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Nabatiyeh is Hezbollah's fortress - Part I



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newspaper. Parts II and III can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

NABATIYEH, Lebanon – We have met with many male and female natives of Nabatiyeh in their southern city, as well as in Beirut and its southern suburb. The majority of those requested anonymity, but a few said they do not mind having their names mentioned. We decided not to mention any names throughout the article for fear that every piece of information mentioned in this report would be attributed to those people whose names were disclosed.

One native of Nabatiyeh, who makes no secret of his adherence to old religious traditions and customs, says that the Shiites are now divided into two categories, one which wants to defend Sayda Zeinab and her shrine and another which silently believes that Sayda Zeinab is the one defending us.

This comes up in the context of Hezbollah and its participation in the ongoing fighting in Syria. However, such statements are often twisted and laden with innuendos and those making them often wish for anonymity.

The posters of various shapes and colors that greet Nabatiyeh's visitors paint a vivid image of the region's political identity. Right at the entrance of the town, visitors are greeted by posters of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, slain Hezbollah official Imad Mughniyah, Iranian leaders Imams Khomeini and Khamenei, and Amal leader Speaker Nabih Berri. One finds alongside these posters a few others of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

This does not mean that Hezbollah is ruling Nabatiyeh based on repression, deterrence, and force, but rather through potentially far more effective tools. Indeed, the party provides job opportunities and medical and educational services that go far beyond simple daily offerings. These include, for instance, the Al-Nour card: Based on a 20,000-LL (\$13) monthly subscription, it allows its holders to benefit from prices reductions in various Hezbollah-affiliated shops and warehouses, entertainment locations, kindergartens, restaurants, and organized *haji* pilgrimages.

Furthermore, the number of religious rituals and celebrations has grown exponentially, thanks to the addition of Iranian ceremonies and occasions which were elevated to religious obligations by the Khomeini doctrine. These events, in addition to those linked to Hezbollah's rich organizational and political history, create a fake unified identity. Anyone who diverts from it feels as if they are living unprotected out in the wilderness.

An industry targeting children

This parallel society is completed with a wealth of colors and clothing, such as the prevalence of black garments, women wearing the *abaya*, and men sporting beards and toying with prayer beads. It is also manifested physically, in schools and boy scouts troops, which contributes to the shape of society as a whole.

Not even children are spared in this human-fashioning industry. For the past three years, condolence gatherings have been organized for children between three and six years of age. During which, they are told moving and simplified stories – sometimes in the shape of cartoon movies – about Karbala and the death of Hussein. Ceremonies are also organized to celebrate girls reaching the age of wearing the *hijab* (nine years old), which is labeled as a “religious obligation.” During the *hajj* season, a representation of the Kaaba is placed in the center of Nabatiyeh, and children wearing the garments of Mecca pilgrims go around it in a reenactment of *hajj* rituals. Children provide Hezbollah with a gateway into families that are not part of its traditional supporters, whether by showering the child with party images and symbols that drive a wedge between the household’s inclinations, or by controlling entertainment facilities to which mothers – regardless of their personal political inclinations – are forced to turn when their children are on vacation. Things are no different in death than they are in life, as the families of those martyred are confiscated both materially and symbolically. A martyr may leave behind a family that needs to be supported, something which may prove too heavy a burden for his parents. The same holds true for those wounded who require medical treatment and follow-up. The party also honors its martyrs in such a manner as to leave his family with no choice but to support it, as failing to do so would be tantamount to denying its own martyred relative.

Moreover, Hezbollah’s ties to its public can be likened to calling an apostate to account. Indeed, anyone steering away from the party would be exposed to a costly sanction. In addition to accusations of wrongdoing, the “apostate” may be called upon to pay back all funds and allocations they and their family have received in the past. Whoever opts out of this relationship may be asked to pay back what the party gave to his household, or the medical expenses of a family member down to the last penny. Still, the mechanism of fusion and assimilation goes far deeper than that, giving an illusion that Hezbollah rules its public based on joint unanimous agreements among its members. Since 2000 at least, the party has been covertly relying on an arsenal of ideas blending the leftovers of leftist activism, Nasserism, and Palestinian resistance in order to spread unquestionable principles pertaining to the Resistance (‘the Cause’), and whatever relates to them. These principles are shared by everyone, be they rulers or regular people, as many Hezbollah critics use expressions like “we all support the Resistance.”

“You are a traitor”

Hezbollah has the authority to hand out definitions and define the appropriate behavior linked to them. Accordingly, it can brandish accusations of “treason” in the face of anyone who does not adhere to the party’s instructions and definitions. It can also selectively unearth files from a bygone era and infer some connection or relation between the person whose loyalty is being questioned and some former Israeli collaborator. This is an easy task in a region that spent 18 years under Israeli occupation, which – like any long-term occupation – created a web of relations in the region.

This “new” history that started with Hezbollah is portrayed in terms of integrity, and it is even “sanctified.” In contrast, the “old” history is frowned upon and discarded. One cannot imagine that any hand could be laid upon a poster of Hassan Nasrallah or Ayatollah Khomeini, but the same does not hold true for the statue of Nabatiyeh-born scientist Hassan Kamel al-Sabbah. One newspaper described what happened to the statue as follows: “Once more, students of the Hassan Kamel al-Sabbah High School in Nabatiyeh recklessly distort the memorial statue of the late Lebanese inventor after whom their school is named. The base and body of the statue thus bear the graffiti writings of teenagers and the names of students and their girlfriends, and some have even adorned it with injurious drawings. Far from being content with chalk and white-marker drawings, the students also placed an empty beer bottle above the book in the statue’s right hand.”

The destruction of old heritage houses has become a daily concern for Nabatiyeh’s inhabitants against a backdrop of collusion between Hezbollah’s clout and the rampant wave of construction with the interests it represents. The 1992 destruction of the al-Fadl family mansion remains the greatest achievement of this tendency, given that the al-Fadl family acted as the city’s traditional leaders until the 1960s.

The “city of Jabal Amel”

Nabatiyeh has an “old” history,” one that has been a source of pride for its residents. Up until the 1950s, it was known as “the city of Jabal Amel” and was a Mecca for educated people. It was even said that “a poet cannot be called a poet until he has proven his worth in Nabatiyeh.” This aura is due to old religious schools run by Shiite scholars in Jbaa, Mashghara, and Jezzine, all of whom had Nabatiyeh as their ultimate target. When these schools waned somewhat, they were soon revived with the Hamidiyya School (known as the ‘Mother of All Schools’) established by Ahmad Youssef Makki in the late 19th century. This school attracted Shiite talents, be they students or teachers, including Suleiman al-Daher, Mohammad Jaber al-Safa, Mohammad Rida, Ali Fahas,

Mohammad Ali al-Houmani, and others.

These schools, which originally had a religious character, also taught subjects associated with modern schools. This coincided with the tenure of Rida al-Solh, (former PM Riad al-Solh's father) at the helm of the Nabatiyeh regional directorate in 1883, as he had a special interest in education. The establishment of the *al-Irfan* magazine in 1909 in Sidon by Ahmad Aref al-Zein, along with Nabatiyeh Sheikhs Ahmad Rida and Suleiman al-Daher, was viewed as the start of modern Shiite and southern expression. The independence period in the 1940s saw the establishment in Nabatiyeh of an official elementary school known as the Algeria School, which was run by Antoun as-Sayegh. During Kamel al-Assaad's tenure as the minister of Education, a teachers' training school and a secondary school were established in 1962 as part of the broad orientation of former President Fouad Chehab's era.

Key educated figures in the South, such as Ali al-Zein, Ahmad Jaber, Jaafar Sharafeddine, Mohammad Serhan, and others, had an essential participation in Nabatiyeh's cultural activities during the 1960s and 1970s. This can be likened to religious and literary figure Sheikh Abdel Hussein Sadeq's moving from his hometown of Khiyam to Nabatiyeh, where he founded the first *Husseiniyya* (a meeting place for social and religious occasions) in Lebanon in 1901.

An atmosphere of optimism

By and large, this accumulation of benefits resulting from worldly and religious sciences impacted the situation of women. Nabatiyeh's women were renowned as the most open of all women in the South. Many women still wore the *niqab* and *hijab* in the 1950s, but they had a social backdrop devoid of any sectarian or political dimensions, proven by the fact that even Christian women covered their hair before the drastic changes of the 1960s and 1970s.

Optimism in the future had other sources, as in the burgeoning modernization of political representation in the 1960s.

The al-Fadl family went politically extinct and their last representative was Mohammad al-Fadl, an eccentric MP and minister who was viewed as more a native of Beirut than of Nabatiyeh. His tenure marked the end of the partisan loyalty to the al-Fadl family, which went over to their allies from the al-Assaad family who were competing with their rivals from the Osseiran family. This was due to the fact that Ahmad al-Assaad, Adel Osseiran, and Youssef al-Zein, all of whom were major land owners, monopolized the greatest share of popularity in the area until the 1960s. While it is true that the al-Assaad family's clout extended beyond Nabatiyeh

to the remaining parts of the Shiite South, the fact is that an agreement between any two of these three forces allowed them to prevail over the third, both in Nabatiyeh and its district. More importantly, land ownership provided reason enough for one to be regarded as a leader. Yet, Nabatiyeh undertook the modernization of leadership and representation through several of its natives who went into the political fray at the time. These include, for instance, Rafiq Shaheen who studied political science in the early 1960s. Then came his cousin Anwar as-Sabbah who studied engineering, and Ghaleb Shaheen, who held a PhD in political science. In addition to these three US graduates, Abdellatif al-Zein, a lawyer and native of the neighboring village Kfar Remman, replaced his father Youssef.

Much like other capital cities, Nabatiyeh does not rely on a guaranteed loyalty to one creed or party. Rather, it is the home of a trade tradition consolidated by traditional immigration that took Nabatiyeh natives to faraway countries like Mexico and Cuba starting in the 1930s, as well as by the 'Monday market', the most important popular meat and relevant goods market in the South. This was an early testimony to the role of the trade sector in the city's life.

Why Nabatiyeh?

Nabatiyeh lies at the heart of the South. It is located near Sidon and Zahrani and not far away from Tyre and Bint Jbeil. It easily became a regional trade and cultural center thanks to its position at the heart of the district's 28 villages. It is also renowned for having the most uniform sectarian composition of all districts in the Shiite South.

This central position and sectarian uniformity explain Hezbollah's early interest in this city, especially since it has been a traditional cradle for Ashura observances in the shape of condolence gatherings to mourn the death of Imams Hassan and Hussein (and their companions) for centuries, even if these gatherings only acquired their current shape in 1909. Yet, another version recounts that these commemorations were brought in from Iran to Nabatiyeh by Iranian national Bahjat Mirza during the 1920s.

The Ashura symbolism, as exalted by Hezbollah, was further consolidated by the start of the uprising against the Israeli occupation following the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. This is added to the role played by Sheikh Ragheb Harb, a native of Jebshit in the Nabatiyeh district, in the resistance against the Israeli occupation, and by Kfar Remman, native Sheikh Hassan Malak's close relation with Hezbollah, knowing that Sheikh Malak was originally a member of the Iraqi Da'wa Party. An equation specific to the South was written as of 2000, painting Tyre as the playground of the Amal Movement and Nabatiyeh as Hezbollah's.

In truth, the arduous road that led to this stage acted as a prelude to the birth of Hezbollah.