

Shouhadaa Wanted! When Fighting Terror Produces ever more Radicals and Sectarianism...

A running joke is that only the Quds Brigades accountant is sure of how many Lebanese Shia affiliated within Hezbollah's military and paramilitary groups have been injured or killed, or have gone missing in Syria. Although that euphemism fails to evoke any laughter, it addresses capably some prominent background about Hezbollah's armed support of the Assad regime. While Hezbollah's so-called "resistance" is but one of many regional militias funded, administered and utilized by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hezbollah is accountable only to its Iranian patrons for its involvement in Syria (and elsewhere).

In a more literal sense, this observation again raises a question about the political impact Hezbollah's combat losses are having on the community from which it draws its "human resources"—and then dumps them onto the battlefields of Syria (which look more like an abyss than navigable terrain). Stated otherwise, how much does Hezbollah's surging Syrian death toll really matter? And, how willing is Lebanon's Shia community to continue paying such a bloody price, especially since it seems unlikely that the Syrian



Hezbollah's full-fledged participation in the seemingly endless conflict in Syria has forced it to institute unprecedented recruitment efforts. The poster above, which *ShiaWatch* captured July 18, 2014 in Bourj al-Barajneh, reads "Recruitment campaign for individuals to help defend the holy family of the Prophet." At left, "Please contact the recruitment office or call [two phone numbers are given]."

conflict will end anytime soon? This multifaceted question returned to the forefront following the resurgence of violence along the Lebanese/Syrian border.¹

Notably, on July 14, Hezbollah began announcing the deaths of some 20 fighters, a number that officially included at least one top-level field commander. However, that figures was questioned by other sources, which estimated Hezbollah's losses

¹ Known in Syria as al-Qalamoun and in Lebanon as the Anti-Lebanon Mountains.

during its most recent Qalamoun engagements to be in the range of 40 to 80.²

Compared to other developments in the region, such as the steady and brutal progress of ISIS in Iraq (which imperils the very existence of that country), the resumption of violence between Hamas and Israel, and international negotiations that focus on Iran's nuclear capability, the circumstances, consequences and impacts of Hezbollah involvement in Syria may seem insignificant. On one hand, if that involvement is evaluated

in terms of material magnitude (such as the number of Hezbollah fighters serving in Syria, the organization's overall losses, etc.), the impact may not be considered tremendous. On the other hand, if the organization's involvement is viewed from a political perspective (considerations that include, for example, U.S. Secretary of State Kerry placing Hezbollah on equal footing with Iran and Russia, and Bashar al-Assad thanking Hezbollah while being sworn in for his third term as Syria's president), then the situation takes on different dimensions.^{3,4}



Social media always seems to offer implausible surprises. At left, a *shaheed* who has been placed in his grave. In this case, the depth of the grave suggests that it has a "double floor" to accommodate someone else from his close family. Double and even triple-floored graves are certainly acceptable; however, recent information indicates that such practices are becoming more widespread as close family members of *Shouhadaa* are trying more often to reserve space for themselves in the grave of their beloved relative. At right, the scooter of a *shaheed* is pictured with words written just above,



supposedly by his mother. "Hammoudi [casual for Mohammad], do you remember how many accidents you had while riding this scooter? Do you recall how you organized your belongings inside it? Do you remember how you decorated it? Today, your sister and I adorned it with white flowers." Of note, both photographs were copied from a pro-Hezbollah Facebook page.

² According to a *Now Lebanon* report published July 15, 2014, "during the last two days [Hezbollah suffered] 41 killed." The *Janoubia* website noted in a report published July 17, 2014 that Hezbollah had lost 80. Respectively: <http://goo.gl/FP0SeK> and <http://janoubia.com/197676>

³ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/227100.htm>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/16/syrian-president-bashar-al-assad-sworn-in-third-term>

For instance, thought must be given to the consequences of Hezbollah shifting its narrative to justify its involvement in Syria. To be precise, it employs the notion of fighting *takfiri* terrorism. That approach not only fits well within the “pattern” tolerated globally, but it also gives Hezbollah sufficient justification to enhance coordination with several Lebanese state institutions (particularly the security and military organizations viewed typically by the international community as the guarantors of Lebanon’s so-called stability). In other words, the essence of Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria, to include the mechanisms it uses to manage that involvement, is not an issue related exclusively to Hezbollah or Lebanon’s Shia community. Rather, it simultaneously affects and concerns Lebanon’s present and future prospects.

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Since Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria has become a matter of public record, several attempts—some driven by research and others by propaganda—were made to track the losses associated with that commitment.⁵ Notably, *ShiaWatch* also participated in that effort. In a piece titled “Ordinary Cannibalism” published near the end of May 2013, it shared what it saw as the most accurate casualty figures available to date: a list of 115 young Lebanese Shia—*Shouhadaa*, the plural of *Shaheed*—that had been killed in

Syria. Since then, *ShiaWatch* has continued to assess the mounting casualties based on open source information and firsthand testimonies. Today, we can state with confidence that approximately 750-800 of the Lebanese Shia who were engaged to participate in Hezbollah’s “adventures” in Syria (regardless of the capacity in which they served), have been killed, a number that also has been confirmed through community-based research.⁶

According to a Hayya Bina poll conducted in March 2014 by a leading Lebanese analytical firm, more than 70% of the 600 Dahiyeh residents queried stated that they knew someone (family member, neighbor or village resident) who had been killed in Syria.⁷

While Hezbollah officials have stated repeatedly that the organization never hides its “martyrs” but is instead proud of them (true, but only to a point), we cannot say convincingly that Hezbollah has set the bar for transparency relative to disclosing its losses. Rather, mere “opacity” is evident in the language it uses to describe the fallen by consistently omitting any reference to Syria.

In general, Hezbollah affiliates who have given their lives in Syria are categorized as either “martyrs of Jihadi Duty” or “martyrs of Holy Defense.”⁸ The first category, *Shouhadaa al-wajib al-jihady*, includes those killed under

⁵ Among the most interesting is an infographic designed by Hisham Ashkar and published on his blog: <http://mostlyoff.wordpress.com/2014/03/31/funerals-of-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/>

⁶ While the notion may seem appealing that everyone associated with Hezbollah in Syria is carrying a weapon to prosecute the fight against the *takfiri*, the organization’s involvement there is necessarily comprised of supporting elements that may far outnumber those actually doing the fighting. For instance, the prosecution of any land combat demands a heavy presence (on and/or near the battlefield) of supply/logistics specialists, vehicle operators, medical technicians (first responders), armorers, cooks, etc. Accordingly, Hezbollah has numerous “job openings” it must fill in order to remain successfully engaged in Syria.

⁷ Some of the findings from that poll will be addressed in an upcoming *ShiaWatch* Alert.

⁸ The category “Martyr of Jihadi Duty” is not used specifically to acknowledge decedents from the conflict in Syria. Before Hezbollah became involved in that conflict, it used the expression to recognize members of the organization that had been killed in training or under other circumstances.

circumstances Hezbollah prefers not to disclose, such as combat actions in Syria. The second category, *Shouhadaa ad-Difaa al-Muqaddas*, recognizes those who fell in combat near Shia shrines, specifically Sitt Zaynab.⁹

Hezbollah's special Syria *Shaheed* "department" is responsible for ensuring the *Shaheed*'s family is notified, that the *Shaheed* is returned to the land that he reaches his final resting place—and beyond!¹⁰ The makeup of each funeral ceremony is very well defined due to its frequent use. Briefly, these functions are saturated with a propagandized version of Shiism that promotes a uniquely superstitious legacy and reflects "political Mahdism." Moreover, each presents Hezbollah with a unique opportunity to keep the community mobilized and motivated to continue along this path.¹¹ When these ceremonies have a particularly religious orientation and are intended to bolster local esprit de corps, the political-pedagogical explanation of the ongoing fight in Syria comes later, usually during the Seventh Day tribute ceremony.¹²

Unsurprisingly, the eulogies given at these occasions over time have varied tremendously according to Hezbollah's shifting narrative for its involvement in Syria. Those changes reflect the organization's overall efforts, which include defending Lebanese Shia who live along the border with Syria, defending the Shia shrine of Sitt Zaynab (and other sacred sites), defending "the rear areas of the resistance" and "fighting

takfiri terrorism." As mentioned above, this latter explanation seems the most feasible because of its near-universal appeal. After all, that explanation not only helps mitigate fear among the Lebanese Shia, but it also ameliorates the concerns of Lebanon's substantial Christian and Sunni sectors. Even more importantly, the slogan is tacitly accepted by the international community.

Clearly, Hezbollah must carefully construct and deliver information about its involvement in Syria that will please its various "target groups" and



Two typical scenes of a *shaheed*'s burial procession. Above, the al-Mahdi scouts' musical troupe precedes the crowd. The group is followed by a cavalcade of posters of (in order) the *Shaheed*, Khomeini, Khamenai, martyred Hezbollah leaders and Nasrallah. Finally, flag bearers precede the coffin, which is showered with flower petals and rice en route to the cemetery.

⁹ See "Sentinels of the Sitt" at ShiaWatch.com <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/346>

¹⁰ Clearly, Hezbollah has developed particular competence in this area. In fact, the *Shaheed* Association is often touted as one of the organization's social welfare success stories.

¹¹ A comprehensive article, "The Return of Political Mahdism" by French scholar Jean-Pierre Filiu is available online at <http://www.hudson.org/research/9891-the-return-of-political-mahdism->

¹² Such observances usually include ritual recitations of Quranic verses, the narration of a particularly relevant episode of the Passion of Hussein (*ta'ziya*) and a political address given by a senior Hezbollah political or clerical official.

facilitate its own political agenda. When delivered in the form of literature, it must keep the Shia community sufficiently motivated to ensure that it continues to accept further sacrifices while it also seeks to ensure that this sectarian-oriented mobilization neither dissipates nor fails to “impress” the general Sunni population in Lebanon, regardless of whether they are Lebanese or refugees from Syria or Palestine. At the same time, such literature must highlight the “just” nature of Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian war vis-à-vis the international community—while being mindful that its so-called “military wing” was classified a “terrorist organization” by several different nations.

In general, however, Hezbollah is less concerned about the impact of security risks on Lebanon’s “stability” since these can and do occur despite political entente between local and regional actors on the Lebanese scene. By extension, the likelihood that such risks will be exacerbated by spoiler groups is increasing in proportion to the probability that such groups are increasing their presence in Lebanon.

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While Parliament Speaker/Amal Movement head Nabih Berri (and his organization) has remained discrete about expressing any position on Hezbollah’s actions in Syria (as if that involvement was a private matter between Berri and Hezbollah that had no impact on the present and future of Lebanon’s Shia community), the arguments against Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria and its purported “active defense” of the Lebanese

The Jeep Man

Criticism of Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria is not confined to theological or intellectual arguments. In fact, it cuts much deeper through black humor that questions the moral integrity of those in charge of following up with the families of Shouhadaa. A few weeks ago, a comedic audio file began circulating on social media sites and smart phones. It centered on an attempt by Abou Jeep (the man with the Jeep) to flirt with the widow of a Shaheed:

And the “brother” dies! You know how...he goes to Syria and gets killed after just two years of marriage. Listen to what happens when Abou Jeep arrives:

- Peace upon you. How are you? Congratulations on your late husband’s martyrdom. His peace and blessings be upon the Prophet and his family. Sister, if you need anything, we are at your service—and not only in the capacity of the as-Shaheed Association. The martyr was dear to us, and he often asked that we take care of you.

That’s was the first day.

Here’s what happened the next day:

- Peace upon you. How are you? Oh, God! Here is my mobile number in case you need anything. Do you have a landline? No? I’ll have one installed for you.

He leaves. But on the third day, Abou Jeep sends her a “what’s up” message:

- Good morning on this morning of al-Mahdi—may God hasten his holy reappearance.

Next, they begin to chat...

And where is our martyr?

Safely beneath the ground....

Do you see where this is headed?

Go on and follow them....

Peace upon you.

<http://vocaroo.com/i/s1sHMLVKTzm8>

Shia community come mainly from individuals and groups that opposed Hezbollah before it began its Syrian adventure. That assemblage includes senior clerics, such as former Hezbollah secretary general Sheikh Subhi Tufayli, the former Grand Mufti of South Lebanon Sayyed Ali al-Ameen and a collection of overtly secular and progressive groups and individuals.¹³

The arguments being advanced by this body span religiously oriented considerations (where the basis of

¹³ Tufayli said recently, “Due to the manipulation of some Iranians, Hezbollah has become a sectarian *takfiri* party similar to other *takfiri* [organizations] and has [thus] become a killing machine [that targets] the Islamic community and a defender of the bastions of dictatorship and corruption.” Interview with *al-Yaum* (Saudi Arabian) of July 18, 2014. Available at: <http://www.alyaum.com/article/4002437>

the Shia political/theological creed is that it must stand against injustice and unjust rulers) and those with a more political orientation (such as Hezbollah's Iranian-ordered involvement in Syria and support for the Assad regime being responsible for having invited terrorism to Lebanon).

Clearly, Hezbollah's overriding response that it is fighting terrorism in Syria expressly to *prevent* it from spilling over into Lebanon is fallacious at best. Yet another argument considers Hezbollah's involvement in Syria from a strategic perspective, such that the organization's actions are not in the best interests of Lebanon's compact Shia community since its fate should not be tied to that of Iran. To be specific, standing with Iran stokes antagonism among the entire Sunni Arab world against Lebanon's Shia community.

Moreover, as long as the Syrian conflict persists and Hezbollah continues to hold the Lebanese Shia community hostage by promoting its supranational agenda over that of the state, Lebanese Shia will have no choice but to pay sharply increasing prices relative to their community's relationship with Lebanon's other communities—and with the Sunni Arab world.

While these arguments are certainly accurate and relevant (and are shared typically behind closed doors), they do not appear to be exceedingly persuasive to mainstream Lebanese. After all, Hezbollah's public accepts the organization's propaganda at face value, particularly since Hezbollah, directly or indirectly, provides its public, directly or indirectly, with the jobs they need to sustain their welfare.



Opportunities abound for a *Shaheed* to be created. The photograph above is of Lebanese (/Swedish?) Sunni militant Monzer al-Hassan. Apparently, he detonated himself the night of July 19/20 as special forces stormed an apartment complex in Lebanon's northern Tripoli area to place him under arrest. Among other deeds, al-Hassan was accused of having provided explosives and explosive belts to other terrorists.

Accordingly, despite the inhuman and highly propagandized exploits of ISIS (including public crucifixions, executions and stoning) that have transfixed the world, the overwhelming response among Hezbollah's public (as well as the general Lebanese public) is that they will pay allegiance "a hundred times to Hezbollah and not once to ISIS." In fact, ISIS' spectacular rise is conveniently providing Hezbollah with the perfect circumstances vis-à-vis the Shia community and (particularly of late) huge swaths of the Christian and even the Sunni communities.

Of course, this is all happening under the genial eyes of the international community, which considers Lebanon

through the costs associated with sheltering hundreds of thousands of refugees and what the country represents in terms of the risk associated with the sharply increasing number of refugees, cross-national Sunni extremism and increasing Sunni/Shia polarization.

At no time in the recent past has the Lebanese Shia community been held so tightly in the grip of the dialectic of *fear and protection* that Hezbollah is imposing today. While the “Zionist threat” once gave Hezbollah license to justify keeping its weapons and partnering with the Lebanese state, it also enabled the organization to maintain a condition of militarization/mobilization within the Shia community. However, the “Zionist threat” has since been displaced by the “*Takfiri* terrorist threat.” While the preceding threat helped Hezbollah

centralize power and strength, the new one appears to be having an opposite effect.

While it seems logical to accept Hezbollah's demonization of the *takfiri*, it is also advisable to bear in mind that in Lebanon, such disparagement is creating a hotbed for all types of Sunni extremism.

Moreover, while the tendency to depend on joint Hezbollah-Lebanese state efforts (such as those being provided by the Lebanese Armed Forces to protect the country from Sunni Islamist terrorism may seem logical, it is also cynical.¹⁴ After all, the side effect of that option will only encourage Lebanese Sunni and Shia alike to generate more “radicals” to support “good” or “bad” causes—which will only produce evermore *Shouhadaa*....

¹⁴ See, for instance, the article by Ibrahim Bayram, a journalist close to Hezbollah, published July 16, 2014 in *an-Nahar*. In that piece, clear mention is made of the recent battlefield coordination between Hezbollah and the LAF: <http://goo.gl/9rzQqu>