

From Political to Field Support Hezbollah's Involvement in the Syrian Crisis Unsung Martyrs

Unsung Martyrs

The Arabic language *al-Balad* newspaper noted on June 26, 2012 the passing and funerals of two young men, Mahdy Abdullah Sbat and Hussein Abdu Shamas. It explained that official Hezbollah services, attended by senior representatives from the organization, were conducted at different locations in the North Bekaa, and that both men had been characterized as martyrs for having died while “performing their jihadi duty.”

The information came amidst a surge of rumors from different sources regarding the involvement of Hezbollah elements in the Syrian conflict. *Al-Balad*'s astonishing announcement of the young men's funerals begged the obvious question: has Hezbollah just announced, albeit indirectly, its military involvement in the ongoing Syrian conflict? Of course, Hezbollah has yet to provide a conclusive answer. Shortly after publication of the article, however, it became clear that the announcement was intended more as a distraction than a usable piece of news. According to several leaks verified by *ShiaWatch*, Sbat and Shamas were killed in a car accident that happened along a stretch of road renowned for its inherent danger, which connects the villages of Kfardan and Hosh Barada in the Bekaa Valley. Yet while these two men were officially designated as *martyrs* and received highly ceremonial and dignified funerals *for having died in a car crash*, that outcome begs the question why untold numbers of other young men



Al-Balad announcement of the funeral of two Hezbollah shaheeds.

killed under circumstances even more ambiguous are not enjoying the same benefits.

During the past two decades, Hezbollah's propaganda machine has advanced the cause of the “Resistance” by glorifying *martyrs* and putting on large, public funerals. The organization's nurturing of its “martyr mill” by positioning the honored brethren prominently in the public eye has been one of Hezbollah's most successful strategies. Indeed, its outspoken support and veneration of its members killed in battle promises instant stardom to these new *martyrs*. Yet the organization's recent shift toward omitting the names of its *martyrs* and withholding the details of their deaths is worrisome to Lebanon's Shia public. In response to increasing numbers of such deaths, the public is left to wonder about where and why these individuals were killed. In fact, many

Lebanese are asking whether Hezbollah's abrupt detour toward obscurity means the organization is seeking a return to its “underground” existence, when it operated under a variety of aliases and

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Since Hezbollah's reconfiguration of its martyr propaganda campaign, the organization "manages" its members killed along the Lebanese-Syria border by issuing commemorative posters. These placards convey subtly the heightened status of the deceased without naming them or disclosing how they died. The posters are at once odd and misleading. While they remain silent about the date, location or cause of the individual's death, they evoke almost inconspicuously the ideology of martyrdom. Moreover, the posters obviate the usual fanfare associated with Hezbollah's granting of the title, martyr.

The posters above, photographed in Beirut's Basta Tahta district in early August, portray three young men clad in military-style uniforms and prepared to fight. The man in the left-hand poster, Ahmad Faheem, is wearing an Ashura scarf—the traditional Shia religious commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain—below which appear subtle images of warfare. Interestingly, these illustrations bear a remarkable likeness to Hezbollah's militarized "resistance" propaganda. Although the posters stop short of labeling those pictured as martyrs, that intent is implicit in the choice of language, "our dear lost youth," and in the overall tone conveyed by the images.

made certain the names of its martyrs never went public. Of course, the most famous example from that "clandestine" period was the October 23, 1983 bombings of the U.S. Marines and French paratroopers in their respective Beirut barracks. The nearly simultaneous attacks were claimed by the ethereal "Islamic Jihad," and the names of the suicide drivers were never released—at least officially. Reminiscent of that time, Hezbollah has ceased bestowing the official martyr designation on its fallen members, notably those fighting on behalf of the Syrian regime.

Navigating the path between disassociation and falsehood

The official policy adopted by the Lebanese government toward the ongoing events in Syria is one of persistent *disassociation*. That posture has helped maintain the fragile, Hezbollah-led coalition that rules the country as it shields the

government from being held accountable for its refusal to take a decisive stand on the issue. Such benefits are vital since although Hezbollah continues to support the Assad regime, the rest of the coalition may not hold the same position. Yet for those who support the Syrian regime, the policy offers a plausible defense each time Lebanon is asked by the international community or the Arab League to condemn the deeds of the Syrian regime. The government's *disassociation* policy conveys the idea that we, the Lebanese, have absolutely nothing to say about the events in Syria. Importantly, however, such *disassociation* has facilitated the collusion that exists between Lebanese officials and institutions and the Syrian regime.

An example of the strength of the Lebanese-Syrian nexus within the government made news in Lebanon recently when *al-Manar* TV reported that Amal-affiliated Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour refused to send a letter of complaint to Syrian authorities from President Michel Suleiman regarding Syria's repeated violations of Lebanese borders. Mansour's defiance of the president's wishes was resolute, with the minister explaining that he wanted to "verify the facts on the ground" (which had already been documented) prior to lodging the official complaint. Furthermore, during an *al-Manar* television interview, Mansour explained that Lebanese-Syrian ties "will not be severed, neither now nor in the future."^{1,2}

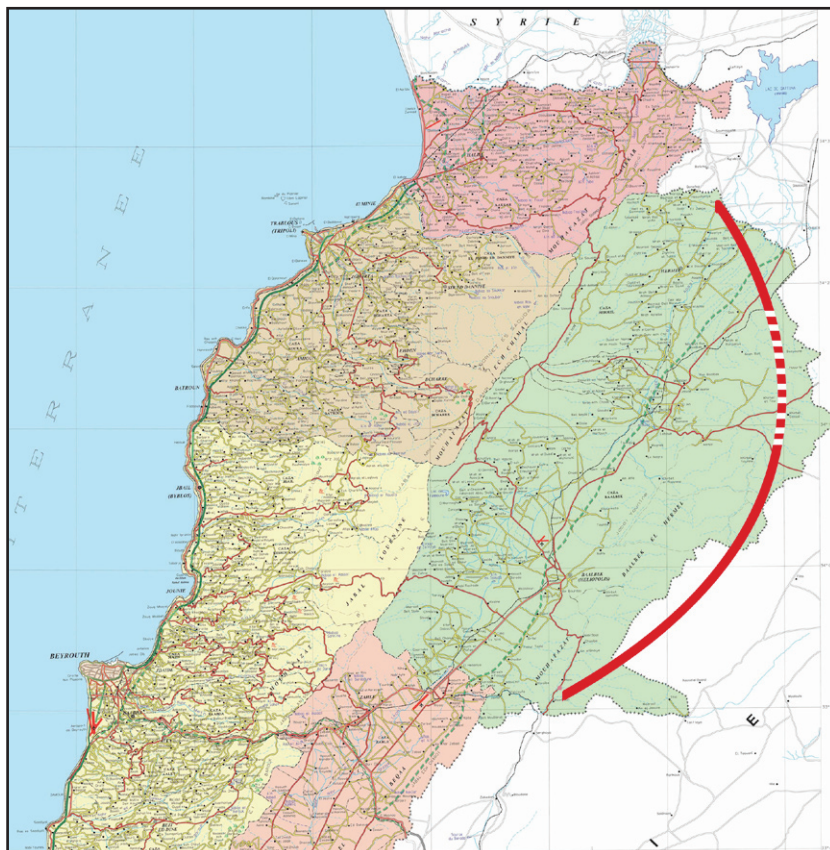
The enduring "intimacy" between Lebanon's General Security Office (GS) and the Syrian regime provides another example of the collusion. On August 1, the GS deported 14 Syrians despite pleas made by prominent Lebanese (mainly MP Walid Jumblatt) and human rights organizations

that the individuals' lives could be placed in danger if they were returned to Syria. Anxious to dispel the criticism, which included Jumblatt's call for the dismissal of GS General Secretary Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, the GS stated that the deportations were necessary "based on criminal acts and violations committed during their stay in Lebanon." Jumblatt, however, interpreted the official statement differently: "Here is the director general of the General Security showing new evidence that he is utterly following the orders of the Syrian regime."^{3,4}

Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime has markedly deepened the rift between Shia and Sunni in Lebanon and elsewhere. Specifically, the ongoing ordeal of the 11 Lebanese-Shia abducted last May in Aleppo offers just one illustration.⁵ Lebanon's response, vetted through the government's *disassociation* policy, has also made a less than positive regional impact that has impacted the Lebanese-Shia diaspora working throughout the Gulf.⁶

While most of the world recognizes the legitimacy of the Syrian people and hopes for the demise of the Assad regime, Lebanon's government remains supportive of the Syrian regime. Similarly, Hezbollah is experiencing a precipitous loss of legitimacy and support as well as a dramatic increase in organizational embarrassment owing to the steady stream of information that continues to flow from Syria in indictment of Assad's actions. Despite this, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah clarified his position on Syria during a recent speech:

The martyrs killed in the Damascus blast yesterday⁷ were our comrades in the struggle against the Israeli enemy. In the war [of 2006], the most valuable weapons we had in our possession were from Syria. The missiles we used in the Second Lebanon



The solid red arc outlines the Hezbollah-controlled portion of Lebanon's eastern border with Syria while the broken section identifies the Orsal-Feqha pocket.

War were made in Syria. The Syrian army is the only army in the region not receiving training or weapons from America. There was an interest to destroy this army; [and] America, the West and its pawns in the Arab world used the just demands of the Syrian people and threw Syria into war.⁸

To be sure, such support is not restricted to well-considered speeches. The Beirut-based *al-Joumhouria* newspaper reported in July that Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan "Nasrallah had offered al-Assad two forms of assistance, firstly he offered elements of Hezbollah's special forces any time they are needed, even if they are required to be sent to open fronts to fight the revolutionaries."⁹ The nature of that support is in line with established Iranian policy. In other words, Hezbollah cannot decide freely whether it will support the Syrian regime. Since the organization is integrated with Iran's overall Middle East policy, as long as Iran supports the Syrian regime, Hezbollah must do the same.

What can we confirm regarding Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian crisis?

It is no longer a secret that a large portion of Lebanon's eastern border with Syria is controlled primarily by Hezbollah. In fact, Hezbollah's fighters strive to control a rough semi-circle of the border region that runs from al-Qasr (Hermel) in the north to Maaraboun in the South, excluding the "Sunni pocket" in Orsal-Feqha, which encompasses a significantly large portion of the border in the Eastern Bekaa region. Since its "soldiers" in that area are attacked frequently by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other Syrian rebel forces, the exact number of Hezbollah fighters killed while patrolling the region during the last several weeks is difficult to determine, particularly since Hezbollah always obscures the circumstances involved. Fortunately, ShiaWatch was able to gain firsthand information from several highly reliable sources on a case that highlights Hezbollah's surreptitious support to the Assad regime. On May 17, 2012, after a series of retaliatory kidnappings involving Syrians and Lebanese, the powerful Bekaa-based Shia Jaafar clan orchestrated an "exchange" with the opposition FSA.¹⁰ According to reliable sources, the swap involved two Lebanese who had allied with pro-Assad Syrian troops and the bodies of two others killed fighting the rebels. Apparently, Syria—via Hezbollah—outsourced the operation to the Jaafar clan, which relieved it from having to deal directly with the FSA, an organization Hezbollah refers to consistently as a "gang of terrorists".¹¹

Another example that lends credibility to reports of Hezbollah fighters being placed on Syrian territory became apparent during the recent Shmustar funeral of Hadi Ali Hussein, a man eyewitnesses described as having obviously been killed in a combat situation. Notably, these are not unique cases. Rather, there are many more examples of Hezbollah involvement in the war in Syria, to include the organization's back-alley negotiating and its martyr funerals.

Given the many instances of information being withheld, suppressed or "customized" by Hezbollah, including that related to Lebanese citizens dying in relative obscurity along the

Lebanese-Syrian border, any argument about whether that organization is participating in the Syrian conflict is nothing more than wasted effort. Clearly, the Hezbollah-Syria nexus exists and it does so thanks to the complicity of the Lebanese government. With that in mind, three issues must be mentioned:

1. In collaboration with the army of the Syrian regime, Hezbollah has been using certain Lebanese-Shia enclaves situated in Syrian territory as weapons storage facilities. According to *The Daily Star*, the estimated 5,000 residents of the adjacent villages (including Haweik, Safsafa, Hamam and Fadlieh) are Lebanese, pro-Assad supporters. The porous nature of the Lebanese-Syrian border, particularly where such villages have "historically been centers of illegal transfer" has facilitated the smuggling of soldiers and weapons across the border.¹² Similarly, it has been confirmed that some Lebanese villages in the Hermel border region are being used as long-range artillery bases from which barrages can be launched into Syrian rebel-held territory. *ShiaWatch* has learned firsthand that the village of Hosh as-Sayyed Ali, located adjacent to the Lebanese village of Qasr, has become a veritable parking lot for artillery and other weapons trained on the Syrian rebels. Notably, all television and media outlets have ignored the developing situation in this region instead turning their attention to the Sunni dominated border region of Orsal. It seems that "certain authorities" have forbidden media representatives to file any informative reports from there, a tactic Hezbollah also employs in the South and in Beirut's "Dahyeh" suburbs.

2. Hezbollah's media crews have been helping the Assad regime create and disseminate propaganda, particularly on Syrian national TV. Each clip broadcast thus far closely resembles the archetypical Hezbollah media campaigns to the point that even the language used in some of the pro-regime TV spots is borrowed from Hezbollah. For instance, the Syrian regular army is now referred to as the "Men of God," (*rijal al-lah*), a phrase borrowed from Hezbollah's post-2006 War lexicon.

3. The fact that Hezbollah has been allowed to operate freely along the border is nothing less than scandalous where the Lebanese Armed

Forces (LAF) is concerned. Specifically, the almost countless number of cross-border raids that involve both the Syrian opposition and Hezbollah/the regular Syrian army, underscores the LAF's inability or unwillingness to safeguard this section of Lebanese territory. Nevertheless, despite the government's official *disassociation* from the Syrian conflict, a pro-opposition, Sunni resident of the Bekaa region explains, "Lebanon plays an important role in what is happening in Syria. It closes its border and pursues those who support the FSA while Shiite militiamen cross freely to fight alongside the regime."¹³ In corroboration of those rumors, a report written late in June 2012 by FSA Commander Riad al-Asaad explains that Hezbollah fighters *are* on the ground in Syria, "especially in Talkalakh and Homs," just above the northeast border.¹⁴ Mahmoud Haj Hamad, an employee of the Syrian Defense Ministry who defected to the rebels, informed reporters as early as January 2012 that Syria hired Hezbollah snipers to supplement its dwindling forces: "[T]hey didn't

have decent snipers or equipment. . . . They needed qualified snipers from Hezbollah and Iran."¹⁵

Regardless of the many narratives that seek to quantify Hezbollah's manpower contribution to the Syrian regime, the fact remains that Lebanon's disassociation policy prevents the government from being able to describe, with any accuracy, the real situation occurring around the Syrian-Lebanese border. The term "spillover," being used extensively in the media, is a metaphor for an expected and unavoidable phenomenon of transfer of the Syrian crisis into Lebanon. The truth of the matter, however, is that the obscure "spillover" minimizes the reality that the process is not accidental, but rather deliberate, with two countries whose governments seem, for better or worse, to be joined at the hip. As to Hezbollah, its political obedience to Iranian policy and, consequently, its overt support to the Syrian regime should cause no surprise if we are to fully delve into its "field involvement."

1 <http://www.yalibnan.com/201225/07//mansour-openly-disobeys-lebanon-president/>

2 <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/47695>

3 <http://www.yalibnan.com/201203/08//jumblatt-calls-for-firing-security-chief-over-expulsions/>

4 <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/48825-general-security-hits-back-at-critics-says-deported-syrians-committed-crimes-in-lebanon>

5 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/20122012522163849867118/05/.html>

6 <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/42441>

7 Syrian government and security officials killed in the explosion which struck the National Security building in Damascus on July 19.

8 http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=330_1342710244

9 Diab, Yousef. "Nasrallah to place Hezbollah at al-Assad's disposal—report." *Asharq Alawsat*. 26 July 2012. <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=30479>

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12 "Age-old border smuggling takes on new role." *The Daily Star*. 5 June 2012. www.lebanonwire.com/1206MLN/120605IIDS.asp

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15 Wright, Nate and James Hider. "Syrian regime importing snipers for protests." *The Australian*. 26 January 2012. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/syrian-regime-importing-snipers-for-protests/story-e6frg6so-1226254330519>