



Syria and the Islamist Movements in Lebanon

Introduction

The growth of Islamist movements in Lebanon began in the 1970s along with the rise of the Palestinian organizations on Lebanese soil. It reached its zenith in the 1980s at the height of the Syrian influence over the Lebanese State, spreading its tentacles throughout the country and within its society, mutating with time into security islands – or rather terrorist havens – outside the reach and control of Lebanese authorities. Clearly these developments were counter to Lebanese traditions and foreign to the generations-old customs of shared living, power-sharing, religious moderation and tolerance among Lebanon's various communities.

In this context, it is critical to shed light on the duplicitous role played by Syria's Hafez Assad in fostering these developments, for soon after seizing Lebanon and tightening his grip on the country he embarked on a program of strengthening Islamist movements and fundamentalist organizations in Lebanese territories under his control, while simultaneously denying these groups any freedom of action inside Syria and going so far as repressing them violently. There are three motives behind this strategy: First, he wanted to fight Israel via Lebanon using these organizations, and he completely succeeded in this since he forced Israel to withdraw first from Beirut, then from the south in humiliating circumstances. Lebanon alone bore the brunt of this destructive war, while Syria went on to enjoy stability and security. Second, he portrayed Lebanon as the weak and handicapped country that could not muzzle these organizations, and therefore created the pretext for maintaining Syrian forces in Lebanon to help the Lebanese government exert its control and prevent a resumption of the so-called "civil war". This deception was adopted as the truth by Western countries concerned with the Lebanese dossier, as well as by the international community at large. Lastly, the third motive was to polish the image of the Syrian regime and present it as moderate and against religious fundamentalism and sectarian bigotry.

As a result, Syria – and Iran behind it – succeeded in converting Lebanon into a terrorist base harboring every possible Islamist movement and its derivatives, while eradicating it inside its own society as it did with the Syrian city of Hama which it destroyed and leveled, displaced its inhabitants, and killed tens of thousands of its people!!! At the same time, it reinforced its blockade of the Palestinian camps inside Syria forbidding their residents from carrying weapons or undertaking any political, intelligence, or military activity. Indeed, Palestinians were strictly forbidden from leaving their camps without prior permission from the security apparatus of the Syrian Baath regime.

In contrast, the Syrian regime fully supported the Palestinians inside Lebanon and allowed them to bear arms, train, and organize their cadres and cells, while preventing the Lebanese Army from entering the camps even in search for common criminals. The camps thus became a haven for criminals, bandits, and murderers of all nationalities and ideologies, and a shelter for all outlaws and fugitives such as Abu-Mahjan, Muneer Miqdah, the assassins of the four judges in Sidon, and others from the Takfeer-wal-Hijra and Isbat Al-Ansar groups who fought the Lebanese Army in Dennyiyeh and then disappeared in the catacombs and labyrinths of the camp of Ain El-Helwe.

There are reports that members of Al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan and went to the Palestinian camps in Lebanon under the protection of the Syrians, thus becoming out of reach of anyone pursuing them. US Senator Bob Graham made this information public after his visit to Lebanon this past summer. He went on to demand that the priorities of his government should be to fight the terrorist organizations operating in Lebanon in compliance with its stated campaign to fight terrorism and its initiative to strike Iraq. He further certified that these organizations have bases and training camps inside the Palestinian camps and in the Bekaa Valley, as well as in the South where the Hezbollah organization has total control over the border zone and threatens to start a regional war.

And in mentioning the training camps, the Syrian regime has placed these camps along the border with Lebanon in order to train and host the various terrorist organizations that it sponsors, including for example the case of the Kurdish organization that irked the Turkish government to the point of almost

igniting a Turkish-Syrian war. It was Hafez Assad's prompt recognition of the threat posed against him that led him to close the organization's camp and evict its members and leader Abdullah Ocalan who was soon thereafter captured by Turkish authorities.

The Syrian regime was careful to place these training camps in areas within Lebanese territory that are contiguous with Syria's borders. This gave Syria the advantage of deniability since it could attribute the responsibility for the camps to Lebanon. Some of those places include: Ham, Maarabun, Jenta, and Tufayl, all of which are located on the slopes of the Anti-Lebanon mountain chain in the Northern Bekaa, and the two towns of Yanta and Deir Al-Ashayer located in the Western Bekaa on the same mountain chain.

Syria exploited Lebanon in every possible aspect, from the economic and political to the military and security, and all the way to the area of terrorism. Syria literally converted Lebanon into a "dump for humanity's litter" and a haven for criminals and marginals who came from every corner of the earth, which prompted the American administration into placing Syria on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. However, this did not stop Syria from continuing on its terror policies but it became more cautious, hiding behind the distinction between terrorism and resistance in order to justify terrorism and grant it some legitimacy. Other Arab regimes followed suit in adopting this banner in order to justify their support for the Palestinian suicide attacks and legitimize Hezbollah's operations against Israel.

The Syrian regime was equally careful to fully support Hezbollah since the 1980s in the military, logistics, security, political, and ideological areas, which enabled the development and growth of this organization to the point where it became a state within the state and a future danger to the state's existence. The shelling of the Israeli colonies by Hezbollah is reported to be under the direct orders of President Assad, including the number of rockets and the timing of the attacks.

We all remember the wave of kidnapping of foreigners in Beirut in the mid 1980s at the hands of Syrian-backed terrorist organizations, and how the kidnappings would take place in Beirut but the releases would happen in Syria. Beirut was made to appear to the world as the capital of terrorism, while Damascus became the capital for the fight against terrorism. The irony is that this deception was accepted by many who praised the Syrian president and thanked him for his "laudable efforts" in releasing the hostages, and who ignored, by accident or by design, that it was Syria that ordered the kidnappings in the first place and mandated that the releases take place in Damascus. Syria achieved a double objective with this policy: First, it sought revenge against the West for its support of Israel and at the same time made the West more sympathetic to the Arab side by terrorizing it, and in this it succeeded tremendously. Second, it drove the long-standing Western presence out of Lebanon, which became isolated and an even easier prey away from the eyes of the observers. It also succeeded in this objective whereby Western capitals abandoned Lebanon one after the other to appease Syria and satisfy their economic interests with the Arabs in general.

For all that preceded, we said and continue to say that the stability of this region of the world begins with the stability of Lebanon that has become its center of gravity. Any disturbance in Lebanon has reverberations in its surroundings, and we certainly believe that the stability of Lebanon begins with its liberation from under the Syrian hegemony, and the necessary cleanup of Lebanese soil from the pits and cancers of terror planted in Lebanon by the Syrian regime over the many years of its occupation.

The Islamist Movements in Lebanon: A synopsis.

At a forum recently organized by one of the think-tanks in Beirut and attended by a number of researchers and experts, the discussions revolved around the subject, "Islamist Movements in Lebanon – Reality and Challenges", with a focus on the Amal Movement, Hezbollah, the Jamaa Islamiyya, the Harakat Al-Tawhid, and the Ahabash. This was indeed the first instance that Islamist movements were scrutinized in such a public and bold fashion.

Beyond the primary interest of this forum, it revealed in its practical implications a difference in the definition and reading of the phenomenon of Islamist movements. Some of the participants even acknowledged a difference among the movements themselves, implying that one ought not to cast a monolithic blanket over these groups. There are those movements of the "Salafiyya" trend that venerate the past and only mildly touch on the present, and those that are open to modern times and interact with them from a standpoint of interpretation. On the other hand, there were participants who minimized those differences, insisting that Islamist movements, no matter how numerous or diverse they may be, rally behind a unique platform, namely that "Islam is the solution". These groups are united in their desire to apply Sharia Law. Other voices clamored to maintain intact the halo of Jihad and Martyrdom that hovers above these groups and, as a result, to keep them above criticism and questioning, and "whoever criticized or questioned was to be silenced."

The participants went on to discuss the events of September 11, and there were those who insisted on calling things for what they are, saying that the confrontation with the United States was in fact a

confrontation with universal principles and that the Islamist movements deep down fully support the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, even as they expressed their feelings with equivocation and concealment. Others even went so far as to state that the conflict is now in the open between Washington and the Islamists, now that language and practice were aligned, and ideology and action were in synchrony. Especially with the intellectual elite in the United States now being very close to the decision-making center at the White House, and the government in America now firmly in the hands of the alliance between the conservative movement and the extreme right, an alliance that calls for combating Islamism from a standpoint of a cultural and ideological confrontation, and not simply from a narrow political perspective focused on the protection of economic interests.

As to the position of the Islamists towards the left and communism, the conferees criticized the leftist reading of the Islamist phenomenon because it emanates from a vengeful mindset triggered by the feeling of failure and frustration, in addition to the fact that the left continues to view Islamist movements as a transient blip in the course of history.

The conference participants then moved to discuss the Harakat Al-Tawhid Al-Islami (Movement of Islamist Unification), the circumstances of its creation in Tripoli in 1982, and the people behind it. The latter are: Sheik Said Shaaban, Khalil Akkaoui (a.k.a. Abu-Arabi), Dr. Ismat Murad, Sheik Kanaan Naji, and Sheik Hashem Minqara. They enumerated the phases through which the movement went evolved until the death of Sheik Said Shaaban. They examined its organizational structure, its internal affairs, its regional spread, its financial resources, and the institutions it spawned and managed, as well as its positions on a number of issues and problems.

This was followed by a discussion of the Ahbash (The Society for Islamist Charity Projects), its establishment in 1983, its managerial structure, its objectives, and the prominent figures in it, its methods of recruitment and dissemination, its schools in Lebanon and abroad, and the experience of the Ahbash in the parliamentary forum, and finally its ideology, thought, and writings. This society will be addressed later in more detail.

On the subject of the Amal Movement, some saw that the specifics of the founding of this movement made it distinct from other forces and parties, and these specific differences had to do with sectarian, popular, and temporal considerations. The main driving force behind the creation of Amal was the regional and sectarian distinctions and the problem of the South. The conferees discussed the role of Imam Moussa Sadr in founding the movement in the late 1960s, and the transition from the Shiite Council to the "Movement of the Dispossessed". Substantial time and attention were devoted to the role of the movement in the Lebanese War, and the transformations that the organization went through after the disappearance of the Imam Sadr in 1978, as well as on its alliances which focused on coordinating with Syria and the support of the Islamist Revolution in Iran. The organizational structure and complex leadership were also addressed, followed by the prominence period starting with the application of the Taif Agreement in the early 1990s, and the historic change from a position of opposition to State policy in dispossession and sectarianism to one of a partner in the ruling regime and the political establishment, and the central position occupied by its leader Mr. Nabih Berri against a softening in the structure of the movement.

Others at the conference saw that Amal had no difficulty with a dual allegiance to both country and sect, but had a problem between the country and the system of political sectarianism, much as the movement faced the mystery of the disappearance of the Imam who combined in his persona the attributes of the religious figure and the political leader. The conferees noted the situation of the of the splinter group "Faithful Resistance" which did not have any independence tendency within Amal, but the return of this splinter group to Amal was described as "a reinforcement of the internal scene for the Resistance, for Shiism, and for Lebanon."

Others saw that the "Faithful resistance", which split from Amal in February 1988, was an internal corrective movement and a part of the Shiite Islamist awakening. They further noted that the indications of a disintegration within Amal started with the disappearance of the Imam, even if this disintegration became obvious only in the mid-1980s with internal dissension over the political and ideological path taken by the movement. The religious dimension of the movement was the focus of disagreement, especially in regards to the issue of "Wilayat al-Faqih".

According to some opinions, the "Faithful Resistance" under the leadership of Mustafa Dirani arose from within the Amal movement and was not the outcome of a reaction, and that this outgrowth in the organization brought it to new political positions drawn up by the changing regional and international political environment, and that as the circumstances that created it faded it went back into the fold of the Amal movement.

In the discussions about Hezbollah, some participants gave an overview of the crisis in Arab Islamist thinking at various stages of its history, then traced the developments on the ground that preceded the establishment of Hezbollah out of such groups as the Call Party (Hizb Al-Da'wa), the Union of Moslem Students in Lebanon, and some Ulemas, and the 1982 Israeli invasion that was the crystallizing event

that pushed these groups into coalescing. The ideological and political foundations for Hezbollah were then discussed – and were characterized as being bold and visionary – from the time when the organization openly declared its existence on February 16, 1985. These foundations were centered on the Islamic identity, "the Imperative of Kindness and the Proscription of Abomination" (*loose translation from Arabic*), the concept of the Umma, and the leadership of "Al-Wali Al-Faqih" (*loosely translated as "the Scholar Ruler"*) and Jihad. The centrality of the Palestinian Cause to the Hezbollah movement was identified, and an exposé was made of the relationship of Hezbollah with the Lebanese internal situation. Specifically, the Lebanese situation was of concern to Hezbollah only insofar as it could impact its freedom of action in fighting Israel, and the call for Hezbollah to be more involved in domestic political life was deemed an attempt at distracting it from its principal battle. The Party's social conduct was considered humanitarian through its relationships with all Lebanese factions and its demands for justice for all, irrespective of their sectarian or regional affiliation. Finally, this group of conference participants considered Hezbollah not a means to achieve power but the enterprise of an entire nation.

Others at the conference saw in Hezbollah more of a religious party than a political one, and indicated that there were within Hezbollah a range of opinions, especially in what concerned the concept of "Al-Wali Al-Faqih" and described the lack of interest by the Party in the perks of power as rare and unprecedented, which constitutes one of the reasons for the Party's strength and popularity. Lastly, these participants wondered what would the role of Hezbollah become once a comprehensive settlement to the Middle East crisis is achieved.

The forum concluded its sessions with a discussion on the "Jamaa Islamiyya", which some considered as the oldest and most established movement on the Lebanese Islamist scene. Others described its quiet and obscure beginnings and its relationship with the Moslem Brotherhood and its secession from it, and divided its history into 4 phases: First, the founding from 1914 to 1975; second, from 1975 to 1982; third, from 1982 to 1992; and fourth, from 1992 to 2001. The analysis focused on the experience of the Jamaa Islamiyya in the parliamentary forum, described its structural organization, its geographical distribution and its institutions, and then its ideological orientations and its failed attempts at creating a new party called the "Reform Party".

The Bin Laden Network in Lebanon

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, American officials declared their no-holds barred policy against governments that shelter terrorist organizations in general, and against the Al-Qaeda organization led by Usama Bin Laden in particular. The initial focus was on Afghanistan where Bin Laden's bases were openly operating under the protection of the Taliban, even though the Afghan regime is not the only one to turn a blind eye on the activities of Islamist militants who are allied with Usama Bin Laden.

In Lebanon, the Syrian occupation forces continue to allow terrorist organizations affiliated with Bin Laden to recruit its supporters and train them inside the Palestinian camps after forbidding the Lebanese army and security forces from entering these camps. A similar situation holds for the Eastern Bekaa and Northern Lebanon, since both regions fall under the tight control of the Syrian army.

According to the New York Times, senior officials in the US administration, deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Vice-President Cheney's Chief of Staff Louis Libby, are pushing for a broad and fast military operation, not only against the Bin Laden network in Afghanistan but also against suspected terrorist bases in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley. And according to press reports, a CIA team has been dispatched to Beirut to gather intelligence on the terrorist networks affiliated with Bin Laden. This was preceded by submitting to Beirut a list of 27 names of Lebanese individuals who are suspected to have had contacts with Al Qaeda.

Imad Mughniyyah:

It is highly probable that the name of Imad Mughniyyah tops the list mentioned above because he is the chief of foreign operations of Hezbollah and has close contacts with Bin Laden according to documents from the US Department of Justice.

Mughniyyah, who receives his orders directly from Iranian Intelligence, is behind the planning and preparation of suicide bombing operations targeting the US Embassy and the Marines Headquarters in Beirut in 1983. He was the chief planner for the hijacking of the TWA plane to Beirut in 1985, in addition to the kidnappings of American nationals in Beirut during the 1980s and the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina. He is at this time a fugitive from the American authorities who have placed a prize of 2 Million US Dollars for information leading to his arrest. Mughniyyah has succeeded for the past 15 years in avoiding capture by American Special Forces who have been persistently on his trail. In 1995, an ambush was set up for his capture at a Saudi airport as he was on board a plane traveling from Sudan to

Syria, but the Saudi authorities foiled the ambush by forbidding the plane from landing for transit at its airport.

Of concern to the American authorities is that Mughniyyah, who lives virtually all the time in Iran, has resumed frequent travel to Lebanon under the protection of the Syrians, especially after Syrian forces completed their takeover of Lebanon in 1990, with the objective of overseeing the training camps operating in the Bekaa Valley. Rumors have it that he routinely undergoes cosmetic surgery to constantly change his facial features.

Contacts between Mughniyyah and Bin Laden probably started about 8 years ago. In 2000, Ali Mohammad, one of Bin Laden's senior aides who was in custody for his involvement in the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania admitted to a court in Manhattan that he was tasked with making security arrangements in preparation for the meeting between Mughniyyah and Bin Laden in the Sudan in the early 1990s. The meeting specifically discussed the methods to use in evicting American forces from the Arab Gulf as was done in Beirut in 1983. Reportedly the success of Mughniyyah in chasing the Marines from Beirut inspired and was greatly admired by Bin Laden.

In June 1996, the Iranian Ministry of Security and Intelligence Agency convened a number of terrorist leaders from all around the world to a meeting in Tehran that was attended by Mughniyyah along with a high-ranking representative of Usama Bin Laden. From that time, meetings were to take place repeatedly between Mughniyyah and top planners in the Bin Laden organization.

US Intelligence has serious doubts about any involvement by Mughniyyah in the September 11 attacks, and there are unconfirmed reports that he visited Germany several times during the past few years, and that he met there with the individuals who were planning the attacks at that time.

The intense interest of American officials in Mughniyyah is due to his vast experience in plane hijacking, because in addition to his role in the hijacking of the TWA plane mentioned earlier, some are convinced that he was behind the planning for the hijacking of an Air India plane (AC814) on Christmas Eve 1999. The approach taken in the hijacking of that plane was virtually identical to the way the four planes were hijacked on September 11. The hijackers of the Indian plane used knives and scissors, they had experience flying the plane and controlling the cockpit, and they stabbed one of the passengers and forced the others to watch him bleed to death to terrorize the passengers and make them compliant. That is what happened on the four American planes. It is no coincidence that Imad Mughniyyah led the negotiations to release the hostages of the Kuwaiti plane that was hijacked to Iran in 1994.

Isbat Al-Ansar

Reliable American and Lebanese sources contend that the cooperation between Mughniyyah and Bin Laden was generally channeled through the Isbat Al-Ansar. This group is an armed Palestinian Sunni Moslem organization that operates mostly from the Ain El-Helwe camp near the southern Lebanese city of Sidon, but also from the Nahr El-Bared camp near the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli according to some reports.

The founder of Isbat Al-Ansar, Hisham Shridi, was one of the prominent leaders of Jamaa Islamiyya during the Lebanese War in the early 1980s. The Jamaa Islamiyya is a fundamentalist Sunni movement operating in Tripoli, Sidon, and the Akkar region, and calling for the establishment of an Islamist government and for holy jihad against the neo-Crusaders, i.e Israel and the Lebanese Christians.

Shridi became famous during the fighting against the Israeli forces in South Lebanon, but his participation in combating Nabih Berri's Amal Movement in 1986 led to his dismissal from the Jamaa Islamiyya, at which point he established the Isbat Al-Ansar. He was later killed in 1991 by Amin Kayed, the leader of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement in the camp of Ain El-Helwe.

Shridi's closest aide is Mohammad Abdel-Karim Al-Saadi, a.k.a. Abu-Mahjan, who heads the group today. He was active in organizing the group and disseminating its ideas and ideology at a time when the Jamaa Islamiyya chose to follow the new Lebanese regime spawned by the Taif Agreement and participate in parliamentary elections, which led to its membership in the parliamentary forum. In contrast, Abu-Mahjan's group remained steadfast in the use of violence as a means to achieve its Jihadist objectives.

During the 1990s, Abu-Mahjan carried out a number of attacks on Christian worship targets and commercial liquor stores, but then began focusing on liquidating his opponents among the Palestinians and other Islamist groups in the region of Sidon. In 1995, Abu-Mahjan's group carried out the assassination of Sheik Nizar Al-Halabi, the leader of the Ahbash group in Lebanon who was close to the Syrian Intelligence Agency (Al-Mukhabaraat). As a result, the Lebanese government issued a death sentence *in absentia* against Abu-Mahjan while three members of Isbat Al-Ansar who were charged with the Al-Halabi assassination were executed. It was strange for the Lebanese government, installed as it is by the Syrian regime, to allow the relatives of the three executed individuals to celebrate their funerals in

the Mazraa district of Beirut, which became in fact an armed demonstration attended by more than 4,000 people who shouted insults against the government and issued threats against it.

What is more strange is that the Syrians denied the Lebanese Army entry into the Ain El-Helwe camp to capture Abu-Mahjan, a policy that remained in effect even after Abu-Mahjan assassinated Amin Kayed and his wife in 1999 in an act of revenge for Hisham Shridi. Even worse, a month later Abu-Mahjan ordered the assassination of four Lebanese judges inside Sidon's Court House in revenge for his three executed comrades, an act that this crime generated a wave of anger and denunciation that swept Lebanon.

According to American sources, Bin Laden began sending huge amounts of money to this group in the late 1990s, and that dozens of Palestinians were sent from Lebanon to Bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan under the sponsorship of Isbat Al-Ansar. Some observers believe that these large financial gifts to Isbat Al-Ansar resulted in the group's deviation from its primary Jihadist ideology and toward more foreign-oriented objectives such as supporting the Chechen rebels in their fight against the Russian Army instead of the struggle against its first and close enemy, Israel.

In December 2000, one of Isbat Al-Ansar's members, Ahmad Raja Abou-Kharroub (Abu-Ubayda) attacked the Russian embassy in Beirut with bombs and rocket launchers and killed a security guard and wounded two others. On the same day, members of the same group attacked a Lebanese Army checkpoint near Ain El-Helwe and wounded one soldier. A week later, four members of the group carried out another attack against the Russian embassy disguised as Lebanese Army soldiers, but the attack was foiled by security forces.

Since that time, Abu-Mahjan has taken a lower profile, avoiding public appearances, to the point where his present role in the Isbat Al-Ansar has become somewhat uncertain, whereas his brother Abu-Tareq and his aide Abu-Ubayda seem to have taken his place, at least on the surface.

Press reports indicate, based on local security sources, that Abu-Mahjan has left Lebanon and found refuge in one of the African countries. These leaks may have been deliberately allowed by the Syrian regime to cover for him, hide him, and avoid his capture and prosecution, in an analogous manner to the way the Taliban regime used to issue sporadic statements to the effect that Bin Laden has left to an unknown destination.

Bin Laden's contacts were certainly limited to Islamist movements, but they also included contacts with individuals. On February 28, 2000, The State Security Court in Jordan convicted Muneer Miqdah, one of Yasser Arafat's top aides in Lebanon, of the charges of plotting terrorist attacks inside the Kingdom at the hands of a group of Palestinians who were sent to Afghanistan for the specific purpose of training in the camps of Bin Laden to carry out those attacks. Miqdah denied the charges against him and declared later to UPI (United Press International) that coordination with Bin Laden is an honor to him were this coordination lead to the liberation of Jerusalem. In September, a judgement was issued against him in absentia carrying the death sentence. But Damascus denied the Lebanese security forces entry into the Ain El-Helwe camp to detain him, in spite of enormous pressures applied by the Jordanian government to extradite him.

As to how was Bin Laden able to recruit Miqdah and others from the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon to work inside a terrorist network, the answer remains vague to this date. Some say that Imad Mughniyyah was behind the recruitment effort considering that he was one of Yasser Arafat's aides before he joined Hezbollah in the early 1980s.

Takfeer Wal Hijra

Isbat Al-Ansar was closely associated with another militant Islamist group operating under the name of "Takfeer Wal Hijra". This group attempted a failed military insurgency against the Lebanese authorities in January 2000, and the fighting went on for eight days in the snow-covered highlands of Dinniyyeh east of Tripoli in the north of Lebanon. The fighting was between the group and its partisans on one side, and the Lebanese Army on the other side, and led to the death of 14 Lebanese military personnel and 25 armed men from among the rebels. The uprising had regional and international repercussions after it appeared that the group's members were of a wide range of nationalities including Palestinian, Syrian, Arab, Chechen, Pakistani, Afghani, and others. The leader of the group, who was among the killed in the confrontation, was of Lebanese origin and his name is Ahmad Kenj, a.k.a. "Abu-Aysha". It is believed that this individual was one of a large group who fought alongside Usama Bin Laden during the 1980s against the Soviet forces. Reliable sources indicate that Kenj had traveled to the United States in 1985 on a scholarship from the Hariri Foundation, and married an American woman named Marlene Earl who adopted Islam as her religion. Kenj was very active in raising funds for the Afghan Mujahideen.

Three years later, in 1988, Kenj traveled with his wife to Peshawar in Pakistan so as to be close to the Afghan border and provide the Mujahideen with direct and effective assistance. During his stay in

Peshawar Kenj met a number of people who were later to become the nucleus of Takfeer Wal Hijra. Some of these people include: Jameel Hammoud (a.k.a. Samir Abu-Durra), Bassam (last name unknown) but whose nom de guerre is Sheik Samir, Hilal Jaafar (a.k.a. Tareq), Khalil Mekkaoui (a.k.a. Ahmad), and Ahmad Al-Qassam who was later executed by the Lebanese authorities for his participation in the assassination of Sheik Nizar Al-Halabi, the head of the Ahbash group.

In 1990, Kenj returned to the United States and lived in Boston, working as a taxi driver. It was later discovered that he developed a strong friendship there with one Raed Hijazi who also worked as taxi driver in Boston and who was later indicted by the Jordanian authorities for his involvement in a series of unsuccessful bombings planned in conjunction with a Bin Laden cell for the advent of the third millennium. It is noteworthy that US federal investigators who were looking into the September 11 events discovered that Raed Hijazi had a close relationship with two of the hijackers that seized the 4 planes that took off from the Boston airport, and these were Ahmed Alghamdi and Sakam Al-Suqami.

During his stay in the US, Kenj took at least one trip to Lebanon. But in 1996 he decided to return definitively to his home country where he founded the Takfeer Wal Hijra organization. He split it into three regional branches: a North Lebanon Branch, which he led; a Beirut Branch led by a member of the Akkaoui family; and a Bekaa Branch led by Qasem Daher. The latter had met Kenj in 1995 during the World Islamist Conference in Chicago, Illinois, and traveled regularly to Afghanistan. It is said that he was very close to Sheik Omar Abdul-Rahman who was convicted as a co-conspirator in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and who is now serving a life sentence in an American prison. Canadian police did arrest Qasem Daher on suspicion of involvement in the 1993 bombing but released him in 1998.

According to Lebanese press accounts, Kenj was the recipient of financial support from associates of Bin Laden living abroad through bank accounts in Beirut and North Lebanon.

Of the prominent figures affiliated with this group, the following names or nom-de-guerres are known Haroun Al-Yamani of Panama, Shawki Mohammad of Austria, Abu-Katada from England, and Adul-Bari Al-Khaliji from the United Arab Emirates. This information comes from documents of the Lebanese Military Tribunal that investigated members of this group who were accused of carrying out attacks against the Lebanese army and threatening the security of the State through the failed uprising of January 2000 mentioned above.

The majority of funds received by Isbat Al-Ansar were used to buy weapons from the Palestinian camps, the followers of Sheik Sobhi Tufayli, the former Secretary General of Hezbollah, and from Abu-Mahjan who was convicted by Lebanese justice for the crime of transporting weapons from the Ain El-Helwe camp to Isbat Al-Ansar bases by way of the sea. Isbat Al-Ansar had established training camps in the highlands of Dinniyyeh in North Lebanon for the psychological and military training of its members in anticipation of establishing a mini-Islamist State that will serve as a springboard for eventually controlling all of Lebanon.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that American officials were extremely concerned with this case, and had requested from the Lebanese authorities to allow them to interrogate the individuals detained at the Roumieh prison.

Summary:

The influence of Usama Bin Laden in Lebanon is in large part a reflection of the growth of Islamist movements in the Middle East at large, and Isbat Al-Ansar is undoubtedly an expression of the feelings and aspirations of these movements that have been infiltrating the societies of many Arab countries. However, it must be stated that Syria and its satellite regime in Lebanon have maintained their silence over the growth of these movements in Lebanon and their impact on Lebanese society.

For the sake of simplification, we assert that the aforementioned Islamist organizations would not have the freedom of action they currently have in Lebanon were it not for Syria's implicit approval, especially since it is common knowledge that the ability of the Syrians to uncover, penetrate, and destroy at will all secret movements that oppose them. Therefore it is simply impossible that all these huge quantities of weapons and ammunitions reach the hands of Takfeer Wal Hijra and accumulate in their training camps in the northern highlands above Tripoli without the knowledge of Syrian intelligence. Similarly, the fact that Abu-Mahjan and other fugitives from justice remain immune from capture and legal detention in the Ain El-Helwe camp in spite of all the warrants against them is clear evidence of the suspicious role played by Syria in Lebanon.

This does not mean that the Syrian regime subscribes to the ideology of Islamist organizations and agrees with their outlook. In fact, the opposite is true because the Baathist regime in Damascus is theoretically a secular regime whose principles are at odds with the principles of these organizations, and everyone remembers how the regime brutally crushed these movements in the early 1980s. What this therefore means is that Damascus is behaving in Lebanon in complete opposition to its behavior in Syria,

and that it allows the Islamist movements free rein above the law in Lebanon because this gives the Syrian regime a precious pretext for staying in Lebanon and a defensive shield against outside and inside pressures for its withdrawal.

Syrian officials always use this pretext when they meet with Western diplomats, claiming to them that the withdrawal of their forces from Lebanon will lead to a return of anarchy and "civil war", and to the rise of extremist terrorist groups that are capable of jeopardizing American interests. This is, however, completely untrue, first because Syria has itself triggered the war in Lebanon in order to enter into the country, and second because Lebanon used to be known as the Switzerland of the East before the Syrian intervention in its affairs, and third because the Lebanese army is capable alone of maintaining security and eliminating the islands of insecurity inside and outside the Palestinian camps, like it did in East Sidon in the early 1990s and in the highlands of Dinniyyeh in 2000, if the Syrians indeed withdraw and the Lebanese army is allowed to act.

On the day after the September 11 attacks, the Syrian president sent a wire to President Bush in which he made the commitment to provide all the help "in eliminating terrorism in all its forms"... To this day, however, his true intentions remain to be seen.

Hezbollah

In the aftermath of the crushing American victory over the forces of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the Bush administration began to intensify its focus on the Lebanese Shiite organization known as "Hezbollah". For one, the military attacks – sporadic at times and continuous at other times – that this organization launches against Israeli forces along the Blue Line and from the Shebaa Farms territory located in the Syrian Golan Heights, as well as the training and logistics support that it provides to radical Palestinian organizations is considered by Washington an immediate threat to its interests in this sensitive part of the world.

And in spite of the unprecedented diplomatic and economic pressures applied by the US administration on Lebanon aimed at constraining and undermining Hezbollah, US officials recognize that the Lebanese government cannot act without the prior approval of Syria which for all practical purposes runs the country, directs its foreign policy and its decisions in matters of security. Yet, the Americans have generally refrained from publicly demanding that Syria cease its support to Hezbollah, and that for two reasons: First, traditional American administration policy is based on avoiding making any public statement in this regard out of fear of making any reference to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Second, the US Administration has misjudged the extent of Syrian influence over Hezbollah, which means that Syria still considers Hezbollah an Iranian faction. The reality, however, is that Iran is the spiritual and ideological guide for Hezbollah and the principal source of its financing, whereas Syria effectively controls to a large degree all aspects of Hezbollah's activities on the ground in Lebanon, starting with Hezbollah's choice of allies in election lists and ending with the timing of the organization's attacks on Israeli forces.

The origins of Hezbollah

Hezbollah was founded in June 1982 when Syria allowed the Revolutionary Shiite regime in Iran to import about one thousand troops of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran) into the Lebanese territory of the Eastern Bekaa that is under Syria's direct rule, after Syria had always forbidden any Iranian interference in Lebanese affairs.

But the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and the warm reception given by the Lebanese Shiite population in the South to the Israeli soldiers, forced the Syrian regime to rely on the Iranian Revolution to stem a growing Israeli influence over Lebanon, in addition to the fact that Iran offered Syria oil at greatly reduced prices.

The Iranian contingent that arrived to the Bekaa included military and spiritual trainers. It began working immediately in recruiting young Lebanese men from the ranks of the Amal movement and groups that seceded from it because of its secular orientation, in addition to the fundamentalist party "Al-Da'wa" (The Call) that is Iraqi in origin and whose members include several Shiite clergy in Lebanon.

Most of the clergymen who made up the solid core of a growing Hezbollah studied Islamic Law in the religious schools in the Nejef area of southern Iraq, where the spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini and many of the highest Shiite Imams lived in exile. As a result, the latter were influenced by the ideas of Khomeini and adopted his ideology of the "Al-Wali Al-Faqih" that was the basis on which Iran's clergy elaborated their new constitution in 1979. In 1985, the leader of Hezbollah declared his total allegiance to Imam Khomeini and pledged to strive to establish an Islamic State in Lebanon.

With Iranian money and training, Hezbollah grew rapidly in Lebanon, in particular its military wing that dedicated itself first to the eviction of the American and European Multi-National Force (MNF) from Beirut, then the eviction of Israeli forces from Lebanon, both objectives shared by Syria and Iran. And in fact, after a string of suicide operations by Hezbollah against the MNF, culminating in the twin suicide bombings of the US Marines Barracks and the French paratroopers headquarters in October 1983 in which about 300 soldiers were killed, those forces evacuated Beirut within a few months. And so did Israel when it withdrew in 1985 from Beirut to the South after it faced similar operations by Hezbollah and other Syrian-backed Lebanese groups.

The end of the honeymoon

Relations between Damascus and Hezbollah began deteriorating after the withdrawal of Western and Israeli forces from Beirut, a withdrawal that greatly enhanced Syria's position in Lebanon, especially after Lebanese President Amin Gemayel abrogated the Good Fence Accord (also known as the May 17 Accord) between Lebanon and Israel, refrained from demanding the withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon, and committed to negotiate and coordinate with Syria and its allied Lebanese parties. Syria thus became directly and completely in control of the Lebanese situation and no longer needed Hezbollah, especially that the latter had allegiance to another patron and its existence on Lebanese soil as a revolutionary religious party seeking to overturn the Lebanese political system constituted, in the Syrian view, a direct threat to Syria's policies in Lebanon.

However, and even as Syria looked very favorably on Hezbollah's successful attacks against Israeli forces in the Lebanese south, Syria was uneasy with Hezbollah's activities on the internal Lebanese arena, such as the wave of kidnapping of Western hostages Hezbollah carried out on behalf of Iran, or the attacks it carried out against the offices of leftist parties allied with Syria such as the Communist Party and the National Syrian Social Party, or the kidnapping of four Soviet diplomats which crossed the Syrian red line. Which led Syria to rein in Hezbollah and placed limits on its activities in a manner more in line with Syria's own interests.

Still, Syria exploited the wave of kidnappings of Westerners – which Iran used to pressure the West to its advantage – to serve its own interests by offering its services to Western capitals for the release of the hostages and prove to international public opinion that it is the only state capable of taming "the Lebanese jungle".

The second factor behind the deterioration in the Syrian-Hezbollah relationship was the expansion of Hezbollah during the mid-1980s from the Bekaa to the southern suburb of Beirut and to the South of the country, which threatened the Amal movement, Syria's closest and strongest ally. Hezbollah's expansion was in large part due to its financial affluence that was greatly sustained with Iran's largesse and which allowed the party to command high salaries for its fighters and offer social services to members of the Shiite community, whereas Amal was lacking in these resources and relied for funding on domestic sources.

Once Syria evicted Western and Israeli forces from Beirut, it decided to move against and eliminate its long-time enemy, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in order to weaken and subdue it so that it no longer constitute an independent force outside of its control. As is its customary approach, Syria used Lebanese elements to do the job, in this case the Amal movement which also had an interest in controlling the Palestinian camps and through them achieve its control of West Beirut.

The conflagration began in 1985 and lasted until 1987 and became known as the War of the Camps. Its victims numbered 2,500 dead, and it was indeed the third factor behind the deterioration in the relations between Syria and Hezbollah because the latter not only strongly condemned that war but clearly sided with the Palestinians and offered them humanitarian, and sometimes military, aid. This was driven by Hezbollah's central ideology that was based on supporting the Palestinian cause, liberating Jerusalem, and destroying the Israeli State.

In 1987, the Amal movement launched a failed attack against Druze and Palestinian forces in West Beirut with a nod from Syria who was seeking to create the right excuse for a return of its forces into the city from which it had been evicted by the Israeli invasion of 1982. Syria again used its vintage slogan, namely to "re-establish order and security in Beirut". And so it was. And during its deployment in the city, the Syrian army faced military resistance from Hezbollah in the Beirut district of Basta. The Syrians put to death 23 people affiliated with Hezbollah, among them 4 women and 4 children, whose hands were tied behind their backs and who were killed with a single bullet to the head, according to Hezbollah radio broadcasts. At the following day's funerals, nearly 50,000 people marched chanting "Death to Ghazi Kanaan" (Chief of Syrian Security and Intelligence in Lebanon), while Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, one of Ayatollah Khomeini's potential successors, qualified this massacre as the "twentieth-century Karbala" in reference to the martyrdom of Hussein in 680 AD on the Day of Ashurah.

And as soon as Syrian forces strengthened their foothold in Beirut, they prompted the Amal movement to launch an all-out assault on Hezbollah's positions in the southern suburb of Beirut and South Lebanon. In May 1988, Hezbollah lost many positions in the South whereas it managed to hold on to 80% of southern Beirut by launching well planned and focused counterattacks and also by generously bribing a number of Amal militia leaders. It was then that Syrian forces intervened and imposed a cease fire on the combatants, but clashes continued sporadically for two years and were interspersed with an exchanges of kidnappings and assassinations between the two sides.

Changing circumstances were to restore coordination between Syria and Hezbollah, especially with the death of Khomeini in 1989 which had a negative impact on the morale of Hezbollah's rank and file. The party's spiritual guide Mr. Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah refused to obey Khomeini's successor Ayatollah Khatemi, and decided with the party's leadership to abandon the objective of establishing an Islamic State in Lebanon, even if temporarily, and to focus on Jihad as the means to achieve the central objective of fighting the Jewish State.

The Hezbollah Organization: A case of forced marriage from 1990 to 2000

The relationship between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime during the past decade has been described as a case of a forced marriage because it was based on common interests and not on common friendship.

Hezbollah initially opposed the Taif Agreement that was sponsored by the US, Syria, and Saudi Arabia because it allocated parliamentary seats equally between Moslems and Christians, and in so doing, stood in the way of the Shiite community from assuming the top jobs of the presidency or the prime ministership and take control of the Lebanese state. It then made a U-turn and accepted the Taif Agreement, committing itself to the new rules of the game now in place after October 1990 when the Syrian army invaded the Eastern regions and removed General Michel Aoun from power, and thus eliminated the last obstacle to its unchallenged dominion over Lebanon.

Similarly, Iran had to agree to the new political reality in Lebanon. It reduced the numbers of its Pasdaran militia from 2,500 down to 200 or 300 individuals only. It also tried to pressure Syria into withdrawing its forces from Hezbollah's strongholds in Beirut but failed because Damascus had always rejected giving Hezbollah any independence of action.

There is no doubt that Syria has strong interests in supporting military operations against Israel as long as the latter refuses to withdraw from the Golan Heights and meet Syria's conditions for peace. As to why Syria granted Hezbollah an exclusive "power-of-attorney" for carrying out these operations which was denied to other anti-Israeli parties and organizations, there are three reasons. One, Syria had to reward Iran for its pledge to stand by Syria in case of war with Israel on condition to allow Hezbollah to keep its weapons – in violation of the Taif Agreement, organize its military and security wings, maintain its state of readiness, recruit combatants, set up training camps, and grant it the entitlement of the "struggle" against the Jewish State. Second, Hezbollah demonstrated a military capability on the ground that was superior to that of any other organization. The statistics speak for themselves: Between 1984 and 1993 Hezbollah carried out 90% of all military operations against Israeli forces in Lebanon, whereas other organizations launched limited, symbolic, and in some cases very basic, operations. Third, Hezbollah's radical Islamic ideology provided great service to the secular Syrian regime by making the latter appear moderate by comparison. This allowed the Syrian regime to polish its image with the West and went a long way to mask its terrorist nature.

However, and in exchange for granting it a monopoly in fighting Israel and supplying it with Iranian financial and military support, Syria placed on Hezbollah the following strict military and political restrictions:

Military restrictions:

In order for violence to be an effective tool at the service of politics and to achieve its objectives, it must remain under strict control, disciplined within well defined boundaries, focused without deviation on its stated objectives, ready to adjust to the changes that impact the enemy, and amenable to negotiate with the enemy when necessary, either directly or through proxy. These things were well-known to the Syrian president who perfected these practices to an art form.

During the elapsed decade Syria imposed its complete control over the military strategy of Hezbollah in its war against Israeli forces in Lebanon. Syria also indirectly conducted all negotiations between Hezbollah and the Jewish State. One of the prominent features of these negotiations was Syria's sponsorship of the 1996 "April Understanding" which would not have seen the light of day were it not for the shuttle diplomacy of then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher between Damascus and Tel Aviv and which cinched the deal between Hezbollah and Israel.

The second prominent feature of those ongoing negotiations was the prisoner exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah with German mediation that led to the release of 45 Lebanese detainees from Israeli jails in exchange for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers. This deal came to fruition only after the May 12 meeting between the German mediator Berndt Schmidt Bauer and General Ghazi Kanaan, the head of Syrian Intelligence in Lebanon, and after German authorities released Hafez Qasem Al-Daqmouni, one of the leaders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and transported him to Damascus on June 27.

In terms of the military operations, Syria constantly imposed on Hezbollah the burden of a precise and complete coordination of its activities, not only with Syria's own military apparatus but also with Lebanese military commanders it had itself appointed from the ranks of the Lebanese Army, Intelligence Directorate, and others. It even established a joint command and control operations room specifically for that purpose.

As to the weapons shipments that Iran used to send to Hezbollah, they were strictly watched by Syria, which in fact categorically forbade any direct air shipments between Tehran and Beirut. Syria insisted on first shipping the materiel to Damascus where it would be unloaded and inspected, and only then would it be transported by land to the Lebanese Bekaa Valley.

In addition, and as we mentioned earlier, the orders to heat up or cool down the front lines, the timing of operations launch and cessation, the shelling of the Israeli colonies with Katyusha rockets and the number of such rockets, etc. were all originating in Damascus and were channeled via the command center in the Muhajireen Palace, and according to changing regional atmospherics and in line with Syria's highest interests.

Political restrictions:

Alongside the military restrictions, Syria also put in place political restrictions on Hezbollah, which translated into a diminished role for the party in the Lebanese parliament. Syria forced Hezbollah into an alliance with the Amal movement and the drawing of joint electoral lists that gave Hezbollah a number of representative MPs (Members of Parliament) equal to the number given to Amal, ignoring in the process the popularity of Hezbollah among the Shiite community, and which led at the time to tensions between Hezbollah and Syria.

On the eve of the parliamentary elections of 1992, and those were elections in form only, Syria sponsored an agreement between Amal and Hezbollah which granted the latter 8 parliament seats allocated as follows: 4 seats for the Baalbeck-Hermel region, 2 for the South, one for Baabda region, and one for Beirut, in addition to 4 seats granted to the other non-Shiite communities but whose candidates are selected by Hezbollah.

However, in the aftermath of the Israeli "Grapes of Wrath" operation in 1996, Hezbollah felt its popularity rising significantly within the Shiite community, especially that it effectively controlled the South. It therefore decided to break away from its alliance with Amal at the elections at the time in an effort to gain more seats in Parliament. Hezbollah notified the Syrians of its intentions and demanded 9 seats instead of 4 in Parliament (for the Baalbeck-Hermel region) as a condition to keep the alliance intact, and 6 seats instead of 2 for the South out of a total of 13 seats, while keeping the two seats for Beirut and Baabda and the privilege of choosing the Christian representatives in the South.

The Syrians rejected the offer out of deference for the United States who did not want to see a greater role for Islamists in Lebanese politics. They further told Hezbollah that they approve of only a total of 6 seats for the party in all electoral districts, which meant a reduction by 2 seats compared with the previous elections.

Hezbollah in turn rejected the Syrian offer and considered it a demotion of its role. It openly accused Amal of scuttling the alliance and terminating the agreement, and decided to wage the elections battle alone. The Syrians retaliated by creating a counter-alliance, warning Hezbollah against cooperating with traditional Shiite leaders who opposed the Syrian occupation such as President Kamel Al-Ass'ad, or with the Communist Party, or with MP Habib Sadeq who was trying to create a block against Nabih Berri. The Syrians further used Rakik Hariri to defeat the Hezbollah candidate in Beirut. Hariri's supporters, who were against Hezbollah in the first place, were publicly saying that the electoral battle was between the radicals and the moderates.

In the end, Hezbollah gave in to the Syrian threats and respected the agreed upon red lines in order to avoid a confrontation with the Syrians. The result was that Hezbollah was resoundingly defeated in the first rounds of elections, losing the Baabda and Beirut seats. The party's leaders held a press conference in which they accused the Lebanese regime of fraud and pressuring voters against Hezbollah candidates. In a last minute reckoning Hezbollah again submitted itself to the Syrian conditions and re-entered into

the alliance with Amal at the last round of elections, which allowed it to cut its losses and end up losing only two seats.

At the municipal and local elections of 1998 in the southern suburbs of Beirut, there was no Syrian intervention and Hezbollah's candidate dealt a crushing defeat to the candidate fielded by Amal. The next day, the weekly Monday Morning magazine published an article in which it crowned Hezbollah as the unchallenged leader and voice of the Shiite community. Yet, and in spite of this victory, Hezbollah went back in 2000 to commit itself to the Syrian conditions and to the alliance with Amal in the legislature elections, and it managed in gaining an additional two seats in the Lebanese parliament.

At present, there is a wave of discontent in the ranks of Hezbollah stemming from the equal status given to it with Amal. This has led to constant clashes between the two sides, one of which took place as a dispute over soccer. Four players were injured, as were five Lebanese soldiers who had intervened to break the fight.

One of the reasons that pushed Syria into politically pressuring Hezbollah was that the Syrian strategy for controlling Lebanon used the traditional corrupt political class that is present everywhere in all institutions and administrative departments. Hezbollah, in fact, was one of the strongest critics of that corruption and publicly and loudly demanded that it be fought. The virtues by which the leaders of the party had become known in terms of asceticism, integrity, and honesty stood in sharp contrast to the corruption of the ruling class, and in a way exposed the figures of the Second Republic – the post-Taif Republic – for their corruption, bribery, cronyism and backroom deals, and their avid pursuit of dirty money. So much so that, in a country where sportsmanship is unknown, Hezbollah's soccer team displayed a high degree of that quality in a tournament in 1997 and did not commit a single violation in all the games it played, receiving not a single yellow card.

The distancing of Hezbollah from the circle of vice that is endemic to Lebanese society, and the life of asceticism adopted by the party's officials, imposed respect by the Shiite community and turned into admiration. This was in contrast to the Amal movement which was founded in the late 1970s on the platform of fighting traditional leaderships and political feudalism, but which soon deviated from its platform after the disappearance of its founder Moussa Al-Sadr, practicing political feudalism under its present leader Nabih Berri. The latter, ironically, and from the start of his tenure in the Taif Republic was very critical of his opponent Rafik Hariri whom he considered one of most corrupt new leaders. Yet he himself became one of the most corrupt Lebanese officials, especially in Parliament which is the state institution that is completely under his control. He stuffed Parliament with his own men and cronies on whom he spent with largesse, to the point that Parliament – the Assembly of Deputies, as it is known in Arabic – became sarcastically known by people as the "Assembly of Pockets". It is noteworthy that this was not the case during the First Republic, at least not in the "in-your-face" manner it is at present under Nabih Berri. One of the consequences of Berri's leadership was that the Shiite middle class that made up Amal's solid base migrated en masse to the ranks of Hezbollah supporters. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah's ascetic lifestyle and the genuine passion that underlies his principles, which led him to send his son to the battlefield where he died, are in stark contrast with the lifestyle of Amal's leader that is based on corruption and political opulence.

This internal political ethics in Hezbollah prompted some Christian groups who oppose the Syrian occupation to coordinate with Hezbollah on some issues. In March 2001, Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement agreed on endorsing the candidacy of Dr. Saad Al-Bizri in the Physicians Syndicate elections against the ruling regime's candidate Dr. Mahmoud Shqeir who was openly backed by Nabih Berri and Rafik Hariri.

Syria consistently supported all the parties and groups that are affiliated with her and always mobilized them in a direction serving her own interests. It did not refrain from backing Sheikh Sobhi Tufayli, the former Secretary-General of Hezbollah, and providing him with needed protection when required. After he announced his break-up from the party's ranks in 1992, in protest against Hezbollah's decision to enter the elections battle and accusing Hassan Nasrallah of getting in bed with the Lebanese regime, he organized his followers under the banner of the "Movement of the Hungry" and called for civil disobedience against the Lebanese regime, holding it responsible for trashing the rights of the Shiites. He even called on his fighters to attack Hezbollah's Baalbeck-based stronghold.

The Lebanese authorities intervened at that point, evidently under order from the Syrians, and the Military Court issued an arrest warrant against Tufayli, sending Lebanese Army troops to arrest him. The troops clashed with Tufayli's supporters in a fierce battle that left several dead and injured on both sides. In the end, the Army prevailed and took control of the area, imposing a blockade around the insurgents. As the Army launched a search operation aimed at capturing Tufayli, the head of Syrian Intelligence in Baalbeck, General Ali Safi, intervened forcing the Army to retreat and allow Tufayli to escape with one hundred of his fighters to his hometown of Brital where he stayed under Syrian protection.

From Brital, the leader of the "Movement of the Hungry" resumed his activities, gathering around him a large number of separatists from Hezbollah and widening the area under his control to strategic positions

in the Bekaa. In 1999, his militants attacked a Hezbollah-owned weapons depot in the town of Nabi-Sheet and seized a large number of machine guns, shoulder-rocket launchers, and other ammunition. Tufayli then turned to the town of Drouss near Baalbeck and converted it into his headquarters where visitors and supporters came to see him, in the absence of any challenge or pursuit by the so-called Lebanese government.

Press sources recently indicated that Tufayli's supporters seem prepared to participate in the upcoming elections against Hezbollah's candidates, most likely prompted by the Syrians in order to pressure Hezbollah into keeping its alliance with Amal.

The "Syrianization" of Hezbollah

After the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal, observers expected Hezbollah to discontinue its operations against Israel and focus on social work aimed at helping the people of the South rebuild their destroyed economy. However, and after a lull of just under 5 months, Hezbollah launched a new war against Israeli forces, this time across the Blue Line from the Shebaa Farms area of the Golan Heights, which the Lebanese claim to be theirs. Similarly, the Syrians prevented the Lebanese government from sending regular Army troops to the South in spite of international pressures on Beirut and Damascus. Only a symbolic contingent of troops was sent to placate public opinion, and it was deployed in a few positions far from the Lebanese-Israeli borders.

Even as clashes between Hezbollah and Israel were dramatically less numerous compared to their level during the Israeli occupation of the South, the resumption of military operations in the area had a negative impact on the economy of the country in general and the South in particular, and drove away local and international investors and their capitals. The popularity of Hezbollah began a downward trend, even among its traditional support base in the Shiite community.

At that point, calls for the withdrawal of the Syrian forces from Lebanon as a parallel gesture to the withdrawal of the Israeli forces became louder. On September 20, 2000 the Council of Maronite Bishops meeting in Bkerki issued a statement calling on Syria to re-deploy its forces operating in Lebanon. In response, Hezbollah called on the Palestinian groups to escalate their Intifada against Israel and promised to provide them with assistance.

With Syria unable to contain this rising tide of opposition to its presence in Lebanon, it nudged Hezbollah into heating up the frontline with Israel. Hezbollah sent its militants inside Israeli territory in the Shebaa Farms area where they kidnapped three Israeli soldiers. This daring operation was described as a maneuver aimed at distracting Lebanese public opinion away from the issue of the Syrian occupation. It also put the spotlight back on Damascus whose role had been seriously diminished by the Israeli withdrawal. Syria was now back in the "international equation" according to the Lebanese daily Al-Diyar. Indeed, Syria became the Mecca of foreign envoys and visitors who arrived one after the other following the Hezbollah operation trying to seek the release of the three soldiers or to obtain information about their fate.

For a period of 6 months, each operation carried out by Hezbollah against Israel happened to take place immediately after an act of mobilization by the parties opposing the Syrian occupation. On November 16, 2000, Hezbollah combatants planted a mine on the international road five days after a demonstration organized by followers of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt to protest Syrian threats made against him.

On November 26, 2000 Hezbollah launched an attack against Israeli forces in the Shebaa Farms killing one Israeli soldier, four days after huge demonstrations calling for an end to the Syrian occupation were organized by the Free Patriotic Movement on Independence Day.

During the months of December 2000 and January 2001, Hezbollah suspended all its activities in protest against rumors of a partial withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. On February 16, 2001 Hezbollah resumed its operations against the Israeli Defense Forces, killing one Israeli soldier four days after a live television interview conducted by a Lebanese television channel with General Michel Aoun, in which he strongly attacked the Syrian occupation. The interview met with a huge success as public opinion polls conducted by the television station at the end of the interview showed that 90% of the Lebanese people supported Gen. Aoun's position.

On April 14, 2001 Hezbollah carried out a new attack against Israeli forces after a 2-month lull, immediately after a call by the Free Patriotic Movement for organizing a demonstration against the Syrian occupation on the commemoration of the start of the Lebanese War. In an attempt at containing the opposition, the Syrians pushed the Lebanese regime to deny a permit for the demonstration and to repress it with force. They then prompted the Ahabash and other fundamentalist organizations into descending in the streets carrying axes, butcher knives and daggers.

Early in 2001 and before the February 16 operation, Rafik Hariri informed a number of French investors that there was a clear agreement to stop Hezbollah harassment activities in the south. On his flight back to Beirut, Hariri stopped in Damascus and met the Syrian president trying to convince him that the war of attrition along the Lebanese-Israeli border is hampering all efforts to attract foreign investments and financial assistance. Assad's stern reply was that Hezbollah has carte blanche to continue its military campaign until Ariel Sharon is out of the Israeli government.

Following the next attack, i.e. on April 14, 2001, the Al-Mustaqbal Arabic language Lebanese daily, a Hariri mouthpiece, published on its front page an article raising the question of whether Lebanon should bear the political, economic, social, and financial consequences of these attacks and counter-attacks. The article angered the Syrian president who refused to meet Hariri for more than a month after the article was published. In contrast, Assad invited and warmly welcomed Hariri's declared adversary Omar Karami.

The Syrian role in the timing of Hezbollah's attacks, and its forcing of the Lebanese leadership to acquiesce to the continuation of the war along the international border with Israel had become clear to everyone. As a result and after the April 14 operation Israel decided to change the rules of the game and retaliate directly against the Syrian forces in Lebanon, unlike past practice. And indeed on April 16, the Israeli air force attacked a Syrian radar located on the highlands of Dahr El-Baidar, then attacked another Syrian position in which two Syrian soldiers were injured, two days after a Hezbollah attack in which an Israeli soldier was injured.

The complete surrender by Hezbollah to the Syrian dictate when it comes to military operations over the past few years paralleled Hezbollah's full backing of the Syrian occupation, to the point where officials of the party reversed past policy and became the staunchest supporters of the occupation and its most ardent defenders.

In March 2001, Maronite Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir ended an international tour aimed at gaining international support for his position as a critic of the Syrian occupation. Upon his return, tens of thousands of Lebanese lined the streets from the airport to Bkerki to greet and welcome him. The Syrians prodded Sheik Hassan Nasrallah to issue a response during a major Ashurah commemoration on March 4, and he said: "The Syrian presence is in the internal and regional interests of Lebanon, and it is a national obligation for Syria. If Syrian officials wished to withdraw their army from Lebanon we will strongly oppose it, and we will tell them that they are mistaken."

The absolute support given by Hezbollah to the Syrian occupation during the past few years, at a time when the campaign for ending the occupation has grown louder, has caused the Syrian president Bashar Assad to reciprocate and back Hezbollah in an unprecedented manner. When Hassan Nasrallah visited the Syrian capital, Assad welcomed him with great honor and adulation, surprising observers when he granted the Hezbollah leader the privilege of a military parade in front of the Syrian president's summer residence in Lattaquieh.

Summary:

Some consider the close relationship between Syria and Hezbollah to be due to the naiveté of Bashar Assad and his lack of political experience, because the allegiance of this party is first and foremost to Iran and not to Syria. In fact, should Iran decide to escalate military operations against Israel for one reason or another, Syria could lose control of the situation if it were to be dragged into a full-fledged war with Israel, a war that will definitely not be in Syria's interests.

Others see that Syria can maintain greater control over Hezbollah than Iran because of its immediate and direct management of Hezbollah's military activities and financial resources, especially since the party has grown increasingly more dependent for these resources on Damascus than on Tehran. Most of the financial backing is now from wealthy Lebanese and businessmen operating in Syria's orbit, in addition to donations from expatriate Lebanese Shiite communities across the globe.

On the ground, it is evident that Hezbollah is preparing for an all-out war with Israel, and according to Israeli sources weapons shipments to Hezbollah are growing bigger by the day. Hezbollah now has approximately 7,000 Katyusha rocket launchers that are capable of striking deep inside Israel. Hezbollah is also building solid defense lines in the Lebanese South that should hamper advancing Israeli tanks in such a war.

It remains that if Hezbollah is gearing for a major military escalation, the timing of such an escalation will undoubtedly be a Syrian decision.

An Islamic Profile of Ain El-Helwe

The crime that took place last September in the camp of Ain El-Helwe, and which resulted in the death of three Lebanese soldiers, has turned everyone's attention to the camp and to a host of internal issues and matters.

According to informed Islamic sources, the perpetrator of the crime, one Badih Hamade a.k.a. Abu Ubayda, is a Lebanese born in Qomatiyyeh and a resident of Al-Qia'ah in Sidon. He converted from Shiite to Sunni Islam and adopted the tenets of the Salafiyyah ideology without belonging to any specific organized group as was rumored. He was not a member of Isbat Al-Ansar under the leadership of Abu-Mahjan and his brother Abu-Tareq, and neither was he a member of Isbat Al-Noor – in reference to the Al-Noor Mosque inside the camp – which is an offshoot of the former group and is led by Abdullah Al-Shridi.

After committing the crime Abu Ubayda found refuge with Isbat Al-Noor. Then the "Denniyyeh Group", an affiliate of "Takfeer Wal-Hijra", gave him protection and issued a fatwa that he should not be handed over to a non-Islamic entity, threatening anyone who tried to do this with serious consequences. But Isbat Al-Ansar intervened, raided his hiding place in order to capture him and hand him to the notables of Sidon.

The same sources also say that the Islamic forces have special control over the Safsaf neighborhood inside the camp, and this is the neighborhood where Abu Ubayda has sought refuge and which was transformed by Isbat Al-Ansar into a fortified entrenchment for itself. Also located in this neighborhood are the two organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but without significant military fortifications because not one of their members are wanted by Lebanese authorities and because they decided to focus on social work, believing that their Jihadist efforts should be in Palestine and not in the Diaspora.

In addition Isbat Al-Ansar's strong Salafiyyah ideology as mentioned earlier, it maintains open lines of communication with Islamic forces in general, and with the Fatah movement led by Muneer Miqdah in particular. Mutual support is occasionally offered among these groups.

It is also known that Isbat Al-Ansar in the camp has suffered several splits within the movement, especially after the withdrawal of Abu-Mahjan. The most prominent such splinter group is Isbat Al-Noor. However, and without any formal affiliation, several groups have joined Isbat Al-Ansar including Algerian, Tunisian, Pakistani, and Afghan groups who found refuge in the camp from Lebanese authorities who are after them for illegal residence. It is thought that those groups are Jihadist and have a direct or indirect connection with Bin Laden's terrorist network. Also joining them is the group of Denniyyeh who are also wanted by Lebanese justice for the failed coup of 2000. It is believed that among these are three individuals who are much more important than all of those detained by the Lebanese Military Court. In summary, the splintering of the organization of Isbat Al-Ansar did not happen without it attracting other organizations which are structurally independent but functionally cooperating, and while retaining certain military control inside the camp.

Additional information indicates that two members of the group who carried out the assassination of the four Lebanese judges in the Court of Sidon were killed and buried in the camp. Isbat Al-Ansar, which killed Sheik Nizar Al-Halabi, did so at the behest of the Al-Qaeda network which issued a fatwa to the effect that the Ahbash Group had renounced the Salafi ideology and the Salafi religious institution and its symbols. Which is why informed sources insist that a coordination and cooperation effort is afoot between Isbat Al-Ansar and the Bin Laden network, and that the communication between them is handled by members of the Isbat who are residing in a Scandinavian country.

This is a general perspective on the situation inside the camp. As to the outcome of the operation of handing over Abu Ubayda to the Lebanese authorities, the same sources say its success was due to the important role played by Sheik Jamal Khattab together with Sheik Maher Hammoud. Khattab is a university professor who graduated from American University of Beirut with a degree in Political Science. He has been living in the camp since a summons was issued for his appearance for investigation purposes. He brings some rationality to these antagonistic groups, and played a key role in involving the notables of Sidon in settling the problem mentioned earlier.

As to Sheik Maher Hammoud, he is the Imam of the Al-Qods Mosque in Sidon and he succeeded in his mediation because he is acceptable to the Islamic street in the camp and he maintains open communication with the Moslem Clergy and Hezbollah, a distinction that eases the Salafis' extreme sensitivity toward these two groups.

The last but not least factor that contributed to the handing over of Abu Ubayda is the strict blockade and the measures imposed by the Lebanese Army on the camp and the fear of compounding the suffering of the camp's residents. Which suggests that the decision to hand him over was made more on a calculated risk-benefit assessment than on simple religious considerations.

The sources also indicate that the balance of forces inside the camp is more like a balance of terror, because had this not been the outcome, things would have moved towards a military solution between the Islamic forces on one hand and the Fatah movement on the other. Especially that the latter had brought additional troop reinforcements to impose its dictate on the camp after it had decided that Abu Ubayda must be handed over at any cost.

The sources conclude by saying that what keeps the camp in its present condition is the strict blockade imposed around it, adding that the number of fugitives inside the camp is low in comparison to the number of those who are called for investigation. So fear makes them stay in the camp and get more frustrated, leading them to get even closer to the radical organizations. The advice to the Lebanese regime is to allow them to "breathe" a bit since an all-out assault on the cave that this camp is remains conditioned on known Syrian and regional considerations.

Conclusion

This report clearly shows that Syria, which has destroyed the Lebanese State in its political, economic, financial, security, social and cultural attributes, eliminating its substance while maintaining its form, has long blackmailed the country as far as it could. It has subjected its potential or whatever is left of it to serve its own interests, discarding by the wayside the interests of Lebanon which is now irrevocably on a path of certain death and annihilation.

The Lebanese people consider the silence of the international community over the ongoing Syrian crimes in their country and Syria's deliberate policies at destroying Lebanon as a greater crime. To be silent in the face of wrongdoing is to be complicit in the crime.

The Lebanese people see that the dangerous game played by the Syrian regime on their soil in its support of Islamic movements and terrorist organizations will inevitably lead to a greater tragedy, not only in Lebanon but in the entire region, if the international community does not change its policy and rescue Lebanon from the claws of the Syria.

Etienne Sakr (Abu Arz)
February 23, 2003