

# NOW.



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June 15, 2013

## Nabatiyeh is Hezbollah's fortress - Part II



*This is the second in a three-part series translated from the [original Arabic version](#) published in the pan-Arab Al-*

Hayat newspaper. *Part I* and *Part III* were published on June 14 and June 16.

NABATIYEH, Lebanon – Never had Nabatiyeh’s residents known such clear-cut alignments as those witnessed during the last two decades. They are no strangers to disputes and conflicts, which date back to the division between supporters of the Assaad and Osseiran families, in addition to the Palestinian resistance, and the rise of leftist movements and its repercussions. However, it is also true that these conflicts created an unprecedentedly heated atmosphere that lay the foundations for Hezbollah’s emergence and growing role.

During the 1958 civil war, for instance, back when Christians in Nabatiyeh and across Lebanon in general were regarded as partisans of then-President Camille Chamoun and his regime, they were nonetheless unhurt. As one Christian resident of Nabatiyeh put it, “they used to plant their fields, go away for weeks, and come back to still find their corn cobs untouched.” Calm prevailed between 1958 and 1975 despite wide-ranging annoyance about Palestinian weapons. Change only became noticeable with the Israeli shelling of the Palestinian camp near the al-Bayyad neighborhood in response to Fedayeen operations. The intensification of shelling in 1978 led to increased displacement to Beirut.

### **Moussa Sadr**

It is during these times that Imam Moussa Sadr’s leadership emerged as a force in Nabatiyeh. When MP Ghaleb Shaheen – who was loyal to the Assaad family – died in 1974, by-elections were held with far-reaching implications at the time. Kamel al-Assaad was backing the candidacy of Kamel Ali Ahmad, whereas Imam Sadr backed Rafiq Shaheen. Following the failure to agree on Hani Fahas as a unified candidate who would confront the al-Assaad’s family candidate, the Communists backed the candidacy of Adel as-Sabbah, while the Iraqi Baathists supported the poet Moussa Shouaib. Shaheen, who was Sadr’s candidate, won with 10,000 votes whereas Ali Ahmad (i.e. al-Assaad’s candidate) came in second place with 6,500 votes. By comparison, Communist candidate as-Sabbah fell short of scoring 2,000 votes, and Shouaib (the Baathist) received only 1,200.

Thus, a new page in the political history of Nabatiyeh and the South was turned with Moussa Sadr as its main headline. When he was met with the opposition of most traditional religious references, the imam took cover behind educated people, civil servants, immigrants, and peasants, and Sadr represented became a symbol of salvation from both political and religious feudalism. Sadr’s rise to prominence denoted the increasingly sectarian character of the Shiite community, as was the case with the Maronites and the Sunnis before them. At the same time, it portended the eclipse of the al-Assaad family clout as one of the main traditional

political phenomena in the South, and warned that leftist parties – which represented the sole alternative to the Assaad family – made more clamor than their actual size.

Likewise, Sadr's rise to prominence and the ensuing new Shiite mixture of religion, sectarianism, and politics, was not to be dissociated from the "movement of Arab liberation" starting with Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser's defeat in 1967. The Palestinian resistance, which was a controversial issue among the Lebanese, could not compensate this defeat, and its relations with the Shiite population of the South deteriorated shortly thereafter.

## **1982 and beyond**

The 1982 Israeli invasion saw rice thrown at the Israelis in Nabatiyeh and other areas of the South. Nabatiyeh's inhabitants also prevented the Palestinians from returning to their camp, and the city regained the lands and properties that had been confiscated by Palestinian armed organizations. The clashes with the Israelis soon replaced those with the Palestinians in search of a Jabal Amel identity that would not be spoiled by any 'stranger.' Still, daily life remained relatively pleasant as those who returned to their villages were able to resume some aspects of their old lives. This occurred despite fears of Israeli retaliation in response to the operations led against occupation troops.

During the period coinciding with Hezbollah's emergence, Israeli troops withdrew from the city of Nabatiyeh in 1985, even as they still occupied the hills overlooking the city. This was the era of the "iron grip," during which the two Shiite parties – Hezbollah and Amal – gained in importance, with the former taking the struggle out in the open like never before.

Money transfers from emigrants led to a building boom as Nabatiyeh natives returned to their city over which Hezbollah started to exercise strong control. One source who witnessed this era gave the following account: "At first, their rise was characterized by extreme violence. They banned drinks, music and affiliation to any other political parties or movements. The period of assassinations soon started afterwards, sowing fear among the people. Naturally, no investigations were carried out and the perpetrators were never identified, but everyone knew that it was Hezbollah's iron grip. Assassination victims were, for the most part Communists, with occasional victims being mixed Shiite-Christian families. Leftist cadres who escaped assassinations were tortured into silence, and many fled further south. Everyone took to staying home after sunset."

## **Hezbollah and Amal**

The uneasy cohabitation between the two parties was short-lived. Tensions peaked in the late 1980s, and the clashes – which climaxed in Iqlim al-Tuffah spread to Nabatiyeh and other regions. Following a settlement brokered by Syria and Iran, Hezbollah took to focusing on the Resistance, whereas the Amal Movement emphasized jobs and state-provided benefits, especially those of the Council for the South – and since 1992, of the parliament speaker's position.

These developments outlined the map of party loyalties in Nabatiyeh. Most youths from a traditionally pro-Assaad background who had reservations about Moussa Sadr and Amal sided with Hezbollah. On the opposite side, the majority of youths from a pro-Osseiran background who had reservations about al-Assaad (and sympathized with Sadr) leaned in Amal's direction. In Nabatiyeh, as in the rest of the South, Amal became a refuge for those who disagreed with Hezbollah's doctrines and influence – as well as for those seeking jobs, income, or social status. Hezbollah was beyond any doubt more ideological than Amal, and Iran provided it with revenues that spared it the trouble of getting involved in petty Lebanese networks. In contrast, a typical Amal supporter had a morally questionable image and somewhat rude manner, whereas Hezbollah supporters were known to be polite and ethical.

However, things soon settled in the 1990s as the two parties started adapting to the population as best they could. Thus, a kind of slackening based on self-confidence with regard to alcohol and other matters emerged. For instance, school principals were previously notified in writing of the need to attend a meeting at a local Hezbollah or Amal HQ, often in an arrogant manner that sounded like an order. Nowadays, a party representative comes in to the school and meets with the teaching corps to inform them of demands, which include adding religious studies to the curriculum and shifting the standard Saturday-Sunday weekend to a Friday-Saturday weekend. This was carried out even in the schools run by Christian missions, including the Evangelical School which was compelled to abide by the decision. Once the Lebanese Armed Forces entered the region following the 2000 liberation, religion lessons were suspended and Saturday became part of the weekend once again as per the rules of procedure, and the Ministry of Education's decisions. This, among others, does not attest to the state's ability to exercise active power – rather, it denoted Hezbollah's readiness to offer temporary concessions from the glory of its 2000 victory. Indeed, religious culture was entrenched with the liberation of the South, which consolidated the values and meanings of mobilization, and imposing this culture no longer required any coercion.

## **Rebellion hotspots**

The natives of Nabatiyeh or other southern regions cannot resist Hezbollah and do not want to do so. Yet, this does not mean that there are no rebellion hotspots – the most important of which was represented by Sheikh Abdel Hussein Sadeq – Abdel Hussein al-Kabir's grandson.

Sadeq was not an especially charismatic figure, but he had a solid religious and family background. His primary cause was the observance of Ashura, the preservation of its traditional aspect, and the ensuing commemoration of occasions relevant to Hussein.

Sadeq's interest in a pre-Khomeini brand of Shiism resembles other clerics like Ayatollah Shariatmadari. He thus opposed Hezbollah's ban on self-flagellation and beating naked bodies. Sadeq's stance in this respect is probably based on a similar stance by his grandfather, which became a family tradition that was slammed (by more enlightened clerics at the time) under the aegis of Mohsen al-Amin. Yet, Sadeq was riled by the fact that Hezbollah's Ashura marches and growing Iranian signs and symbols departed from the unanimity over traditional Ashura rites, not to mention the party's interference in determining the occurrence of holidays or new crescent sightings.

More importantly, the two sides were locked in a conflict over religious mosques in Nabatiyeh, which drove Sadeq to strike an alliance with the Amal Movement in order to counter Hezbollah's landslide.

Hezbollah had actually managed to lay its hands on several mosques which had no sheikhs of their own, and which Sadeq's network of sheikhs could not cover. The central *husseiniyya*, however, remained under his control and was probably the only *husseiniyya* that did not contain any poster of Khamenei or Hassan Nasrallah.

Sadeq's rebellion against Hezbollah was further aided by the fact that the party did not have any eminent clerics within its ranks. Hezbollah's sheikhs are always subjected to Khamenei's referential authority, which stifles any ambition. It was said once that three or four Hezbollah sheikhs were being trained for the post-Sadeq period, but this was countered by an announcement whereby Sadeq's son, Alaa, would be finishing his studies in Iran soon and returning to take over religious and temporal matters.

Sadeq prevented the political use of sheikhs in Hezbollah's project, thus creating a deficit feared by every party seeking to deal with earthly matters by invoking godly justifications.

**Nabatiyeh's "original" natives**

The fanaticism of Nabatiyeh's "natives" for their city was no secret to anyone, as they noted that most Hezbollah and Amal members were foreign to the city. In other words, they came from the villages upon which Nabatiyeh folks tend to look down on in general. Party members who were original Nabatiyeh natives received less bigotry and mobilization.

Even today, this fanatic attachment to the city does not represent much of a competition for Hezbollah, as it is merely confined to sighs and closed rooms. Yet, we hear stories that go beyond politics and party control. One story has it that most businesses belonged to people from neighboring villages who brought in their beliefs and customs with them to the city.

Likewise, there were symbols that had come to embody Hezbollah's control over Nabatiyeh and its changing identity. In addition to the numerous posters, slogans, banners, cars fitted with megaphones patrolled the streets at all times to convey news. According to one "original" Nabatiyeh native, "there were flags, voice recordings, and images of martyrs and local leaders, as well as numerous images of Iranian leaders."

"This struck a cultural nerve," he said, and drove "original" Nabatiyeh natives "to remain in the confines of our homes." This led to a dwindling interest in social relations between families, and "we only met on the occasion of condolences." Some even mentioned the habit of shooting guns in the air during funerals as a new behavior likened to the "Palestinian decay" of the 1970s. Others, however, went further down the line – saying that not one "original" Nabatiyeh native headed an official department in the city. Even neighborhood youths and "scoundrels" all came from outside Nabatiyeh. This provided an exotic source of fun and amusement, which transformed into "military rituals and party marches surrounded by posters of Lebanese and Iranian political and religious leaders."

This control extended into many forms of political representation. The three MPs who represent Nabatiyeh today are led by Loyalty to the Resistance bloc leader, Hezbollah MP Mohammad Raad, who entered parliament with 62,720 votes. By contrast, Nabatiyeh native Yassine Jaber only won 60,068 votes compared to 55,250 votes for the traditional politician Abdellatif al-Zein. This goes without mentioning that Jaber is known for his loyalty to Nabih Berri, who chose him to replace his cousin Imad on his list while aging Abdellatif al-Zein's ability to form an independent political weight was in doubt.

Municipal representation is in no better shape. Hezbollah used to curry favor with "original" Nabatiyeh natives by striking an alliance with the former Nabatiyeh municipality head, Mustapha Badreddine, son of popular humanitarian doctor Ali Badreddine.

Hezbollah previously did this in order to counter the Amal Movement and Sadeq. However, the party soon relinquished the conditions of this alliance by discarding Badreddine, who was appointed president of the Municipal Action Association while the position of municipality head went to Dr. Ahmad Kohail, a Nabatiyeh native and Hezbollah supporter. Kohail is unanimously described as a man of honesty and integrity, even if some of Hezbollah's detractors accuse him of being a Hezbollah security official.

In any case, the turnout in the city, which was recently paired with Tehran, did not exceed 30 percent and was described by some as “[a testimony to] Nabatiyeh’s political abstention.”