

Hezbollah's efforts to safeguard its image The Proof by the Poll and by the Rocket

Near the end of a two and a half hour interview with Hezbollah's secretary general broadcast January 15 by al-Mayadeen television, host Ghassan ben Jeddo asked, "Speaking frankly, do you believe the social and sectarian milieu still supports you [Hezbollah] and represents a viable core?" Sayyed Nasrallah responds affirmatively. As proof, he refers to some public opinion surveys conducted by "research centers" managed by "Shia Americans," and he made sure to note that those involved were "Shia connected to the American Embassy." Of course, his mention of "research centers" was a direct reference to Hayya Bina, and the survey he acknowledged was the February 2014 Hayya Bina poll, the results of which were published the following August in Arabic and English.^{1,2}

Apparent in Nasrallah's comments is the common, paranoid obsession that sees the hand of the "American Embassy" behind all such research efforts. Similarly, his indiscriminate reference to the Hayya Bina poll is yet another reiteration of the joint Nasrallah/Hezbollah argument that seeks to assert the organization's righteousness by emphasizing the credibility of literature produced

by their political opponents (or enemies)...as long as those "sources" support their allegations. Beyond these anecdotal facts, Nasrallah's mere reference to the Hayya Bina poll instantly enhanced its reliability and publicity—even though the responses collected via that poll are not always favorable to his organization. Thus, we owe Sayyed Nasrallah a debt of gratitude for having acknowledged the very best way to measure Hezbollah's popularity within the Shia community.

Hezbollah often refers to its constituency as *al-biaa al-hadina* or *Joumhour al-Moqawama* ("the lapping environment" and "the public of the Resistance," respectively). While these terms are often used interchangeably, their connotation is anything but similar.

In a nutshell, *Joumhour al-Moqawama* is far less restrictive than *al-biaa al-hadina*, as the former encompasses everyone who supports "the Resistance" regardless of sectarian affiliation or nationality. Conversely, the inclusiveness of *Joumhour al-Moqawama*, which has no preconditions for membership, differs substantially from *al-biaa al-hadina*, which refers more exclusively

¹ The full interview is available on al-Mayadeen website: <http://www.almayadeen.net>.

² A summary of Hayya Bina's 2014 poll is available at <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/602>.

to the larger Shia community with its semantic complement of intimacy and worldliness.

To understand the nuance between these two expressions, it may be helpful to describe their other potential uses. For instance, *Joumhour* is the term sports clubs often utilize to define their fan base. Alternatively, *al-biaa al-hadina*, as might be used by a Sunni Future Movement MP, would likely describe his own

community—following a monotonous dissertation in which he rejects the notion that his community is a “lapping environment” (hotbed) for extremism. Accordingly, Hezbollah’s efforts to promote itself as “the Resistance” are (at least) twofold. After all, what Hezbollah sells to its extended *Joumhour* is not the same “bill of goods” it might peddle to the *biaa hadina*, comprised primarily of Shia from the Bekaa, Dahiye and south Lebanon, who exist under

In the Name of the Percentage...

The following excerpt is a literal translation taken from the al-Mayadeen interview referenced above. At this point in the conversation, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah is referring to the Hayya Bina poll question “Do you think your community supports Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria?” The responses indicated that 95.3% of those questioned answered “yes.” Yet that almost unanimous affirmative response does not make sense if taken out of context. Referring further to the poll, 59% of the respondents indicated that Lebanon is heading in the “wrong direction,” 74% disclosed that their financial situation is worse than the year before, 75% indicated that they knew someone who had been killed while fighting in Syria and 53% answered that Hassan Nasrallah is the leader they trust most:

Interviewer (Ghassan bin Jeddou): Speaking frankly, do you believe that the social and sectarian milieu still support you [Hezbollah] and represent a favorable core?

H. Nasrallah: Now more than ever before.... Today, more than ever before.

Interviewer: Despite the difficulties Lebanon is experiencing?

H. Nasrallah: Despite those difficulties.

Interviewer: On what do you base this appreciation?

H. Nasrallah: First of all, on the public opinion polls conducted by the Americans.... I’m referring to the [public opinion] surveys done by Americans, not by us—done by Americans, by the American Embassy [in Beirut], by relying on research centers that it funds.... Of course, [these] research centers are managed by Shia Americans... [by which] I mean [Shia] connected to the American Embassy.



Now, [let’s talk about] the milieu...this milieu.... [Let’s recall] that this milieu [has been] in tune with us [on] the most difficult [issue, which is] our stand against Israel.... This milieu has been based for more than 60 years on the issue of [demonstrating adversity against Israel].... But the issue [regarding our] involvement in Syria is [certainly] problematic and may [even appear] at first glance to arouse debate, especially [since the combined impact of our] martyrs and wounded, and the implications of [our] presence there [Syria] are [tremendous]....

[Among the many other consequences we face,] our [living] areas [have been] targeted with explosive cars [car bombings], which means that people, our milieu, have [themselves] become martyrs [in addition to] our fighters [who have fallen as] martyrs.... Okay..., this [being] the case, a public opinion survey—[the one] I [mentioned]—was done, and it proved that 98% of our milieu supports our involvement in Syria and [supports our decision to remain] there.

[Our milieu] does not support us theoretically, but supports [us by] paying the price of [our] involvement. [So] what does this mean? [It] means that this milieu supports us [on] this subject [even though it may appear] at first [glance to be] controversial.

vastly different economic, social and security conditions (as if any such reminder is necessary)!

Much to his credit, al-Mayadeen host Ghassan bin Jeddo chose not to whitewash his pivotal question. Instead, he remained on point by asking about the “the lapping environment,” i.e., the Shia community. But while the true nature of the question seems clear, it requires additional illumination. In Lebanon, discussions about political representation of the Lebanese Shia community typically utilize “local” parlance to identify the “Shia duo,” comprised of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, as the pillars of that representation. And while both organizations have their respective MPs, ministers and other shares of the Lebanese pie, when the discussion centers on “the lapping environment,” we seem to overlook that inherent division and focus instead on something beyond. In reality, however, Hezbollah’s popularity is not a partisan issue! After all, whether we like it or not, that vague reference to Hezbollah also encompasses its organizational affiliates and clientele-oriented architecture, both of which enjoy bits and pieces of Hezbollah’s share of the Lebanese pie. Thus, when we describe Hezbollah’s “lapping environment,” the larger Lebanese Shia community is automatically inferred. Clearly, the same cannot be said for the Amal Movement. Moreover, the question bin Jeddo asked of Nasrallah simply could not be answered by Nabih Berri (the Amal head). Despite the fact that Berri sees himself as heir to Sayyed Moussa Sadr (to whom the Lebanese Shia community owes its ascendancy on Lebanon’s political horizon), Sadr’s populist legacy and eventual “Movement of the Deprived” (the

forerunner of the Amal Movement) seem to have shifted toward Hezbollah. A nostalgic, former senior Amal personality describes that transformation in militaristic terms: “Amal’s constituency is ‘occupied’ to a large extent by Hezbollah.” Unfortunately, although this metaphor is tempting because it suggests that simply undoing that “occupation” would force a return to the status quo ante, it fails to account for today’s sectarian related identity polarization (in Lebanon and throughout the region). Under this still emerging model, within-group partisan competition is no longer based on programmatic rivalry but on whom can best represent, protect and advocate the interests of a given sect in the face of other sects. Clearly, the matter of *perception* changes the situation little if at all.

In view of the foregoing, the logical conclusion is that no one in Lebanon—at least in the near term—can emerge as a viable competitor to Hezbollah. Consequently, questioning Hezbollah’s popularity among Lebanese Shia revolves less around the organization gaining or losing popularity vis-à-vis other competitors than it does to *political cohesion* within the community—or at least the image of unity and self-confidence to which the mainstream portion of that community subscribes. Further, an appreciation of this conceptual framework is necessary before one can genuinely understand the developments that began to unfold on January 18, 2015. That Sunday, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) helicopters attacked a joint Hezbollah-Iranian Revolutionary Guard convoy in Quneitira killing those in the two vehicles targeted, including an Iranian general and the son of Imam Mughniyyeh. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah finally appeared

January 30—on a mega screen—to comment on Hezbollah's retaliatory attack conducted two days before in the contested Shebaa farms region.³

Much has already been, and will continue to be said about Nasrallah's speech, particularly his announcement that "the Quneitira attack also destroyed the rules of engagement that had previously governed military confrontations between Hezbollah and Israel in south Lebanon."⁴ Assuming *an-Nahar* is to be believed, "members of the Lebanese government received calls from U.S. and French diplomats who were unnerved by Nasrallah's speech, in which he warned that Hezbollah was prepared to respond to any Israeli attack...at any time and in any place."⁵ Unfortunately, the focus being given to that particular aspect of Nasrallah's speech enables all involved to either ignore or at least minimize the background and context of his rhetoric. It also allows them to balance the speech's appeasement with the threats it conveys. Of particular relevance is the beginning of Nasrallah's monologue, in which he mentioned that the joint patrol attacked was not in Quneitira to take any action against Israel, or his conclusion, in which he insisted, "we don't want war with Israel but do not fear it."

The January 18 attack became important not only because of where it occurred (Quneitira, Syria), but also because an Iranian general was killed in the process. By extension, Sayyed Nasrallah's warning about "changing the rules of engagement" became

important because of the vociferous Iranian statements that followed—the bulk of which were anything but subtle. In a brief review of the events that occurred subsequent to the attack, the increasingly famous Qassem Suleimani visited Beirut several days before Nasrallah's speech to pay tribute to (the late) elder and younger Mughniyehs. Stated otherwise, Suleimani was likely in Beirut to supervise the retaliation operation. Similarly, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, attended the rally held while Nasrallah gave his speech! Although these gestures may add credibility to Nasrallah's threats, they also imply that making good on them will not be left to Hezbollah, but to its patrons. Moreover, although the implication may provide some relief to those who do not want to see other rogue, non-state groups contribute to the region's prevailing instability, it is indeed more bad news for other Lebanese political actors. After all, the wheels set in motion by the January 18 attack simply reinforced the fact that they matter very little to Hezbollah generally or individually.⁶

However challenging it may be to admit, Hezbollah's agenda as a subset of Iran's grand regional strategy is easier to read than its domestic counterpart. In reality, Hezbollah's agenda for Lebanon is focused completely on maintaining the image that "its" Shia community is cohesive and free of dissent and ensuring that the mainstream portion of that community remains

³ Levs, Josh. "2 Israeli soldiers, peacekeeper killed in Israel-Hezbollah fighting." CNN. January 28, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/28/world/mideast-golan/>.

⁴ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Jan-31/285933-nasrallah-rules-of-engagement-shattered.ashx>

⁵ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Jan-31/285951-western-diplomats-alarmed-by-nasrallah-remarks-report.ashx>

⁶ For more about the dialogue between Hezbollah and the Future Movement, see our previous alert "Lebanon's Attrition: Possibly Worse than War?" at <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/609>.

All Roads Lead to Jerusalem...



Sayyed Nasrallah addressing the public during a mega screen appearance. The right side of the screen offers images of the six Lebanese and one Iranian *Shouhada* that resulted from the January 18 IDF attack. The *Shouhada* also appear to Nasrallah's left along with a caption that reads, "On the Way to Jerusalem."

In a speech given January 30—two days after Hezbollah retaliated against the IDF in the contested Shebaa farms region for the attack in Quneitira, Syria, which targeted a joint Hezbollah-Revolutionary Guards patrol, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah made it clear that those killed were not involved in a mission against Israel. Yet, Hezbollah celebrated its fallen members by declaring them "Martyrs on the Way to Jerusalem." Clearly, this renewed attempt to misappropriate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was not made randomly. After all, it represents a handy way to sow confusion about the real nature of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria—and whom its involvement actually supports. Understandably, Nasrallah's reference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the same story Hezbollah used during its popularity surge in the pre-Spring Arab World. In fact, several commentators mused that some 40 years ago, Yasser Arafat's right-hand man in the PLO, Abou Iyad, justified the PLO's involvement in the Lebanese civil war by observing, "the way to Jerusalem goes through Jounieh." Interestingly, Jounieh, a coastal city, is located in the heart of Lebanese Christian lands a mere 20 kilometers north of Beirut....

convinced that everything Hezbollah does or fails to do is in the best interests of that community. Yet things become much more complex when we add that keeping the Lebanese Shia convinced of Hezbollah's omniscient rectitude is the essential ingredient that enables it to help achieve Iran's overarching regional agenda. It is clear to anyone who observes *post hoc ergo propter hoc* the entire Lebanese Shia scene (rather than its Hezbollah distillate), that the IDF attack which killed Jihad Imad Mughniyeh (among others) placed

significant pressure on Hezbollah vis-à-vis its *biaa hadina*.

Compared to the broader *Joumhour*, Hezbollah has drawn the bulk of the manpower it needs to sustain its adventures in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere from the *biaa hadina*—the same "community" that continues to receive Lebanese corpses from those destinations. Aside from the "blood debts" that *biaa* is already struggling to pay, it is now being asked to make good on others, such as the outstanding bill

represented by the Sunni Gulf states. During the al-Mayadeen interview, for instance, Nasrallah harshly criticized the Bahraini regime and likened its rulers to "Zionists." Not only did those remarks prompt the Arab League to condemn Hezbollah's "repetitive interference in the internal affairs of Bahrain," but it also led Bahrain to consider expelling a certain number of *Lebanese Shia*. In sum, aside from the bloody price being demanded of the Lebanese Shia to underwrite Hezbollah's adventures, the community—the *biaa*—is also expected to afford less brutal yet nonetheless painful costs.

Hezbollah has yet to avenge the February 12, 2008 attack in Syria that killed Imad Mughniyeh.⁷ Ignoring the death of his son, without so much as a vague promise of retribution "at the right moment and place," would have been unbearable for a *biaa* which now feels that it is being attacked from all sides. Of course, this does not infer that the *biaa* is seeking all-out war on a scale similar to (or greater than) that of the July 2006 War. Ultimately, it considers Hezbollah a military apparatus and guarantor of its interests, and the *biaa* is seeking proof that Hezbollah, the community's "guardian angel," can still live up to the image it created for itself. In other words, the January 18 attack near Quneitira compelled Hezbollah to address (among other things) the crisis of confidence its *biaa* is experiencing.

We cannot subscribe fully to anything that has been discussed

and/or published recently about Hezbollah's internal difficulties. We understand, however, that these include security breaches (which may help explain Israel's success in the Quneitira attack), financial problems (characterized by some as approaching "bankruptcy"), questions about its Syrian adventure (which is costing the *biaa* an ever-increasing share of its youth) and the prevailing opinion among Lebanese (including Shia) that the country is heading in the "wrong direction."^{8,9} But no matter how we choose to minimize these issues, they impose an undeniable sense of reality. Regardless of Hezbollah's travails, it was left to Nasrallah to address this crisis of confidence. Further, believing that the repercussions of the January 18 attack were strictly political-military and supra-national in nature is tantamount to ideological color blindness, a "condition" that can be treated by replacing intellectual laziness with timely facts about Lebanon's Shia community, especially those who reside in south Lebanon.¹⁰

It is unnecessary to cite a litany of references and footnotes which confirm that since implementation of UNSC resolution 1701 following the July 2006 War, south Lebanon has been experiencing degrees of peace (despite some scattered incidents) and prosperity that would shock Lebanese living elsewhere in the country. While Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has placed the Bekaa and Dahiye on the frontlines of the confrontation, today, the

⁷ Goldman, Adam and Ellen Nakashima. "CIA and Mossad killed senior Hezbollah figure in car bombing." The Washington Post. January 30, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-and-mossad-killed-senior-hezbollah-figure-in-car-bombing/2015/01/30/ebb88682-968a-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a_story.html.

⁸ George, Susannah. "This Is Not Your Father's Hezbollah." Foreign Policy. January 15, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/15/this-is-not-your-fathers-hezbollah/>.

⁹ Neumann, Jeff. "Is Hezbollah Going Broke?" Newsweek. January 15, 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/01/23/hezbollah-going-broke-299139.html>.

¹⁰ Smith, Lee. "Hard Times for Hezbollah." The Weekly Standard. Vol. 20, No. 20. February 2, 2015. http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/hard-times-hezbollah_824283.html.

only portion of the country that has escaped the spreading conflict is south Lebanon. Thus, it appears south Lebanon is the sole remaining safe haven for Lebanese Shia.¹¹ Based on the foregoing, it would be shortsighted to ignore the fatigue being experienced by Lebanon's Shia community while assessing Hezbollah's homeopathic response to the Quneitira attack. After all, that community would become the first victims of Hezbollah's "teaser" response in the disputed Shebaa farms region—which certainly has the potential to be the catalyst for a broader conflict.¹²

Several days after the Quneitira/Shebaa episode, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman prophesied somewhat biblically that, "A fourth operation in the Gaza Strip is inevitable, just as a third Lebanon war is inevitable."¹³ While Lieberman's forecast may ultimately prove correct (regardless of the magnitude involved or which "camp" makes the first move), we can be sure that Hezbollah will not make the decision to "light the match" unilaterally. Hezbollah's role in the Syrian conflict has certainly proved the organization's instrumental role in Iran's plans for regional expansion, but it also demonstrated quite clearly that Hezbollah's moves are subject to the desires of the Iranian regime. In the meantime, of course, Hezbollah cannot neglect its domestic homework: it must maintain the "divine" image it inculcated within mainstream Lebanese Shia, and it is already doing just that. The proof can be made by the Poll and by the Rocket—yet neither form seems irrefutable. On February 1,

Shouhada of the Sitt...



An alibi used frequently by Hezbollah to justify its involvement in the Syrian conflict is its need to defend Shia holy shrines, especially Sitt Zaynab. But the attack that targeted a busload of Lebanese Shia pilgrims visiting those shrines seems to have spoiled the so-called "mini-Divine Victory" achieved recently in the contested Shebaa farms region. Hezbollah's exceptionally discreet handling of this latest "bus" incident indeed says it all....

following Nasrallah's speech and Hezbollah's retaliatory attack in the contested Shebaa farms region, a bus filled with Lebanese Shia visiting Shia shrines in Damascus exploded. Half a dozen people were killed and triple that number were injured. Understandably, the attack was not especially unique compared to the numerous terrorist attacks that take place every day, so it did not enjoy wide media coverage and was "filed" routinely in the category of Syria-related daily security incidents. Nevertheless, the lack of media attention certainly does not diminish the impact of that attack on the Lebanese Shia community, which was still struggling to recover from the Quneitira episode. Popular sentiment regarding this spate of events usually invokes a well-known colloquial proverb: "good news which proves to be wrong is worse than bad news...."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Levs, Josh. "2 Israeli soldiers, peacekeeper killed in Israel-Hezbollah fighting." CNN. January 28, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/28/world/mideast-golan/>.

¹³ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4621448,00.html>