

A Hezbollah Crack-up?

Lebanon's fratricidal extremists.

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Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, wants out. Things have gotten so tense for Hezbollah, says Lokman Slim, an independent Lebanese Shiite activist, that according to well-sourced accounts of a meeting two weeks ago, Nasrallah “complained he no longer wanted the job.”

It's hard to blame him. A figure once revered by Arabs for his (relative) success against Israel, Nasrallah is now tainted in the Sunni-majority Middle East by his association with a Syrian regime that has been slaughtering its Sunni opponents. More to the point, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that Hezbollah's patron in Damascus will survive the uprising. Some Lebanese observers are even wondering if the clerical regime in Iran, Hezbollah's main sponsor, will survive. With mounting pressure in the form of U.S. and EU sanctions, a devalued currency, a secret war waged, it seems, by the Americans, Israelis, and perhaps internal adversaries, the Iranians are reduced to making threats—like closing the Strait of Hormuz—that if acted upon could spell the regime's demise.

If Hezbollah's regional partners are in trouble, the domestic arena presents even more daunting challenges for the party of God. Hezbollah's control over Lebanon's Shiite community seems to be unraveling. There's crime and social unrest in Shiite areas that the party is incapable of curtailing. It has had to ask the Lebanese state for assistance in policing Hezbollah's own areas.

“After the 2006 war,” says Slim, “the Iranians handed out cash and everyone became accustomed to a certain standard of living. The party kept telling the Shiites that they were the best and most virtuous of people. So even the car thieves and drug dealers were the most virtuous of people. Now they can't control it.”

Perhaps the most telling sign of a fragmented resistance is the news that Hezbollah has been infiltrated by foreign intelligence services. The party can't get a fix on how to package the revelations. If they boast about uncovering CIA assets in their midst, they admit that the American clandestine service was able to penetrate an organization whose prestige rests on a reputation for tight security and lockstep discipline.

Like any totalitarian institution, Hezbollah is paranoid. Accordingly, the worse things get for Hezbollah, the more the party sees itself surrounded by enemies, real or imagined. Worst of all is when Hezbollah feels pressure on the most vulnerable part of its structure, its religious foundations. Which may be why the party is seeking the death penalty for one of its former top clerics.

Last October, a Lebanese military court, supervised by a judge close to Hezbollah, charged Sheikh Hassan Mchaymech with collaborating with Israel. “The message is not just for Hassan Mchaymech,” says his eldest son, Reda. “It is for the other Shiite clerics working outside the radius of Hezbollah. The message is that anyone who is against Hezbollah is a collaborator.”

Last week I met with Reda, a 27-year-old who as family spokesman has taken on more than he ever might have expected—not only working to secure his father's release but also facing down Hezbollah.

“When they came to show us my father’s so-called confession,” Reda says, “we hadn’t seen him or heard from him in nine months.” The elder members of the Mchaymech clan, a large family in the southern town of Kfar Seer, had gathered to meet with Hezbollah officials. “The Hezbollah people put on a CD of my father confessing,” says Reda. “He wasn’t the same man. He had lost 20 kilos, and was nodding like he was drugged or something. There were subtitles because his voice was inaudible. I said, there might be some people around this table willing to believe this, but not me.”

Two decades ago, Hassan Mchay-mech was a central figure in Hezbollah’s power structure. As first assistant to the party’s original secretary general, Sobhi Tufayli, Mchay-mech was responsible for the organization’s clerics. When Tufayli left the party in 1992, replaced first by Abbas Mussawi and then, after his assassination, Hassan Nasrallah, Mchaymech’s time with Hezbollah was running out.

“My father said that Nasrallah came straight from Iran to run Hezbollah,” says Reda. “Tufayli could take positions different from the Hezbollah security apparatus, but not Nasrallah. He can’t make decisions independent of Iran.”

In 1998, Nasrallah and the now freelance Tufayli butted heads, and Nasrallah was angry that Mchaymech seemed to side with his rival. “Nasrallah’s deputy summoned my father,” says Reda. The party was also concerned that Mchaymech no longer believed in Hezbollah’s foundational concept, *wilayet al-faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist.

That idea, first formulated by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, stipulates that the religious leader also directs the political realm. For Hezbollah, it justifies sending Lebanese Shiites to die on behalf of Tehran’s strategic interests—if the religious leader orders it, they have no choice.

“My father turned against *wilayet al-faqih* when he saw it had become an idea that had expanded to take control of everything and all decisions,” says Reda. “My father was impressed by Western culture. In his travels in Switzerland, Germany, and France, he came to believe that our society was backward in our ideas and we needed to catch up.”

Hassan Mchaymech explained his intellectual conversion in an article published in June 2010, a month before his arrest:

My divorce from Hezbollah occurred in 1998 when I ceased believing in *wilayet al-faqih* and any authority that purports to enjoy a divine delegation or a divine source. I believe today that the legitimacy of any authority represents the fruit born of agreements made between reasonable adults within a society. Furthermore, I believe the way to achieve power is through free elections that appoint someone to serve for a specific period of time and fulfill specific duties and tasks. A mandate without a given term or well-defined duties is a recipe for corruption, even if the person selected to exercise authority enjoys sacred respect—unless he is a Prophet or an Imam.

Mchaymech’s 1998 book, *Big Holes in Islamic Theories*, displeased the party. “They tried to kidnap him,” says Reda. Mchaymech left for France but returned after securing Hezbollah’s approval. In 2005 he met a Shiite convert visiting from Europe, Mahmoud al-Nimsawi (“the Austrian”), who professed to share Mchaymech’s dream of opening a religious school in Europe. Nimsawi invited him to Germany to discuss the proposal with a man called Abu Ali who soon identified himself as a German counterterrorism officer.

“Abu Ali tried to get my father to speak about Hezbollah security issues,” says Reda. The Germans wanted to know about figures like Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah’s notorious terrorist mastermind, and Mustafa Badreddine, named by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon as one of the plotters in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. “My father told them his expertise was not in security matters. He knew Mughniyeh and Badreddine, but my father is not a tough guy. He’s strong with the pen, but that’s it.”

Reda explains that the German security officer told his father that if he had no information on Hezbollah's security apparatus, he'd have to leave Germany immediately. Concerned about the effect these meetings might have should word of them get back to Hezbollah, on his return to Lebanon Mchaymech approached a friend and former colleague, Ali Damoush, head of Hezbollah's external relations, to debrief him on his itinerary, including an accurate account of his contacts with Nimsawi and Abu Ali.

The matter seemed to rest there until the summer of 2010 when Mchaymech was crossing into Syria on a pilgrimage to Mecca. At the border he was kidnapped by Syrian security. After two months of no contact, the family read in a pro-Syria and pro-Hezbollah Lebanese newspaper, *Al-Akhbar*, that he had been arrested for collaborating with Israeli intelligence.

It was clear from the outset that Hezbollah, rather than Syria, was responsible for the arrest and accusation. "The Syrian investigation comes from the folder my father gave them after his return from Germany. It's obvious that Hezbollah gave that to the Syrians. They handed this issue off to the Syrians to keep their hands clean. But they kept telling us, this is Syria's opinion, we don't know."

Nonetheless, the family moved carefully. "My father was in Syria and anything could happen there. He could disappear for nothing. . . . We signaled to them that we're not going to shut up." Reda started to write in the press. "I wrote about Hezbollah's silence in this affair. When Nasrallah's deputy Nabil Qaouk came to show us the CD of my father's confession, he said to me, 'If you want to write about Hezbollah, go ahead, there are 100 articles about Hezbollah everyday, let there be 101. But if you want your father back, you have to stop writing.'"

Reda agreed to keep quiet on two conditions, that the family be allowed to visit him and that he be moved to Lebanon. "Anything could happen to him in Syria," says Reda. Within a few days, Mchaymech's wife and another son visited him where he was being held in Syria. "There were two Syrian security people there the whole time monitoring what he said," Reda explains. "My father said, 'The first three months they hit me, but now it's different.'"

Lokman Slim, who has worked with the Mchaymech family on their father's case, believes that the Lebanese military court due to reconvene for sentencing on January 26 will not give Mchaymech the death penalty. "It will be a stiff sentence, but the family is already getting accustomed to visiting and phone calls."

Hassan Mchaymech has also started writing letters to his eldest son. "In one letter, my father says, 'Nasrallah says all you need is honor. As long as we have honor, we don't need bridges or cars or streets.' My father writes, 'How can you have honor if you don't have streets and cars and bridges? They're trying to set us back 300 years.'"

That is to say, it's not just Hassan Mchaymech who is paying a price for resistance, but Lebanon's entire Shiite community. "We need to focus on developing our society, our economy rather than getting into internal and external battles and bloody conflicts. Finally," says Reda, "this is my father's message."

Hassan Mchaymech knew he was expendable from the moment he first challenged Hezbollah's theoretical foundations, back in 1998. Perhaps his June 2010 article reminded the party's leadership that it might still be useful to punish him and thereby send a message to the Shiite community, especially its clerical class: You are all expendable.

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http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/hezbollah-crack_616154.html?nopager=1