

The Middle East Media Research Institute, July 27, 2012

## **Decline In Hezbollah's Status In Lebanon**

E. B. Picali \*

There has been a tangible decline lately in Hezbollah's political and public standing in Lebanon. This is evident, for example, in attacks and provocations of unprecedented boldness made by Ahmad Al-Asir, a Salafi sheikh from Sidon, against the organization and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah; in the decision of Michel 'Aoun, a prominent partner in the March 8 Forces and Hezbollah's political ally for the past six years, to revoke political understandings with Hezbollah; in the May 22, 2012 abduction of 11 Lebanese Shi'ites in Syria, who, according to some reports, were senior Hezbollah members (and in the fact that Hezbollah has not publicly reacted to this incident); and in criticism by Hezbollah's own supporters over its handling of social and economic affairs in the government and parliament.



The issue of Hezbollah's declining status was addressed by editors of two Lebanese dailies associated with the March 8 Forces. Ibrahim Al-Amin, editor of the Hezbollah-affiliated daily Al-Akhbar, wrote that only "divine help"[1] would save Hezbollah in its current state.[2] Some 10 days later, he even called on Hezbollah to leave the political arena and focus on resistance, in order to improve its situation.[3] Sati' Nour Al-Din, editor of the pro-Syrian daily Al-Safir, assessed that the Shi'ites' silence over the actions and statements of Sunni extremists throughout Lebanon – especially those of Al-Asir – stemmed from weakness and fear. This fear, he said, was triggered by the possible collapse of the Syrian regime, which has heretofore supplied the Shi'ites with weapons that gave them an advantage over the other sects in the country.[4]

Indeed, it can be assessed that the weakening in Hezbollah's standing has been caused by the decline in Syria's status in Lebanon; by the growing power of Sunni-Islamist forces throughout the Arab world, and especially in Syria and Lebanon; and by Hezbollah's unwavering support for Assad, whom many Lebanese regard as a tyrant oppressing and butchering his people.

### **Sheikh Al-Asir Slams Hezbollah**

In a June 23, 2012 appearance on the Lebanese TV channel Al-Jadid, affiliated with the March 8 Forces, Sidon-based Salafi sheikh Ahmad Al-Asir personally threatened Nasrallah and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, the leading representatives of the Shi'ite community in Lebanon, saying: "I challenge you directly, Berri and Nasrallah... I swear by Allah that I will not let you sleep at night, along with your wives and children, until balance is restored to Lebanon."

Al-Asir accused Hezbollah of using its weapons not to promote the Palestinian cause but rather to control Lebanon and subjugate it to Iran.[5] In a July 6, 2012 sermon, he called Nasrallah and Berri "war criminals," and blamed them for all the assassinations and assassination attempts in Lebanon since the murder of Rafiq Al-Hariri in 2005.[6]

Al-Asir did not confine himself to verbal attacks. On June 27, 2012, he and hundreds of his followers – men, women and children – launched an indefinite sit-down strike at the northern entrance to the city demanding to disarm Hezbollah, and even blocked traffic on the main highway to Beirut.[7] Al-Asir said that Hezbollah's weapons "have lost their honor in the eyes of most Lebanese," because, since Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, they have served the organization as a tool for taking over Lebanon. He rejected Hezbollah's claim that the demand to disarm it is a Zionist and American demand, adding that the Sunnis were slaves to no one, and that he does not fear his actions could spark a civil war. On the contrary, he said, what might lead to civil war is the public acquiescence to Hezbollah's takeover of Lebanon by means of its weapons.

He threatened to escalate his struggle and said he was even willing to martyr himself, if necessary, while stressing that all his activity would be non-violent.[8] In a July 13, 2012 sermon, Al-Asir threatened Nasrallah that if the latter failed to heed his demands, he would "harm him as [even] the regional and global forces have not harmed him," adding: "The power balance has shifted, and now we [Sunnis are the ones who will] determine how you [Nasrallah] and Nabih Berri will enter South [Lebanon]."[9] He demanded that Nasrallah undertake serious talks with President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister Najib Mikati on the issue of Hezbollah's arms.[10]

It should be mentioned that, on June 11, 2012, a new round of national dialogue talks began between various political forces in Lebanon. One of the issues to be discussed was the illegal weapons held by various organizations and bodies in the country, the most prominent of them being Hezbollah. The Lebanese Forces party, headed by Samir Geagea, boycotted the talks on the grounds that Hezbollah has no serious intention of giving up its weapons. Al-Asir endorsed this position, saying that the national dialogue was a joke.

### **Michel 'Aoun Revokes Political Understandings With Hezbollah**

Another blow to Hezbollah came from within the organization's own camp, namely from Michel 'Aoun, chairman of the Change and Reform bloc, an important force in the March 8 Forces. A powerful figure in Lebanese politics, 'Aoun has been considered a mouthpiece of Hezbollah in recent years. However, a crisis broke out between the sides on July 3, 2012, when Hezbollah's representatives in parliament supported a draft bill granting full-time employee status to day workers in the Lebanese electric company, many of whom are Shi'ite supporters of Nabih Berri. In supporting this bill, Hezbollah sided with its Shi'ite partner, Nabih Berri, against its Christian partner, Michel 'Aoun, who opposed the bill (thus siding with some of his fellow Christian MPs in the March 14 Forces).

Many assessed that Hezbollah's decision on this draft bill was the straw that broke 'Aoun's back, causing him to denounce Hezbollah's treatment of its allies in parliament and to announce that he was revoking political understandings between his party, and Hezbollah, though he did not withdraw his support for the resistance.[11] Energy Minister Jubran Bassil, 'Aoun's son-in-law and a member of his party, said that the resistance

would not remain whole if it became "riddled with corruption." [12] 'Aoun received considerable support from the Maronite Church and its head, Patriarch Bishara Butrous Al-Ra'i. [13]

According to Al-Akhbar columnist Ghassan Sa'ud, the real reason behind 'Aoun's break with Hezbollah is his sense that this organization is lending him insufficient support in promoting reforms which he feels are necessary in Lebanon. Also, the organization is evidently unable to help him protect the Christians in Lebanon, as evident from the weakness it is showing vis-à-vis Salafis like Al-Asir and the growing power of Sunni Islamists in the country. Sa'ud also assessed that 'Aoun's alliance with Hezbollah and Syria had caused him to become isolated and lose electoral power, motivating him to distance himself from them. [14]

### **Lebanese Columnist: Hezbollah Will React With Violence**

Hezbollah has so far failed to respond publically to Al-Asir's attacks, and has also remained silent on 'Aoun's withdrawal from his political alliance with the March 8 Forces.

In fact, the weakening of the Syrian regime seems to be an important turning point for Hezbollah. Fadi Al-Shamia, a columnist for the Lebanese daily Al-Mustaqbal, assessed that Hezbollah's militant character and history would prompt it to respond with force to the collapse of the Assad regime, including with armed attacks on organizations and public institutions in Lebanon, on UNIFIL, and on targets abroad, both inside the region and beyond it. This assessment is based on statements by Ahmad Jibril, head of the Popular Front – General Command, who said that Nasrallah had promised to fight alongside the Syrian regime against any foreign intervention; on fatwas circulated among the Shi'ites in Lebanon "permitting to kill Lebanese and Syrian enemies"; and on testimonies of residents of the Dahia in Beirut, who say Hezbollah is carrying out defense maneuvers and amassing large quantities of weapons. [15]

March 14 Forces coordinator Fares Al-Sa'id speculated that, among all its options of aggression, Hezbollah would choose to undermine the security and stability of Lebanon, though not directly by means of its own activists, but rather by means of organizations associated with it, such as Saraya Al-Quds, a group of non-Shi'ite mercenaries under its control. Hezbollah would use these activities to improve its bargaining position in the negotiations with the other forces in Lebanon, Al-Sa'id assessed. [16]

First signs of this aggression are mentioned in an article by Al-Akhbar columnist Nicolas Nassif. According to him, Hezbollah has threatened the Al-Mustaqbal faction, and especially the Al-Hariri family, that if the Salafis in Lebanon, including Ahmad Al-Asir, escalate their anti-Hezbollah activity, the organization would block access to a commercial center in Beirut owned by the Al-Hariri family. [17] It is interesting to note that Hezbollah is apparently afraid to confront the Salafis directly, and is therefore directing its threats at Al-Mustaqbal, which is a weaker Sunni force.