

THE “INDEPENDENT SHI’A” OF LEBANON: WHAT WIKILEAKS TELLS US ABOUT AMERICAN EFFORTS TO FIND AN ALTERNATIVE TO HIZBALLAH

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U.S. diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks have given a new insight into American policy in Lebanon, especially efforts to counter Hizballah. Hizballah’s willingness to use a combination of hard power through violence and coercion, combined with a softer touch via extensive patronage networks has given them unmatched control over the Shi’a community since the 2005 Cedar Revolution. Using these released cables, this study will focus on efforts, successes, and failures made by so-called “independent” Shi’i political organizations, religious groups, and NGOs to counter Hizballah’s pervasive influence among Lebanon’s Shi’a.

I sat in on a fascinating meeting yesterday with some independent Shia Muslims – that is to say, Shias who are trying to fight against Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanon. They’re an admirable group of people, really on the front lines of history in a pretty gripping way... To make a long story short, the March 14 coalition pretty much screwed them... However: you know how everyone says Lebanon is so complicated? Well, it is, but once you understand a few basic particulars on why things are structured as they are, it’s really not so different from other places. – *Michael Tomasky, American journalist, March 13, 2009.*^[1]

INTRODUCTION

Leaked cables emanating from *Wikileaks* have provided a unique insight into a realm of U.S. policy unseen by many in the analytical community. As of this writing, almost 250,000 unclassified, confidential, and classified cables have been released. Of these, around 2,500 cables originated from the U.S. embassy in Lebanon.

The Lebanon cables span the years 1985-2010, with the majority covering 2005 to 2010. The cables provide a multitude of first-hand information, lobbying ploys, potential disinformation, and brief assessments made of meetings with officials, common citizens, and NGO leaders. Demonstrating extreme American concern regarding the group, the *Financial Times* noted, “Every Lebanon-related cable worth reading has something to do with” Hizballah.^[2] Throughout the released cables, American concern with Hizballah and finding ways to counter the group are prominently exposed.

In few countries did the leaked cables have a bigger political effect. One headline read, “WikiLeaks Threatens to Raise Lebanon Tensions.”^[3] Anti-American forces in Lebanon welcomed the leaked cables. Pro-Hizballah newspaper *al-Akhbar* had special access to many previously unreleased *Wikileaks* cables

and soon published them on its website.[4] When the site was hacked and taken offline, Hizballah offered its support, calling the cyber-attacks, “an attack on freedom of opinion and expression.”[5] Although *al-Akhbar* most likely published the cables in the hopes it would embarrass the United States, Israel, and Hizballah’s Lebanese opposition in the March 14th Alliance, the cables reveal a Hizballah campaign of violence, utilization of threats, and a continuing rift between Hizballah and its Shi’a pro-Syrian ally Amal. In addition to Hizballah’s duplicitous methods, the leaked cables also showed American support for finding alternatives to Hizballah within the Shi’a community it dominates.

It was hoped that with full Lebanese sovereignty, the primarily Sunni, Christian, and Druze March 14th Alliance could democratically marginalize Hizballah. Around the same time, a number of leaked cables demonstrated an interest in Shi’a alternatives to Hizballah. Following Israel’s failure to destroy Hizballah during the 2006 Hizballah-Israel War, Hizballah’s power grew.[6] A number of Shi’i-led NGOs and political groups were consulted and spoken to by the embassy in efforts to counter Hizballah politically. It was hoped these groups could erode Hizballah’s membership and create new political feelings within the Shi’i community.

However, the anti-Hizballah Shi’a of Lebanon has been faced with many difficulties. Some of these problems arose from threats by Hizballah and the group’s monumental resources. Other problems were blamed on the March 14th Alliance’s failure to engage the Shi’i community as a whole. In other cases, the proliferation of small independent Shi’a parties and unwillingness by some of their leaders to work with other independent Shi’a parties led to one cable calling them “amorphous”.[7] American policy makers also had to deal with certain independent and more dominant mainstream Shi’a groups that had connections to terrorism, anti-American policy, corruption, and that may have actually been Hizballah fronts. Former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffery Feltman summed up these problems in one cable, saying the “deck [was] stacked against independent Shia.”[8]

HOW “HIZBALLAH” BECAME SYNONYMOUS WITH “SHI’A”

Hizballah’s armed strength and financial power was not created overnight. The group adopted many methods to secure and increase its power within the Shi’i community and Lebanon. Creating patronage networks has been a common tactic for building party power and control in Lebanese politics. In the words of former U.S. Ambassador Michele Sison, “The patronage of the current system is spread across the political spectrum, meaning it is in no politician’s interest to dismantle it.”[9] With mounds of cash coming from their Iranian state-backers, charitable operations, and criminal activity Hizballah’s state-within-a-state and extensive patronage network is seemingly insurmountable. In one confidential cable, independent Shi’a Muhammad Mattar spoke of the difficulties arising from Hizballah’s threats combined with their social services saying, “Hizballah has succeeded in making them [the Shi’a] afraid and polarized, while at the same time mobilizing their support through provision of services.”[10]

To retain the loyalty of its Shi’a base, Hizballah, through front organizations such as the Islamic Health Association, “runs three hospitals, 12 health clinics, 20 infirmaries, 20 dental clinics, 10 civil defense (fire and rescue) departments, and various health awareness programs.”[11] Construction projects, such as the rebuilding resulting from the 2006 war, was handled by the Hizballah front group, Jihad al-Bin’a

(Struggle for Construction). Jihad al-Bin'a, according to one Shi'i journalist, "provides free construction services for the residents of southern Lebanon" and "supports other public service work such as constructing tennis courts and summer camps for youth."[\[12\]](#)

Hizballah also operates the Wa'ad (Promise) Construction. After the 2006 Hizballah-Israel War, Lebanon's Higher Relief Council would make payments of around \$53,000 to homeowners that had suffered damage.[\[13\]](#) According to Shi'i journalist Abbas Sabbagh, with the money given to them by the Lebanese government, "Some hired Wa'ad to do the repair work." The embassy added, "Typically, we are told, recipients gave Wa'ad LL 30 million (about \$20,000) and were asked to keep for themselves LL 10 million (\$6,500) as a 'gift' from Hizballah."[\[14\]](#)

Independent Shi'i intellectual Muhammad Obeid opined that Hizballah might be "Lebanon's second largest employer... after the government."[\[15\]](#) He noted Hizballah has "about 40,000 employees on its payroll, including political, social, and military officials."[\[16\]](#) According to other secret embassy sources, including members of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and "respected Shia politicians," Hizballah was receiving anywhere from \$10-\$50 million a month from Iran.[\[17\]](#)

Smaller and newer Shi'i alternatives faced a Sisyphean task if they hoped to create patronage programs on par with Hizballah's. In a 2006 cable about Hizballah's charitable operations, a number of group's activities to support Hizballah were analyzed. For those who had fought and died for Hizballah, "[t]he [pro-Hizballah front] Iranian Institute for Martyrs provides families of 'martyrs' with an apartment in south Beirut worth approximately USD 35,000; a monthly stipend; and a free Hajj trip to Mecca."[\[18\]](#)

In March 2009, independent Shi'i Khalil al-Khalil told U.S. Ambassador Sison that Shi'a unsupportive of Hizballah, "suffer from disorganization and lack effective mechanisms to challenge Hizballah's network or finances."[\[19\]](#) With their own patronage system siphoning money from the government, Hizballah's closest rival and political ally, Harakat Amal, is still outstripped by the benefits Hizballah provides to its party members.[\[20\]](#) In a confidential cable it was noted, "Amal, at most, offers employment opportunities for families of 'martyrs,'" said one Shi'i journalist with the Lebanese daily *al-Nahar*.[\[21\]](#)

For those who could not be bought or persuaded, threatening actions were often instituted by Hizballah. Independent Shi'a have been at the receiving end of Hizballah's often violent punishment for Shi'a not towing the party's line. During the 2006 Hizballah-Israel War, anti-Hizballah Shi'i politician Ahmad al-As'ad's home in the south of Lebanon had rockets fired from it into Israel. According to one 2007 cable, As'ad felt, "Hizballah shot rockets at the Israelis from his unoccupied house in order to invite Israeli retribution on his property, following his criticism of Hizballah. The Israelis bombed the house."[\[22\]](#)

Independent Shi'a Dr. Ahmad Chehab was beaten, shot, and "left in critical condition on the steps of a local [Nabatiyya] hospital" after he criticized Hizballah during their armed takeover of Beirut in May 2008.[\[23\]](#) Durayd Yaghi, Shi'i vice-president of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, was also targeted during the May 2008 fighting. According to one confidential cable, "[Yaghi's Beqaa Valley] home was targeted with two explosive devices... militants fired guns into his bedroom while his wife was in the residence."[\[24\]](#) Around the same time Abdallah Bitar, businessman and president of the Nabatiyya Chamber of Commerce, was threatened, harassed, and "pressured to sell" \$600,000 worth of business for \$200,000 after he went to the United States with a prominent independent Shi'i politician.[\[25\]](#)

As with other independent Shi'i organizations and individuals, clerical resistance against "the Resistance"

was often met by violence and coercion. Sayyid Ali al-Amin, Mufti of South Lebanon and a prominent anti-Hizballah Shi'i cleric, was forcibly removed from his position as Mufti by Hizballah during the fighting in May 2008. Escaping from his home in Hizballah-controlled Tyre, al-Amin and his family's "departure was made difficult when [the] family's driver was attacked and the family was harassed at Hizballah checkpoints as they left the south." [26] According to Durayd Yaghi, al-Amin's son was even targeted by Hizballah after he was removed from a position with the parliamentary guard. [27] Al-Amin was replaced in Tyre by a pro-Amal cleric.

Anti-Hizballah Shi'i journalist Ali al-Amin told the embassy about three issues that Hizballah would not allow a journalist to criticize: Hizballah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, "Hizballah's role as a self-perceived resistance movement," and Hizballah's retention of weapons. [28] "[W]hen he had crossed one of these red lines in the past, he had received death threats." [29] In another cable describing independent Shi'i Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Hajj's meeting with the then American chargé d'affaires, it was noted, "Hizballah had been following him and his family members for months." [30]

A SHI'A "THIRD WAY": POLITICS, PARTIES, AND NGOs

Even before the 2005 Cedar Revolution, a wide ranging group of Shi'a, including clerics, intelligentsia, members of prominent families, and feudal-political leaders known as *zu'ama*, came forward to oppose Hizballah. Some of these Shi'a were affiliated with the March 14th Alliance. As late as March 2009, retired Lebanese ambassador and prominent independent Shi'a, Khalil al-Khalil, told former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Michele Sison that "vast numbers of 'respectable' Lebanese Shia do not truly support Hizballah." [31] These independent Shi'a wanted a "third-way" type Shi'i party, which would arise and attract moderates not affiliated with Amal or Hizballah. While some Shi'i "third-way" parties did not publically endorse or run with March 14th, they promoted many of the alliance's sentiments and ends.

Started as an independent Shi'i umbrella group, The Lebanese Option Group (LOG) was the creation of Shi'i Ahmad al As'ad. [32] As'ad is also leader of the independent Shi'i Hizb al-Kaf'at (Party of the Worthy/Competent). As'ad is descended from the wealthy landowning Shi'i As'ad family. In the early years of the Lebanese Republic, the As'ad family members were prominent *zu'ama* and governmental officials. As'ad's grandfather Ahmad and father Kamil both served as speaker of parliament. However, Ahmad has cast off his family's background and rejected the feudalistic system that gained the family power. Roger Shanahan's assessment of Ahmad's new policies and push into politics were negative, writing, "it is likely we have seen the political demise of the once dominant al-As'ad dynasty." [33] Other criticisms of As'ad came from leaked cables demonstrating his unwillingness to work with other independent Shi'i groups and his hope to lead independent Shi'i political efforts. [34]

The Khalils, another traditional family of *zu'ama* from the south of Lebanon, formed another set of Shi'i independents. The Khalils' approach differed from that of As'ad, whose vocal and public approach to Hizballah Khalil al-Khalil branded as "a big mistake." [35] Historically, the Khalil's normally opposed the As'ads in the quest to become the dominant *zu'ama* of south Lebanon's Shi'a. This fact did not stop them

from sharing a similar anti-Hizballah goal. Walid Jumblatt expressed his doubts about the viability of working with the Khalils due to their Lebanese Civil War and “South Lebanon Security Zone” era “special militias with the Israelis.”[36]

U.S. support to the Khalils and As’ads was heavily criticized by pro-Hizballah press organs. One cable noted *al-Akhabar’s* criticism of then Chargé d’Affaires Michele J. Sison’s visit to Nabatiyya, stating the U.S. government’s goal was to “resuscitate decaying southern feudalism represented by the [As’ad] and Khalil families.”[37] Moderate Shi’i cleric Muhammad Ali al-Hajj was paraphrased in one cable saying that average Shi’a had developed a “distrust” of both families and instead favored Amal and Hizballah’s stability.[38]

Families with feudal backgrounds were not the only Shi’i independents. One of the most prominent independent Shi’i individuals was Ibrahim Shams al-Din, who was made the minister of administrative reform by the March 14th Coalition in 2008. Shams al-Din is the son of the late but extremely influential and popular Shi’i cleric Imam Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din. Ibrahim Shams al-Din described himself to American officials as a “true fundamentalist Shia” that did not support Hizballah’s version of Islamic government, and was “a friend of the U.S.”[39]

Other parties were the direct creation of the March 14th Alliance. Lebanese Choice (al-Khiyar al-Lubnani) is an independent Shi’i-style party that “receives modest funding from March 14.”[40] Two of Lebanese Choice’s members, Bassam Saba and Ghazi Yusuf, were elected to the Lebanese parliament, but the party was seen by Shi’a—especially independents—as being nothing more than a Sa’ad Hariri-backed operation, and thus was seen as a Sunni front.[41]

Independent Shi’i NGOs played a significant role in the attempt to create a “third way” of thinking and by turning the Shi’i populace away from embracing Hizballah. Nevertheless, these NGOs were faced by funding problems and Hizballah’s own attempts to shut them down. One of the groups, Hayya Bin’a was established to provide “a platform for moderate, liberal and independent voices, committed to resisting the culture of fear and intolerance,” with projects including the teaching of English to women and the promotion of non-sectarian democratic values.[42] According to a June 2008 cable, the European Union and Japan were wary of supporting independent Shi’i groups. The U.S.-backed Hayya Bin’a (led by Lokman Slim) discussed the difficulties arising from international donors with American officials.[43] Slim stated that the EU was not supporting independent Shi’i organizations out of the fear of Hizballah’s large influence. Slim told then Chargé d’Affaires Michele Sison that he felt the EU wanted “to remain on the safe side and has avoided public support.”[44] Despite fears of funding an anti-Hizballah NGO, Hayya Bin’a established many educational programs, religious schools, and assisted in the creation of many independent Shi’i organizations.

THE AMAL ALTERNATIVE

Behind Hizballah, Harakat Amal (the Amal Movement or simply Amal) is the most powerful political group among Shi’a in Lebanon. Founded by the “vanished imam” Musa Sadr, the group originally strove to give the “dispossessed” Shi’a of Lebanon a voice in the country and protection from various enemies. In the

late 1970s, Nabih Berri was a powerful player in the organization, becoming its leader in April 1980, a position he still holds today.[45]

The Amal Movement and Hizballah have had a checkered history since the 1980s. Much of Hizballah was formed out of a pro-Iranian Islamist faction of Amal.[46] From 1987-1989, the two groups fought a number of pitched battles against one another in the south and Beirut. [47] Throughout the 1990s, until the Cedar Revolution, both groups vied for more political power within the Shi'i community, yet occupying Syria facilitated "both Amal and Hizballah ... to run on joint electoral tickets for the national elections." [48] Following the 2005 Cedar Revolution, both groups sensed the Shi'a (especially pro-Syrian Shi'a) may be marginalized by the ascendant Christian-Druze-Sunni Muslim March 14th Alliance and thus cooperated more closely.

Amal is still seen as the most popular secular representative for Shi'a who do not wish to adhere to Hizballah's radical Islamism. However, the group has been plagued by corruption and the domineering leadership of Nabih Berri. One family member of Musa Sadr said Berri only delivered social services to the south's Shi'a via "wheeling, dealing, and stealing." [49] A secret 2004 cable summarized these issues, saying, "Amal is near universally derided as corrupt to the core, but it is also considered the only alternative for moderate, secular Shia." [50]

Berri's leadership has come with fierce criticism from those in and out of his ranks. The party is also seeing a loss in members because they have been drawn to Hizballah. Independent Shi'i intellectual Muhammad Obeid discussed Amal's declining numbers, revealing to the embassy that Amal members have been turning out for Hizballah rallies like never before and "some of the 5,000 government workers who owe they jobs to Berri's patronage are leaving his fold." [51] Former Amal parliamentarian Muhammad Baydoun added to this assessment saying, "Some two to three thousand young people have left Amal for Hizballah." [52]

A major issue among Amal's rank and file has been over the question of who will take the reins of Amal following Nabih Berri's death or retirement. In recent years, Berri went so far as to expel popular party leaders that were potential threats to his leadership. One of these figures was the former Tyre MP, described in one cable as a "popular and dynamic young leader," Mohammad Baydoun. [53] Baydoun later joined the ranks of independent Shi'a. According to the U.S. embassy's Amal contacts, Berri was instead grooming his son Abdallah as his successor. However, Abdallah "has little credibility within the party or Shia community." [54]

Before the Hizballah-pro-March 14th gun battles of May 2008 broke out, Muhammad Baydoun told the U.S. embassy, "Hizballah is not inclined to take up arms itself, but might encourage some of its allies... to create some minor civil disorder." [55] Hizballah successfully used Amal to achieve its ends in Beirut. It was noted, "It was undisciplined and inexperienced Amal fighters who were seen as the bullies, while the sophisticated Hizballah senior fighters stayed behind the scenes." [56] Moderate Shi'i cleric Ali al-Hajj's assessment that Berri was Hizballah's "perfect political pawn" gained much more credibility. [57] This sentiment resulted in Shi'i NGO leader Lokman Slim concluding, "Amal is finished. They had been losing ground for a long time and Hizballah played them perfectly." [58]

For some Shi'i independents, reformation within Amal was the only answer to Hizballah's growing power. Even though Muhammad Obeid pushed this idea, he also felt that encouraging a third Shi'i movement to take the political stage would be a mistake. His plan was to counter Hizballah, by reforming Amal through

bringing back the teachings of Imam Musa Sadr. Obeid spoke of older members' anger regarding Berri's "willingness to allow Amal to be absorbed by Hizballah."^[59] Obeid told the embassy that Iran had invested millions in a cement plant Berri was running.^[60] In a separate cable he asserted that Berri was receiving \$400,000 a month from Iran.^[61]

Berri's dealings with Hizballah and Iran have not made him immune from privately criticizing Hizballah. In a number of the cables, Berri's dislike of Hizballah was a key issue. In one cable, Berri said, "who needs" Hizballah.^[62] In another cable, Berri claims he tricked Hizballah into allowing Lebanese Army forces into the south of Lebanon.^[63] The revelations of *Wikileaks* had a large effect on the Amal and Hizballah partnership. In April 2011, the Pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*, claimed that the published cables "almost caused a split in strategic relations between Amal and Hizballah."^[64] Nasrallah, in an effort to tamp down any potential clash or split between the parties, "directly intervened." He claimed in a speech that the *Wikileaks* reports were the product of "[t]hose who target [Hizballah]," whom "have always aimed to drive a wedge between us and [Amal]."^[65] An *al-Hayat* source also claimed Nasrallah attempted to decrease tension between "Shia allies."^[66] For his part, Berri told *al-Safir* that the cables were a "conspiracy" and "poisonous."^[67] Notwithstanding the public relations campaign, Berri's—and by extension Amal's—dislike of Hizballah is a present issue.

In 2004, former American Chargé d'Affaires Christopher W. Murray claimed, "[a]s a result of Amal's corruption and Berri's poor leadership, Hizballah's political strength is increasing."^[68] Corruption and the popularity of Hizballah, combined with lack of a legitimate heir to Amal's leadership, may spell doom for the party. A cable entitled, "What's Wrong with Amal?" went so far as to say "many of its supporters are more anti-Hizballah than pro-Amal."^[69] Nevertheless, if problems do occur within Amal, secular membership and those feuding with Hizballah may provide more numbers to the still small independent Shi'i parties. If the ideology of Imam Musa Sadr with trusted and less corrupt leadership is formed into a successor party, there is a good chance Amal can live on and provide a better counterweight to Hizballah.

THE THEOLOGICAL BATTLE AGAINST HIZBALLAH

Traditional Shi'i clerical leaders have normally embraced a form of Quietism, where clerics remain indifferent to politics. This brand of Shi'i clerical leadership is considered the mainstream and is led by Najaf-based cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.^[70] The Quietist form of Shi'ism differs greatly from Hizballah's adoption of the late Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini's philosophy of Islamic government by jurisprudence or *wilayat al-faqih*. The Khomeinist system of having Islamic clerics hold political power was a radical departure. As a result, the radical Khomeinist ideology has sparked many theological debates in the Shi'i community and caused an ideological split between the Shi'i holy cities of Najaf and Qom.^[71] Unlike Hizballah, which looks to the Iranian holy city of Qom for much of its religious guidance, most Lebanese Shi'a have looked to either the late Lebanese-based Shaykh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah or Najaf's Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Fadlallah, who was widely regarded as a spiritual leader for Hizballah, offered more acceptance for Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih*.^[72] Since Hizballah's ideology counts on the support and guidance of Shi'i clerics, countering the party using Shi'i clerics that differed with the group's ideology has been a very successful strategy.

The fact that the popular Sistani did not embrace Hizballah's brand of Shi'ism was not lost on either the more secular Amal or on independent Shi'a. In 2004, Nabih Berri told then Ambassador Vincent Battle, "Amal Movement followers looked to Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as their primary source of religious authority."^[73] Independent Shi'i Minister of State for Administrative Reform Ibrahim Shams al-Din "indicated Sistani, as a religious leader, should be more visible and outspoken."^[74] However, not all independent Shi'a were as supportive of Sistani. Sayyid Ali al-Amin claimed that Sistani did little to assist Amin when he was assaulted by Hizballah and was helping fund Amal and Hizballah.^[75] Al-Amin had his doubts about having a regional group involving Iraqi clerics as opposed to a mainly Lebanese organization and "described the lack of support [for independent Lebanese Shi'a] from Iraqi Shi'a, whom he describes as afraid to confront Iranian influence in Iraq."^[76]

Since Hizballah dominates the influential clerical group, the Higher Shi'a Council (*al-Majlis al-Shi'i al-Islami al-A'la* or HSC), some independent Shi'a concluded that the best option would be to create their own Shi'i religious grouping.^[77] In 2008, prominent independent Shi'i lawyer and Hariri confidant Muhammad Matar, told the U.S. embassy he was in the midst of creating a "Chatham House" style think tank organization for Shi'a, called the Lebanese Anylitica Matrix (LAM). According to Matar, the LAM "includes some 180 Shiite religious clerics and has strong relations with the Shiite highest spiritual leader in Iraq, Sayyed Ali Sistani."^[78] Al-Amin felt an independent Shi'i grouping that would include "clerics, businessmen, and others who share a moderate religious ideology would be a more successful track. This coalition is important, he said, because 'you cannot fight Hizballah with prayers alone.'^[79]

Another cable (also including al-Amin) from the same day al-Amin discussed his hopes for a Shi'i professional and clerical grouping involved a number of independent Shi'a proposing to the U.S. embassy's chargé d'affaires that a Higher Shi'a League (HSL) be formed. The HSL's membership was to be composed of intellectuals and clergy, and would operate under the leadership of Sayyid Ali al-Amin. It was hoped the HSL would function as an official counter to Hizballah's HSC. ^[80]

Ahmad al-As'ad wrote off the HSL to push his own independent Shi'i clerical gathering. As'ad approached the embassy for funding to hold a meeting involving regional Shi'i clerical leaders in Beirut. He had hoped to put 300 clerics on his Lebanese Option Group's payroll. The embassy was dismissive, calling the plan "not-well-thought" and "clearly the least impressive and most self-centered."^[81]

These separate ideas to create a non-Hizballah controlled clerical group eventually coalesced into the Independent Clerical Gathering (*al-Liq'a al-Ulama'i al-Mustaqil* or ICG), created in September 2009. Ironically, the ICG's Shaykh Ahmad Talib was the son-in-law of influential Hizballah cleric Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. In 2007, Talib started another Shi'i clerical group, the Lebanese Ulama Gathering (*al-Liq'a al-Ulama'i al-Lubnani*), but the group failed, due in part to it being viewed as too close to Sa'ad Hariri.^[82] The ICG had a successful start despite having "no structure behind it."^[83] The group did not just attract the typical names that make up the intellectual and clerical base of the independent Shi'a, but was even supported by Berri and his Amal Movement.^[84]

When independent Shi'i NGO's established religious schools, such as Hayya Bin'a's "Leadership Academy" in the Hizballah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut, students were "presented with offers by Hizballah to partner with some of Hizballah's religious seminaries following its establishment in 2008."^[85] Despite the offers, religious schools teaching the value of official Lebanese government institutions were

successful. Shaykh Muhammad Jamal Hamoud also established a school in the southern suburbs. According to Lokman Slim, Hamoud was considered “very knowledgeable” and “cannot be touched [by Hizballah].”[86]

Luckily for independent Shi’a there was a more willing base of clerics to recruit from. Nonetheless, this did not mean they were not met with difficulties. When one independent Shi’i politician tried to sway clerics away from Hizballah’s line, he was rebuffed, because, “They are afraid in part because their salary is controlled by Hizballah. Moreover... there is internal pressure from the residents to continue supporting Hizballah.”[87]

ENGAGING SHI’I ISLAMISTS

When discussing American engagement of Shi’i Islamists in Iraq, writer Duncan Currie noted, “So long as the religious classes remain outside that debate, it will be difficult for America to convince ordinary Arabs and Muslims that, yes, Islam is compatible with democracy. More pragmatically, nation-building amidst a violent insurgency demands prudence, compromise, and a willingness to accept the human timber available.”[88] This same concept was explored by American policy makers in Lebanon but was not met with as much success as in Iraq. While many independent Shi’i groups and individuals actively embraced the antithesis of Hizballah’s platform by supporting secularism, others attempted to outdo Hizballah’s domination of the religious-political realm. In the attempt to find a substitute for Hizballah, anti-Hizballah Islamist leaders were analyzed by the U.S. embassy as possible counter-organizations to Hizballah. However, any possible engagement by the United States of so-called independent groups’ relationships was often damaged by their murky links to Hizballah, terrorism, and anti-American sentiment.

The Arabic-Islamic Congress (*al-Majlis Islamiyya al-Arabi* or AIC), under the leadership of Muhammad Ali al-Husseini, was of interest to the U.S. embassy. The group was formed in 2006 and reportedly received money from the Saudis.[89] The AIC was held in some press organs as a counter to Hizballah, and this was one message al-Husseini would issue to Western journalists.[90] In actuality, al-Husseini offered a mix of views; first he publicly condemned Hizballah, and then praised it.[91] Al-Husseini’s group distanced itself from Hizballah’s adherence to wilayat al-faqih and embraced Arabism mixed with Islamism.[92] The U.S. embassy also doubted al-Husseini’s claim to have a 1,500-3,000 strong armed force, complete with Katyusha rockets.[93]

The militia, called the Arab-Islamic Resistance, had the *raison d’être* of fighting Israel as an Arabist and Islamist movement. Logically, the embassy had its reservations about how “anti-Hizballah” the group truly was. In one cable it was noted, “AIC headquarters are located on the Beirut airport highway, a Hizballah-dominated area. Contacts in the Beirut southern suburbs observed that Hizballah has neither harassed nor interfered with AIC.”[94] The cable went on to quote an unnamed Shi’i source who told Ambassador Sison the group was “nothing but an Iranian tool that adopts Hizballah’s rhetoric and objectives but is based on Arabism.”[95] To make the story more confusing, in May 2011, al-Husseini was arrested by Lebanese authorities for being an “Israeli spy.”[96]

The confusion regarding al-Husseini’s group did not stop attempts by the independent Shi’a to get the

United States to connect with other questionable Shi'i Islamists. In an April 2008 meeting with former U.S. Ambassador Jeffery Feltman, LOG leader Ahmad al-As'ad proposed that the U.S. engage one of Hizballah's founders and most radical members, former Secretary General Tufayli. As'ad felt embracing Tufayli could take "a few thousand votes" from Hizballah.[97] Tufayli was Hizballah's first Secretary General and led the group from 1989-1992. He was adamantly opposed to Hizballah's participation in the Lebanese parliament, extremely militant, and is suspected of the murder of a Lebanese Army soldier and French citizen. Some studies on Hizballah suggest that Tufayli was close with the "Iranian Revolutionary faction" in Tehran.[98] Tufayli and other ultra-radicals split from Hizballah in the early 1990s and formed their own groups such as the Partisans of God (Ansar Allah) and Revolution of the Hungry (Thawrat al-Jiyya).[99]

During al-As'ad's meeting with Feltman, he suggested that Tufayli "is away from his old rhetoric and ready to leave (his past alliance)" and the U.S. should work with him." Nevertheless, Feltman's report noted Tufayli's inclusion on the Terrorist Watch List. Al-As'ad even "acknowledged that Tufayli has not yet departed from his anti-U.S. views." [100] According to al-As'ad, Sa'ad Hariri had also offered Tufayli support, only to be met with resistance from the French.[101]

Even though there is no evidence the United States ever entered into discussions with any of the aforementioned Shi'i Islamist groups, the interest shown by the embassy and suggestions forwarded by prominent anti-Hizballah figures indicate a lack of truly viable anti-Hizballah Shi'i Islamist groups to help further U.S. policy in Lebanon.

THE SHI'I DISCONNECT WITH THE MARCH 14TH ALLIANCE

Problems between independent Shi'a and the Druze, Christian, and Sunni-dominated March 14th Alliance began as soon as the Syrians left the country. As early as February 2007, former U.S. Ambassador Feltman wrote, "March 14th's tendency to regard the Shia and Hizballah as a single entity...contributed to the failure of several prior attempts to launch a third Shia party." [102] This view was partially reinforced by Sa'ad Hariri's summer 2008 visit to Iraq and his meeting with Ayatollah Sistani.[103] While Sistani is not a cleric Hizballah looks to for guidance, the visit was seen as a way to calm lingering sectarian tensions in Lebanon between Shi'a backing Hizballah and Sunnis backing Hariri.[104]

Independent Shi'i NGO leader Lokman Slim told the U.S. embassy that there was a "lack of communication" from Sa'ad Hariri with political allies, "including independent Shia." [105] Many independent Shi'a also felt that showing a close connection to Hariri or March 14th would turn off many Shi'a. Slim summed this feeling up in one cable saying that for a Shi'a group it is, "better to be labeled as an independent Shia rather than pro-March 14." [106]

After the fighting of 2008 and subsequent Doha Accord, many of these Shi'a felt they were neglected or even betrayed by the pro-Western March 14th Alliance. Even before the fighting had ended, "moderate Shia cleric" Shaykh Muhammad al-Hajj was quoted in one leaked cable saying, "[Hizballah] will use these

tactical gains to continue to push for more and more concessions. The events of this week will increase its arrogance and it will now start to push against their other internal rivals, such as the independent Shia.”

[107]

Hizballah’s 2008 armed operations would also result in March 14th significantly distancing itself from the independent Shi’a. Sayyid Ali al-Amin, removed from his job as Shi’i Mufti of Tyre during the May clashes, felt “mistreated by the group” and according to Lokman Slim was not given enough political backing by March 14th after Hizballah’s removal of the cleric.[108] Over the following months, “several...’independent’ Shia contacts” told the U.S. embassy, “We agree with the principles of Lebanese sovereignty and independence—the March 14 coalition’s platform—but Saad Hariri has betrayed us.”[109]

Throughout 2008, independent Shi’a complained of how Lebanese governmental efforts had failed to curb Hizballah or Amal influence in Shi’a-majority areas. During a meeting between high-level independent Shi’i politicians, NGO leaders, and U.S. embassy staff, “All the guests agreed that the [Government of Lebanon] mismanaged assistance and compensation programs for the south after the July 2006 war,” when the March 14th majority government put all rebuilding funds in the hands of Nabih Berri.[110] This move allowed Hizballah and Amal to be seen as the South’s rebuilders instead of the government.

In another leaked cable, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt went so far as to declare Hariri’s Shi’i advisers Aqab Saqr and Bassem Saba as “not serious.”[111] Shaykh al-Hajj concluded, “[The proto-March 14th] needed us when the Syrians were still occupying the country. However, when the Syrians withdrew and March 14 celebrated the Cedar Revolution, they decided that they didn’t need us any more [sic]. They made a deal with the opposition for the 2005 parliamentary elections. The betrayal and abandonment has left a deep sense of distrust.”[112] In September 2011, Maronite Christian and one of the Kataeb Party’s leaders, Sami Gemayel echoed these criticisms when he told *Now Lebanon*, “March 14 [should have] dealt with parties other than [Hizballah] and the Amal Movement as the Shia’s representatives.”[113]

March 14th’s internal politics and lackluster engagement were not the only problems independent Shi’a had with the alliance. During a March 14th sponsored workshop, held in April 2008, the coalition’s leaders denounced Hizballah’s “culture of death and violence.” Rhetoric of that nature was frowned upon by some Shi’a attending the meeting. One resident of Bint Jbeil (Hizballah’s so-called “capital of the resistance” located on the Israel-Lebanon border) was paraphrased in one leaked cable, saying it was the “incorrect approach to strip Hizballah from its supporters.”[114] Another Shi’i attendee denounced what he saw as a “culture of racism among March 14,” accusing the group of “failing to protect individuals who are at odds within their own confession.”[115]

If the March 14th Alliance is ever to reattempt to brand itself as an alliance encompassing all Lebanese in a strategy to counter radical Syrian- and Iranian-backed elements, serious attempts to involve independent Shi’a and promote their importance to the alliance will be necessary.

CONCLUSION

With extensive supplies of money, willingness to use coercive tactics, and a lack of corruption, countering

Hizballah on its own sectarian turf will be a hard task to complete. Based on the released cables, new independent Shi'i parties, operating under the leadership of traditional families and prominent individuals, are fractious and lack the influence necessary to bring the Shi'i street out of Hizballah's grip. Independent Shi'i cleric Sayyid Ali al-Amin dismissed their efforts as "ineffective and disparate."^[116] In addition, while contacts with Shi'i Islamists should be opened and maintained, the lack of acceptable partners demonstrates the United States may have to continue primarily backing secular independent Shi'i.

If Amal collapses in a post-Berri environment, the United States should move immediately to cultivate potential allies in the movement. It is possible that there is enough dissatisfaction with Hizballah that members of Amal are willing to shed the overcasting shadow of Hizballah's influence. However, Syria's influence in the group must be taken into account when the United States attempts to engage its members. As March 14th embraces its new status as an opposition party, the coalition should reengage anti-Hizballah Shi'a and work to shed its unfavorable status among the majority of Lebanese Shi'a.

The most visible successes in finding alternatives to Hizballah have been through NGO-based educational efforts and via the creation of theological programs that counter Hizballah's radical and violent message. As influential Quietist clerics—such as the octogenarian Ayatollah Sistani—die off, American policymakers and their independent Shi'i cohorts will need to find other clerics that will continue the Quietist tradition and achieve higher statures within Shi'i Islam.

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