

### The Perplexity of being a Better Royalist than the King... *Quo Vadis Hezbollah?*

Several days after the Saudi-led coalition commenced operations in Yemen, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah commented on that development in a televised speech. Aside from the rude language he used—which bordered on anti-Saudi/anti-Gulf “racism”—the speech demonstrated a level of nervousness that even al-Jadeed TV, a media outlet historically favorable to the “Resistance,” was unable to overlook. Of course, the speech prompted a wave of comments and responses, all of which are indicative of Lebanon’s zeitgeist. Perhaps the most interesting observation came from PSP/Druze leader Walid Jumblatt:

I noticed that nothing comparable to the tone of the speech of Sayyed Nasrallah emerged from the Islamic Republic of Iran. We are familiar with a calm and objective Sayyed Nasrallah. This time, he abandoned calmness and objectivity, and his speech seemed nervous. I don’t understand why Hezbollah has to go farther than Iran. Iran itself is not using such language.<sup>1</sup>

While Jumblatt’s question may seem

rhetorical, it became much more literal following Nasrallah’s two-hour-plus interview a few days later, which was broadcast on an official Syrian/pro-Assad regime television station. That impression was compounded after the speech he gave April 17 during a rally Hezbollah organized to demonstrate “solidarity with the Yemeni people.” Interestingly, this was Nasrallah’s third public appearance in less than a month, and on each occasion, the language he used was gratuitously coarse and crude.

In some fashion, Walid Jumblatt’s question may be related to the evolution of Hezbollah’s status within Iran’s regional sphere of influence (and intervention). Of note, that evolution is coincident to the framework nuclear agreement reached recently between the P5 + 1 and Iran, which, as many commentators have observed, is pushing Iran back “into the international fold.”<sup>2</sup> By extension, Iranian “respectability,” at least outside the areas of conflict in which it is engaged, is also increasing. That progression also parallels two commemorative events, which should be included in the already burgeoning catalog of anniversaries for 2015.

<sup>1</sup> As-Safeer. April 1, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy/iran-deal>

These are (1) the 30th anniversary of Hezbollah's manifesto, "Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World," which served as its official introduction and (2) the 10th anniversary of Hezbollah becoming a direct, overt participant in the Lebanese government.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrably, what began in the early 1980s as a marginal, almost underground movement has evolved into a hugely complex political-military-social apparatus that commands a multi-million-dollar budget. Operating within and outside Lebanon, Hezbollah is frequently referred to as a "state" situated either inside or beside the Lebanese State and sharing some of its territories and resources. In fact, Hezbollah's "accretion" of statehood is often referred to awkwardly by some of the most renowned personalities in international politics. For instance, U.S. Secretary of State Kerry did so (intentionally or otherwise) during a visit to Beirut.<sup>4</sup> Yet such aggrandizement of Hezbollah's status rings particularly false and Walid Jumblatt's question discloses some of its more conspicuous features.

While the condition of being more royal than the king seems to be the very definition of hierarchy, and while the chain of command that links Hezbollah to Iran is evident—with all due respect to Secretary Kerry—it may appear that Jumblatt's question is fallacious. After all, how can an entity that cedes primacy to a different body remain self-determinant?

Obviously, the intent of this *Alert* is not to discuss the logical structure

## Lebanon's Yemen Storms

Less than 24 hours after Saudi Arabia announced that it had commenced operation "Storm of Decisiveness" (March 26), Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a particularly inflammatory speech on al-Manar TV (March 27) in which he "rejected the claim that Iran was threatening to intervene and control the region":

Where is the evidence that Yemen is occupied by Iran? [C]laims of Iranian bases and armies in Yemen is a lie. Even claims that Iran is controlling Yemen through political influence and not through military force is a lie. There is a problem in Saudi Arabia's mentality in that it does not respect the will of free peoples.<sup>1</sup>

Political reaction to the speech by local Hezbollah opponents was indeed restrained—as if they had been caught unaware and were unsure of how to reply. The real surprise, however, came from an unexpected source, al-Jadeed TV, which began its prime time (7:45 PM) news with coverage of the speech:

Yesterday's appearance by Sayyed Nasrallah reflected an unprecedented drive towards tension. By encouraging the Yemenis to fight [by promising them] victory, such an invitation is tantamount to urging them to kill each other since those [currently] invading Yemen from the sky have not yet set foot on [Yemeni] lands.<sup>2</sup>

Later that evening in yet another unprecedented action, Nasrallah's youngest son Jawad launched a social media *blitz* against al-Jadeed TV and the editor-in-chief of its nightly news.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Mar-27/292426-hezbollah-would-join-saudi-coalition-if-aimed-at-israel-nasrallah.ashx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLd2Kto8c6g>

<sup>3</sup> Although Hezbollah's official presence in Lebanon's government did not occur until formation of the government that followed the assassination of Rafic Hariri (and the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon), it had participated in an unofficial capacity well before 2005 by filling a number of cabinet positions with its members.

<sup>4</sup> "I particularly call on those nations directly supporting the Assad regime – in what has become a grotesque display of modern warfare by a state against its own people – I call on them – Iran, Russia, and I call on Hezbollah, based right here in Lebanon – to engage in the legitimate effort to bring this war to an end." Secretary Kerry, June 4, 2014 <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/227100.htm>

of Jumblatt's question but to impart some understanding of how Hezbollah is able to exploit its apparent bi-polar existence; specifically, how it can be at once a strong quasi-state entity and a weak follower of its acknowledged patron. For instance, what might compel Hezbollah to follow Iranian policy as precisely as it did during the last Gaza war or in the recent Qunaytirah-Shebaa military "exchanges" when it adopted a conventional if not conservative tone? Moreover, where Yemen is concerned, what convinced Hezbollah to adopt such a bellicose stand and take the lead in escalating the situation when—to borrow from Walid Jumblatt—Iran seemed so "calm and objective?"

Perhaps revisiting some of the landmark events of the last few weeks may help "decipher" the situation. The Saudi-led "Storm of Decisiveness" military intervention in Yemen began on March 26, and Nasrallah gave his speech on Yemen the next day. On April 6, Nasrallah was interviewed by pro-Assad television (*Al-Ikhbariyya as-Souriyya*) during which he reiterated his harsh perspective on Saudi Arabia. Throughout that period, the official Iranian response to the situation in Yemen remained conspicuously *moderate*. By April 9, however, top-level Iranian officials moved decisively to the forefront in the confrontation. That day, Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei "condemned as genocide the military intervention by its main regional rival Saudi Arabia in Yemen...." Iranian President Rouhani, who drew a comparison between the Saudi-led campaign and the U.S.-led coalition against Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq, stated, "You will learn ... that you are making a mistake in Yemen,

The squabble between the network and "Hezbollah's public" (which stood squarely behind Nasrallah junior) also became an opportunity for another Lebanese television network, LBC, to settle its score with al-Jadeed TV over ongoing competition for the lucrative advertisement market. That confrontation ultimately disclosed some intriguing political and financial scandals.



**Tweet by Jawad Nasrallah:**

**"Maryam al-Bassam [editor-in-chief of the al-Jadeed evening bulletin]: either leave al-Jadid if you [have] changed convictions or continue [as before] according to the two salaries you are getting, but stop lying." The reference made to "two salaries" indicates that aside from the salary al-Bassam receives from al-Jadid, she is also on Hezbollah's payroll.**

On March 29, the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon entered the fray by responding directly to Nasrallah: "[Y]our speech reflects the confusion and puzzlement of those that you represent" (i.e., the Iranian regime). That same day, the media/social media duel between al-Jadeed and supporters of Jawad Nasrallah continued to escalate. In fact, it continued until March 31, when the head of Hezbollah's media office abruptly ended the confrontation by stating that Hassan Nasrallah's speech "did not warrant comment." But while that declaration indeed calmed the al-Jadeed/Nasrallah junior front, another opened up immediately between the pro-Hezbollah daily *al-Akhbar* and the Saudi ambassador.

Commenting on some of the particularly harsh articles published by *al-Akhbar*—using language similar to that unleashed by the Hezbollah boss—the Saudi ambassador was quoted by the Saudi newspaper *al-Watan*:

*Al-Akhbar* is familiar with propagating lies and false accusations against the Kingdom and its leadership. It is time to put an end to [that practice].

too.”<sup>5,6</sup> In the midst of these unfolding events, of course, the world's eyes were focused on Lausanne to await the *fumata bianca* curling out of the Beau Rivage Palace that would indicate a successful outcome to the nuclear negotiations.

This brief chronology indicates clearly that initially, Iran did not want to intervene publicly in events in Yemen. Instead, it *outsourced* that responsibility to its allies in the Arab world—first and foremost, Hezbollah. It can easily be deduced that Iran took the action it did largely because it wanted to avoid undue global attention during the critical negotiations in Switzerland. At the same time, however, Iran wanted to ensure that the debate over the situation in Yemen assumed inter-Arab dimensions that would be reinforced, albeit mutely, by an implicit (though unproven) association between the Twelver Shia and the Zaydi Houthis. Notably, the Shiism practiced by that community—as opposed to the notions being implied consistently by ad hoc journalistic reporting—is highly questionable from both a dogmatic and a political perspective. A particularly informative cable sent from the post in Sanaa on February 7, 2007 and released by WikiLeaks reads (under the heading “Yemen’s Zaydi Shia”):

Approximately 75 percent of Yemenis are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi’i school. The remaining 25 percent are Shia of the Zaydi sect. Among Shia, Zaydis are considered the closest to Sunni theology. Zaydis believe neither in the infallibility of the Imams, nor in their divine guidance. [...] Zaydis come from the “fiver”

The Saudi embassy asked a judicial team to [prepare a lawsuit against] the newspaper, which is known to belong to the Iran-Hezbollah-Syria axis.

On April 3, *al-Akhbar* responded by noting that the statements made by Ambassador Asiri were “...an overt attack against freedom of expression.” On April 4, the head of Hezbollah’s media office released a statement which asserted that Ambassador Asiri’s remarks constituted “an overt threat against the lives of those working in *al-Akhbar*.”

On April 6, Nasrallah appeared again on television, this time in a lengthy interview hosted by the pro-Assad regime *al-lkhbariyya as-Souriyya* television. The interview, which lasted nearly two and a half hours, produced nothing particularly new in terms of content. Rather, Nasrallah repeated Hezbollah’s commitment to the Assad regime and employed the same offensive language he used in the March 27 speech. Of course, it was perfectly normal for pro-Hezbollah *al-Manar* to simulcast the interview live. But it was both surprising and puzzling when the Lebanese discovered that Lebanon’s official television network was also simulcasting Nasrallah’s speech. Even more puzzling, neither Lebanon’s minister of information nor the director general of Tele Liban were able to explain convincingly why that public institution, supposedly expected to remain equidistant from all political forces, had been drawn into that particularly partisan performance.

Ultimately, the Saudi ambassador intervened again. He decried the insults levied against Saudi Arabia via a state funded television network. The Lebanese minister of information presented “personal excuses” to the Saudi ambassador, but his actions did not seem to atone for the *lèse majesté* that had been committed. Soon enough, the network of Saudi clients in Lebanon joined the chorus of incendiary statements that have escalated the situation even further. Since then, the media war between Hezbollah and media outlets allied with the Future Movement

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/09/us-yemen-security-airstrikes-idUSKBN0N00MR20150409>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/04/09/world/middleeast/ap-ml-yemen.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/04/09/world/middleeast/ap-ml-yemen.html?_r=0)



school of Shi'ism, based on the belief that there were only five legitimate Imams following the death of the Prophet Mohammed. The overwhelming number of Yemeni Zaydis reside in the northern governorates, which are also heavily tribal. [...] Yemen's Zaydis and Shafi'is often pray in the same mosques and practice many of the same customs. Yemen's Zaydis do not celebrate Ashura, one of the holiest of Shia occasions, with the traditional solemn procession and self-flagellation witnessed in

have continued to question if not the fate of the ongoing dialogue between the Future Movement and Hezbollah, then its propensity for calming the opinions being expressed by the respective publics involved.

other countries. [...] On matters of Islamic law, Zaydis are closer to Sunni Shafi'i beliefs than to other Shia interpretations. [...] Unlike other nations with significant Shia minorities, Yemen has no history of a distinct Shia community with its own religious, social, or political agenda.<sup>7</sup>

## Death Exchange Program...



“Hezbollah offers its deep condolences on the martyrdom of Sayyed Muhammad Abdul Malik ash-Shami.”

On April 14, Yemeni Houthi Sayyed Abdul Malik ash-Shami was buried by Hezbollah in the Rawdat ash-Shahidayn shrine in Beirut's southern suburbs. Of note, that shrine already includes the remains of Imad Mughniyyeh, his son and other senior Hezbollah “martyrs.” Ash-Shami, who was injured in the mosque attacks that occurred March 20, died in a Tehran hospital where he was being treated. After his death, he was transported to Beirut for burial. Pro-Hezbollah news outlets characterized Sayyed Abdul Malik ash-Shami as Houthi leader Sayyed Abdul Malik al-Houthi's personal emissary to Lebanon and Syria. Regardless of the veracity of ash-Shami's “official” curriculum vita, it indicates that he attended classes at the prestigious Sitt Zaynab Shia seminary in Damascus. Further, despite the other political roles he played, ash-Shami was a key force in replicating Hezbollah educational institutions in Yemen. Finally, it mentions that he was buried in Rawdat ash-Shahidayn in accordance with his wishes. While it is obvious that ash-Shami's Beirut burial is a political statement, unconfirmed information indicates that at least one Lebanese Hezbollah fighter was killed in military operations in Yemen. Notably, rumors (if not confirmed leaks) about Hezbollah assisting the Houthis have been circulating for more than two years. Whether or not ash-Shami's Hezbollah-attended burial in Beirut becomes the opening act in some “Death Exchange Program” between Lebanon and Yemen, the “event” is significant since it is now apparent that Beirut's southern suburbs not only serve as Hezbollah's political capital, but also as the metropolis of Arab-speaking, pro-Wilayat al-Faqih Shia....

<sup>7</sup> [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07SANAA226\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07SANAA226_a.html)

To paraphrase the title of a report that demonstrates Iran's involvement in Syria, no one has been so naïve as not to have noticed the meticulously executed Iranian infiltration into Yemen, actions that have included, aside from military support and expertise, efforts to return the Zaydi to the Shia Twelver fold in its *Wilayat al-Faqih* interpretation. Likewise, no one is unsophisticated enough to believe that the Iranian effort, on the dogmatic level, would fail to bear fruit over time. In February 2010, David Schenker had already written an article titled "Who's behind the Houthis?" In it, he noted, "Yemen appears to be developing into a proxy war, the latest battlefield in the conflict between Iran and the 'moderate' Arab states." The article reminded readers, "In December 2009, the Saudi-owned London-based daily Asharq al-Awsat reported that 'high ranking officials' from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps along with Lebanese Hezbollah met with Houthi rebels to coordinate military operations against Saudi Arabia."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the fact that many people believe today that Yemeni "Zaydi" are on equal footing with "Shia" (as with Lebanese Shia) can certainly be credited to Iranian efforts. At the same time, this somewhat aberrant conclusion is also a blatant illustration of the Iranian modus operandi of juggling political and theological clientelism. Thus, such a realization may help explain how the Syrian Alawis have come to be perceived not only as part of the Iranian "axis of Resistance," but also as "Shia!" In short, both outcomes relate more to allegiance to Iran than to genuine sectarian solidarity.

Nevertheless, this narrative may still fall short of explaining the joint Iranian-Hezbollah interest in opening a Yemeni front *from* Lebanon—but far be it from us to place these two actors on the same plane. Despite the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen having attracted more attention than any other Middle East-based conflict, it is reasonable to assume that some concomitance exists between the situational developments in Syria and Yemen—among other arenas. Just a day before operation "Storm of Decisiveness" was launched, Syrian rebels announced that they had taken complete control of the strategic city of Bosra in southern Syria, between (Sunni) Daraa and (Druze) Suwaida. Two days after the "Storm" began, the city of Idlib in northern Syria also fell to the rebels. Interestingly, Idlib's fall occurred several weeks after a supposed agreement had "been reached between [Lebanese] Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt and the Nusra Front regarding Druze living in Syria's Idlib."<sup>9</sup> Several days later, the rebels seized the main border point between Syria and Jordan and have since extended their span of control along that border...under the watchful eyes of the Jordanians.<sup>10</sup> Today's map of Syria demonstrates clearly that because of these developments, almost none of Syria's border areas (outside its Mediterranean littoral and discounting its border with Lebanon) remain under the control of the Assad regime and its allies. In reality, it appears patently unlikely that the Syrian regime and its allies will be able to reverse that situation. The importance of these facts is anything

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/whos-behind-the-houthis>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Life/Travel-and-Tourism/2015/Mar-02/289264-jumblatt-nusra-reach-agreement-onidlibs-druze.ashx>

<sup>10</sup> For additional background and analysis on this important border development, see "How to read Jordan's surprise opening to Iran" at <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565044-how-to-read-jordans-surprise-opening-to-iran>

but fleeting. Rather, the situation must be recognized as a factor that will at the very least affect Iran's estimation of Lebanon's role and status in the short and longer terms.

To avoid becoming mired in the details of events in Syria, it suffices to say that the sails of the Syrian regime and its protectors are certainly not being filled with favorable winds. Further, the situation in Iraq has also not improved. While the Iranian "camp" can certainly continue to add human and military resources to help Baghdad recover the hundreds of kilometers of land seized by ISIS, such recovery efforts are not seen as "liberation" by most Iraqi Sunni or even within the Arab Sunni mainstream. Such reticence relates not only to the well-documented wrongdoings of those "Shia liberators" (army and militias), but also to the absence of any hope for political power sharing that truly considers the concerns of Iraqi Sunni. According to a senior Gulf diplomat who spoke with *ShiaWatch*, Saudi Arabia would not have taken the action it did in Yemen if events (primarily in Syria but also in Iraq) had failed to prove that Iran, directly and via its proxies, is not always the omnipotent *wunderkind* it claims to be. The individual also disclosed that since the first front is unquestionably Syria, the "Storm of Decisiveness" should indeed be recognized as a second front and seen as an important message: that Saudi Arabia is more than capable, with its cooperative regional friends, of achieving success. Thus, Saudi Arabia is not only sending a very potent message to Iran, but it is also polishing its image in the Sunni world. Once reviled in song by extremist gangs as a "kingdom in a wheelchair," it is now obvious that the Kingdom can easily stand upright.

## "There are Shia there"



No one is excused from participating in what Hezbollah refers to as its campaign to support the Houthis "against the Saudi-American aggression." On March 6, Hezbollah organized a sit-in for children in downtown Beirut to demonstrate solidarity with Yemeni children. Interestingly, kids are naturally more outspoken than adults. According to an LBC TV report, one of the kids blamed the Saudi campaign on the fact that "there are Shia there," while another promised Yemeni children that Hezbollah is preparing to rush to their aid....

<https://youtu.be/6hHL5sjumCc>

For the Saudis, Yemen has held and will always hold a special status. Iran understands that relationship quite well and certainly appreciates that where Yemen is concerned, the Saudis have very little tolerance for "uprisings." Ultimately, Iran preferred to outsource direct action regarding Yemen to Hezbollah so that the Islamic Republic could continue to alternate its criticism of Saudi Arabia with offers of a political solution. By doing so, Iran would not shoulder direct responsibility for a possible "defeat" in Yemen, an outcome that may be understood as any ongoing civil conflict in which the Saudis would retain the upper hand. Ultimately, Iran understands perfectly that Saudi intervention in Yemen is not solely about Yemen. Instead, it represents a dramatic change in the types of actions being taken throughout the region to oppose Iran. Critically, Iran realizes that its traditional use of blackmail (via unbridled terrorism and



insurrection) may have reached its zenith in terms of effectiveness. Including Syria as part of the larger equation may impart an even more comprehensive understanding of why it is in the interest of Iran and Hezbollah to open the Yemeni front from Lebanon. Beyond the rationales noted above and in view of Iran's interest in adding an inter-Arab dimension to the Yemen conflict, Iran may be gaining some degree of respect (warranted or not), but it is certainly not making substantial gains on the various battlefields to which it has committed itself. Yet Iran may have no choice but to continue betting on Hezbollah's attractiveness to the rest of the Shia in the Arab world—despite the fact that Hezbollah's promises of quick (divine) victories in Syria have already proven to be both delusional and extraordinarily costly. In that sense, Hezbollah also had a vested interest in jumping on the Yemen bandwagon to divert the attention of its public (at least to some degree) from the abysmal events in Syria. Notably, while Hezbollah needed several months and many different arguments to finally announce its involvement in Syria and its intention to remain there as long as necessary, it mobilized its propaganda machine almost overnight—spearheaded by Nasrallah himself—against Saudi Arabia and its allies (despite the tremendous distance between Lebanon and Yemen and the chaotic nature of Yemeni politics). Thus, for many Lebanese, including Shia Lebanese, the course Hezbollah has chosen is certainly disconcerting. That bewildered population not only includes the tens of thousands of Lebanese expats working in the Gulf countries who see Hezbollah's anti-Saudi campaign as a threat to

their livelihoods, but also Hezbollah's political allies in Lebanon. These include the Christian Free patriotic Movement of General Aoun, the Shia Amal Movement headed by Speaker Nabih Berri and the various “fifth column” elements Hezbollah has infiltrated into the Sunni milieu, all of which are showing very little enthusiasm about following Hezbollah into its developing campaign in Yemen—much less supporting it.

As Nasrallah concluded his March 17 speech, he suggested to the Lebanese a deal similar to the one he offered for Syria: “while we can agree to disagree on Yemen as we have on Syria, we must prevent the conflict from being imported into Lebanon.” Clearly, Nasrallah's deal is tempting, and Hezbollah has no reason to believe that it might not work. After all, the Syrian precedent was successful for Hezbollah: it continues its combat operations in Syria while it engages in dialogue with the (Sunni) Future Movement and sits in government conference rooms with the other Lebanese political forces. Nevertheless, if the Syrian precedent works, then its success is not necessarily because the Lebanese are enjoying the deal. Instead, it is because the balance of power in Lebanon leans firmly in Hezbollah's direction. That reality stems in part from Hezbollah's variety of powerful resources, but also because of the weakness of its opponents and the unwillingness of the patrons of those opponents (with Saudi Arabia at the head of the line) to consider Lebanon a primary battlefield in the confrontation with Iran.<sup>11</sup>

True enough, Hezbollah may well impose its “deal” on the Lebanese. If so, however, it must

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<sup>11</sup> See ShiaWatch Alert 36, “Lebanon 2005 – 2015 – ...Still in the 'Syrian Time Zone,’” at <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/621>



also ensure that the situation in Lebanon remains “stable,” as such perseverance is not only critical for Hezbollah, but is also an enduring agenda item for the regional and broader international communities. What must be crystal clear, however, is that Hezbollah’s future (and by extension that of Lebanon) is being played out according to factors that have very little to do with anything

Lebanese. Paraphrasing the title of a *Newsweek* article that questions Hezbollah’s financial situation, a longtime Hezbollah observer made the following observation to impart some understanding of Hezbollah’s vehemence against Saudi Arabia: “Is Hezbollah going mercenary?”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps that question is the most apt response to Walid Jumblatt’s concern about why Hezbollah is being a better royalist than its king.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/01/23/hezbollah-going-broke-299139.html>