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June 16, 2013

Nabatiyeh is Hezbollah's fortress - Part III



This is the third in a three-part series translated from the *original Arabic version* published in the pan-Arab Al-

Hayat newspaper. *Parts I and II* were published here on June 14 and 15.

NABATIYEH, Lebanon – Yesterday's column covered the emergence of Hezbollah's iron grip on Nabatiyeh and its surroundings in addition to those who rebelled against it. The following represents the last part of this report.

The people of Nabatiyeh were growing silently weary of Hezbollah's and the Amal Movement's authority, particularly of the indefatigable distribution of benefits between them. It is a well-known fact that the sensitive relations between the two parties is preserved by the *fait accompli* agreement they reached towards the end of the 1980s. Locked in competition with Hezbollah, its Iranian financial capacities, and its active ideological and mobilization energy, the Amal Movement placed its bets on squeezing both public and private institutions. According to several indications, Hezbollah may have started to compete with Amal on this front as well after a long period of haughtiness in this respect, perhaps due to the financial crisis in besieged Iran and to receding morale.

Forbidden culture

By and large, most private and public institutions are now controlled by people in the entourage of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah. The capacity to provide jobs and services has thus secured cohesion between the donor and a vast crowd of supporters, in addition to attracting those who hesitate and have reservations. For instance, a bill of \$1,000 USD in the Governmental Hospital is easily brought down to \$200 for those followers who request it; party members are totally exempted from paying.

This distribution of benefits and the ensuing exclusive allocation of jobs between the two parties, especially within the Amal Movement, hamper institutional activity in Nabatiyeh and naturally widen the existing gap between competences and job opportunities.

While these developments have left their mark on the quality of life, the clearest sign to the decay lies in the cultural life, which had managed to preserve its activity even during the previous bouts of civil war. The lectures at the Imam Khomeini Center are almost the only example today of the cultural bustle of a city where the Lebanese Conservatoire was banned from establishing a school to teach music. Nabatiyeh MP and Minister Yassine Jaber and Amal Movement representatives in the Municipality have managed to throw parties, festival, or ceremonies in honor of certain 'key city figures,' but the new culture remains largely a continuation of the growing religious and partisan mobilization in daily life. This mobilization takes place on various levels and comes in many shapes.

Traditional greetings have all but disappeared, as one resident says, with the “*as-salamou aalaykoum*” (peace be upon you) replacing the traditional “*sabah al-kheir*” or “*marhaba*” as greeting expressions.

Quality of life

Mixed-gender parties, common until the late 1990s, have dwindled to the point of virtually disappearing. Accordingly, it is no coincidence that Nabatiyeh female novelist Alawiyya Sobh recorded in her novel *Maryam al-Hakaya* (Maryam’s stories) the deterioration of women’s situation in times of war and mobilization as well as their fallback into religiosity and sectarianism.

Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s radiance has waned over the past few years, hence its receding capacity to make up in ethics for the misery of real life. During the 2006 July War, “not one thing went missing in anyone’s home... they preserved our homes while they were resisting Israel.” The outpour of compensation soon caused the crowd of Hezbollah supporters to multiply, not as “a resistance movement we support,” but rather as a category of people subjecting politics to religion. The building frenzy between 2006 and 2012 as a result of Hezbollah’s compensations also raised the value of real estate property. Money was thus distributed allegedly as compensation, but also to silence the growing voices of dissent. Huge amounts of money thus changed hands without any monitoring whatsoever and a class of newly-rich people acted like a financial façade for Hezbollah and its properties. Some even sneered that Hezbollah has become “Nasrallah’s company.” The bankruptcy of Salah Ezzeddine and the scandal of forged medications to which Abdallah Fneish, brother of Hezbollah Minister Mohammad Fneish, was linked, only served to up the dosage of such covert scorn.

Yet the stained ethical image did not prevent the launch of an alternately direct and indirect campaign. Shiites who chose to keep on selling alcoholic beverages had their stores and warehouses boycotted, which caused them to rethink their decision. The Shqif Club, which had previously played a prominent social and cultural role all over the South, was seized by the Amal Movement and still served alcoholic drinks and hosted dancing parties. However, when the club experienced a financial deficit, Hezbollah took over its cafeteria through one of the party’s financiers, thus enabling it to ban alcoholic drinks and dancing.

The same thing happened with Qasr al-Muluk, which was also “rescued” by Hezbollah money and stopped serving alcohol, the sale of which is now limited to a very few local stores, whose proprietors undertake significant risk in keeping them open, knowing that they are always potential targets for attacks. Those who wish to drink safely have to head to nearby Christian towns and villages. This, in turn, is another coup: Indeed, Nabatiyeh natives aged 40 and above remember that the whole region used to come to buy

alcohol from a store owned by Suleiman Bou Raad, a policeman from Ammatour who had settled in Nabatiyeh and called himself Abou Mahmoud.

Syria and tough politics

Politics has been easy business for Hezbollah until today. The 1992 elections allowed for the exclusion of Kamel al-Assaad from the equation altogether thanks to a blend of his natural transgressions along with organized blackmail of his lists and candidates. Hezbollah and the Amal Movement thus headed the representation of the South, which they monopolized, and distributed crumbs to those who accepted to be dependent on and obedient to them. The 2000 liberation of the South provided sheer and uncontested victory in the 2005 elections, and the subsequent 2006 “divine victory” only made this tendency clearer as proven by the 2009 elections.

Yet it seems that the number of causes allowing some easy gains has dwindled these days, which coincided with politics turning into difficult business. This is clearly manifested by some results of the Syrian revolution and by Hezbollah’s involvement in fighting in Qusayr, Homs, and probably elsewhere as well.

One hears Nabatiyeh natives, whether pro- or anti-Hezbollah, invoking various pretexts to justify Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria. These pretexts include the need to defend the Lebanese Shiites living within the Syrian territory, to defend the Sayda Zeinab shrine in Damascus, to secure a safe passage for the Resistance and its weapons – which come from Iran – so that it does not weaken in the confrontation against Israel, and to wipe out *takfiris* in Syria so that they do not wipe ‘us’ out here. Others link the performance of ‘jihad duty’ to the diktats of the Guardianship of the Jurist, reaching the conclusion that participation in fighting is unquestionable. Others, still, mention the emergence of a vocabulary of supernatural and magical events within Hezbollah’s environment, which takes the shape of signs and visions that justify involvement in fighting and determine the dates of future victories.

About a year ago, one started to hear about a certain number of youths actually skipping school for a month or more. Their parents, who came to school to inquire after their children, knew nothing about the whole matter. When the students came back, they would tell those inquiring after them in school that they were following “a training session” with some even asking for the truth to be hidden from their parents.

There is some degree of unanimity among the people invoking these pretexts, but the high number and variety of these pretexts

justifying 'jihad duty' over a relatively short period of time noticeably weaken the case of those using them. When one takes into account the rising number of Hezbollah youths killed in battle, not to mention the fact that Qusayr and Homs are not part of the "Jabal Amel" identity fostered by the party for three decades, this silent restlessness is likely to turn into a more vocal one.

Such an assumption is bolstered by the difficulty to conceive that Hezbollah may score a decisive and clear victory in Syria, knowing that it has built its glorious image on its incessant string of decisive and clear victories. All of the above may justify Hezbollah's secrecy – at least during the early stages of its military involvement – with regard to the number of its martyrs. As one of Hezbollah's most drastic critics puts it, "since when does a party renowned as the party of martyrs abstain from boasting about its martyrs?" Still, the repercussions of the Syrian crisis do not stop here. In the South much like elsewhere in Lebanon, the number of Syrian refugees – most of whom live in dire poverty and in very densely populated conditions – is rising. The most common estimate puts the number of Syrian refugees in Nabatiyeh alone at around 50,000, all of whom are Sunnis with the majority hailing from Deraa.

Nabatiyeh natives say that they are welcoming the Syrians to "pay back" for their kindness when the Syrians welcomed displaced southern residents during the 2006 war. Others are complaining, as in many other regions across Lebanon, that refugees contribute to problems of cheap labor or robbery.

In any case, the most common version has it that Hezbollah and the Amal Movement did provide some food and health aid to the Syrian refugees in the regions under their influence. However, the prolongation of the Syrian crisis and Hezbollah's increasing involvement in the Syrian war may cause a dangerous clash in the South, including Nabatiyeh.

What coexistence?

There are no longer substantial sectarian or denominational minorities in Nabatiyeh. About 1,000 Sunni Lebanese of Palestinian descent still live there. Candidates for the parliamentary elections visit them during election season in quest of their votes, but no one ever meets their simple request: This Sunni community does not have its own cemetery; instead the community's dead are piled one on top of another in the too-small existing cemetery. The only Muslim cemetery belongs exclusively to Nabatiyeh's Shiites even to the exclusion of Shiites from other regions.

Christians have a historical presence in Nabatiyeh. It is often said that they were never harmed or harassed and that Hezbollah paid compensations for those Christians whose houses were damaged in the 2006 war. Christians thus carry on with their

religious celebrations and occasions as they used to in the past; they have a mayor for their neighborhood and a representative on the town's municipal council. However, and this is characteristic of *dhimmi* relations, they do not meddle in politics. During the 1960s and 1970s, some Christian youths joined the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and an even fewer number joined the Communist Party. Yet nowadays – in a pattern that is reminiscent of the Copts in Egypt – “they do exactly as they are told by the church,” which was built in 1902.

Furthermore, the “Moussalla al-Sayda Maryam,” a building used as a prayer venue, was erected three years ago in the immediate vicinity of their neighborhood, which branches out from the market place, thus prompting them to request MP Michel Aoun's intervention with his Hezbollah ally so that the building would be moved. The loudspeaker, which was turned in the direction of the Christian neighborhood, was indeed brought down but the *mousalla* itself was further enlarged and fitted with stone walls.

The Christian neighborhood is one of the city's original four neighborhoods in addition to the Serail neighborhood, the Maslakh neighborhood, and the Bayyad neighborhood. Its population has been witnessing a steady decline: Originally exceeding 65 houses in 1976, it is now home to fewer than 100 residents. Commenting on the transformations the city has witnessed, one Nabatiyeh native quoted a popular saying whereby “a neighborhood without Christians is tantamount to pure loss.” Following a brief silence, he asked: “Did you know that Muiin Jaber, who headed the Nabatiyeh Municipality until his death in 1995, was kidnapped by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Israel, the Amal Movement and the Syrian army? His story epitomizes our situation.”