'NO' TO HEZBOLLAH



Hezbollah billboard in Beirut - (David Holt London)

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**BEIRUT** - Sheikh Hani Fahs lives by the old route to the airport, near the entrance of Beirut's *Dahieh* ("southern suburb"). This a Hezbollah stronghold.

The Lebanese cleric has had a ringside seat over this main axis, which has often been blocked by angry demonstrators these past few months. Down the street, walls are covered with posters from two Shiite groups: The Party of Allah (Hezbollah) and Amal. The 66-year-old religious leader has been at odds with the two parties, not only politically but also socially.

His detractors among the Shiite community call him as a "traitor," helping the Lebanese opposition (Hezbollah's rivals) or serving U.S. foreign policy interest in the Middle East. The religious leader, who wears the traditional black turban of the *sayyid* (the descendants of prophet Muhammad), is used to criticism. He claims to be a dissenting voice within the Lebanese Shiite community, a majority of whom are Hezbollah supporters. He is not afraid to say that his movement and his supporters are a minority within the community, although he believes that "a strong and reasonable Arab Spring could bring

more diverse opinion among the Shiites.”

While the Party of Allah and Amal fully support Bashar al-Assad, the cleric once again voiced his support to the “legitimate Syrian revolution” and with another Shiite religious leader, Muhammad Hassan al-Amin, urged a stop to “the massacre in Syria.” The sheikh, used to international meetings on interreligious dialogue, joined around 50 Lebanese Shiite intellectuals and activists in an opinion piece for Beirut’s daily newspaper An-Nahar. Published on August 25, the statement praises the Syrian people’s fight for “liberty” and “justice.” Among the other signers are Saoud al-Mawla, a sociology professor and former member of Hezbollah in the 1980s and Lokman Slim, head of Umam Documentation & Research, an organization dedicated to the memory of the Lebanese War (1975-2000).

### **On the side of the oppressed**

“Since its early days, I have always supported the uprising in Syria. Shiites must defend a position in line with their Arabism, Lebanese nationalism and history: they have always been on the [side of the oppressed](#) against the oppressors,” explains Sheikh Hani Fahs. He claims to have inherited the legacy of Musa al-Sadr, the religious figure who initiated the Shiite revival in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, Shiites were considered outcasts in Lebanon. While he deplores [the support of most Shiites for the Syrian regime](#), the cleric is also very critical of Sunnis, who have generally ignored the uprising in [Bahrein](#).

Sheikh Hani Fahs, who visited Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris during his exile, and then became passionate about the Islamic Revolution in Tehran in 1979, is now a strong supporter of the [Iranian](#) opposition. He has not travelled to Iran since 1979 and has severed his ties with Hezbollah – their decision, he claims. Regarding Iran, the cleric hopes that the country will “come back to the values of the Islamic revolution.” He “encourages Shiites to get involved in the Arab societies in which they live instead of turning them into an Iranian diaspora.”

In his office, located in a building in the Hamra neighborhood, [Abbas Beydoun](#), editor of the culture pages of As-Safir, another Beirut daily newspaper, praises the initiative launched by the religious leader. “Shiite intellectuals have been among the first to voice their support for the Syrian people against the regime. It is interesting that these two leaders have voiced a different opinion from Hezbollah’s, which is followed by most Shiite leaders,” says the famous poet and journalist.

Yet Abbas Beydoun, who did not sign the statement published in An-Nahar, explains that “Shiite intellectuals have always been at odds with the rest of the community.” He does not believe there has been a radical change of opinion in the Shiite community, despite the emergence of voices against Hezbollah and the fact that some Shiites have been disgusted by the bloodbath perpetrated by the Syrian regime, even those firmly attached to “the resistance against Israel.” “Today, Hezbollah is the voice, the leader, the head of the community. Most Shiites are afraid that they will be weakened by the fall of the Syrian regime and believe they must remain faithful to it, as they think it has always protected them,” says Beydoun.

A large number of Lebanese Shiite Muslims are concerned about the possibility of conservative Sunnis taking power in Damascus, and they worry that a power struggle between foreign nations (the West vs Iran) there could potentially harm their community. They believe they would be the first victims if the “axis of resistance” (Syria, Iran, Hezbollah) were to collapse.

Shall they be worried about the future? “Shiites have deep roots in Lebanon. They have many assets, demographic, cultural, economic, and military with Hezbollah. But in Lebanon, every community lives with the fear of being extinguished, and they feed on this fear,” says Abbays Beydoun. “By supporting the Syrian regime, Hezbollah is not endangering Shiites, but its position is not helping the community either. What’s the point in supporting a losing regime?”

Read the article in the original language.

Photo by - David Holt London