

## **Lebanon: Shiites Express Political Identity**

*Amal Saad-Ghorayeb*

Despite its reactive origins, the recent mobilization of the Shiite community in Lebanon does not seem to be an ephemeral episode, but rather a new chapter in an ongoing epic of communal consciousness and activism with far-reaching political implications. The political climate following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri engendered an unprecedented display of political unity within the community. The vociferous calls of the Sunni-Druze-Christian opposition for a Syrian troop withdrawal and political disengagement from Lebanon were met by a groundswell of popular support manifested visibly in the ensuing “Independence Uprising” demonstrations. As the movement gained momentum both domestically and internationally, the Shiites repositioned themselves from an initial stance of reticent neutrality to one of vocal participation, effectively transforming the Shiite community into an opposition to the opposition.

By Hizbollah's account, the secular opposition's self-appointment as the mouthpiece for all Lebanese and its portrayal in the local and Western media as representing the entire nation provoked alienated Shiites and precipitated their mass mobilization. As Hizbollah's Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naiim Qassem explained, “we found that we had to say ‘no, there is another view in Lebanon which rejects [UN Resolution] 1559 and internationalization.’” It is important to note that the Shiites' rejection of Resolution 1559 did not stem from their aversion to the clause calling for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, but rather the stipulation that all Lebanese (and non-Lebanese) militias be disbanded. As such, the main impetus behind the massive Hizbollah-organized demonstration on March 8, 2005 was the defense of Hizbollah's role as a resistance movement against Israel, a role Syria had safeguarded and enshrined in the Taif Accord of 1989. Support for Syria was therefore synonymous with support for the resistance. A recent poll by Zogby International reveals that 90 percent of all demonstrators claimed their motive for joining the demonstration was “support for Hizbollah.” The survey also reported that the large majority of protestors denounced Resolution 1559 as well as the U.S. and French roles in producing it, thereby voicing their rejection of the perceived internationalization of the situation.

The March 8 demonstration drew between six hundred thousand and one million protesters, mainly Shiites, to the heart of Beirut. The designated hub of the demonstration was the opulent downtown area, a deliberate attempt to highlight the incongruity between protestors and venue and also a self-affirming communal gesture of national presence. The historically disenfranchised and deprived Shiites, more commonly associated with the city's suburban southern slums than its affluent center, were out to lay claim to the capital and the political arena it betokened.

The colossal size of the demonstration and the common motives of its participants, coupled with other indications of communal marginalization and discontent, illustrate the unique political identity shared by Shiites, which transcends the secular-religious divide

as well as the cleavages of political affiliation and social class. When the components of this identity—resistance to Israel, anti-imperialism, politico-cultural Arabism, and Shiite empowerment—were called into question by certain elements in the opposition movement, this was perceived as a threat to Shiite identity.

These communal dynamics signal the eruption of a war of semantics through which different interpretations and definitions of highly charged concepts such as freedom, sovereignty, independence, nationalism, and terrorism are deconstructed and reconstructed by various sects. The Shiite community's reconstruction of these concepts takes the form of communal support for the resistance. Protecting the resistance is identical to the preservation of the Shiite political identity. Viewed from this perspective, the resistance's role in confronting Israel cannot be divorced from its capacity as the Shiites' communal guardian—a role that is never publicly acknowledged but is nonetheless etched in the collective Shiite subconscious. Thus, the resistance functions as a form of political compensation for Shiite political underrepresentation; although an estimated 40 percent of Lebanese are Shiite, the community is allotted only 21 percent of parliamentary seats.

Accordingly, any plan that seeks to disarm the resistance will be construed as a form of communal disempowerment and will render the Shiites a potentially destabilizing force, eager to upset the political status quo. The community might no longer content itself with the political configuration laid out in the Taif Accord and would seek to redress the imbalance by pursuing the abolition of political confessionalism. Unfettered by Syria or its priority of resisting Israel (for which it has made numerous political sacrifices), Hizbollah could well play a starring role in such a narrative, striving to enact its regional agenda through a majoritarian democracy and in so doing, entrenching itself as the custodian of the Shiite political identity.

*Amal Saad-Ghorayeb is Assistant Professor at the Lebanese American University. She is the author of Hizbollah: Politics and Religion (Pluto Press, 2002).*