



Resistance society: Hezbollah's municipal activity

September 23, 2019

Overview

► **Hezbollah constructs a Shiite “mini-state” among the Shiite community in Lebanon, which caters to the needs of Shiite inhabitants in all spheres of life.** For this purpose, Hezbollah, with massive Iranian support, is engaged in establishing a civilian system, which operates alongside its military infrastructure, in the spheres of education, culture, health, welfare, finance, sports, construction, agriculture, and more.

► The social institutions established by Hezbollah with Iranian support, and their intensive civilian activity, provide the Shiite residents of Lebanon with a wide variety of services of the sort which is usually provided by the state, while taking advantage of the weakness of the Lebanese central government and years of neglect of the Shiite community. Hezbollah's extensive civilian activity **is designed to create among the Shiites in Lebanon a “resistance society” which supports Hezbollah in its struggle against Israel.**

Hezbollah's civilian activity **also includes the municipal field** in municipalities of regions with a Shiite population. In view of the rural nature of most of Shiite society, Hezbollah attaches major importance **to local government in towns and villages and maintains regular representation there.** Through power positions at the municipal level (see below) and the provision of services to the local residents in cities, towns and villages, **Hezbollah wins major influence on the ground.** However, Hezbollah does not only invest its own resources in the provision of municipal services. Its activity in this field, at least according to its opponents, **also constitutes an important source of finance for the activity of Hezbollah's civilian infrastructure.** The staff unit which regulates Hezbollah's activity in the local government is the **Municipal Activity Association** (which is also called the **Municipal Activity Unit**), with representatives in Shiite population centers throughout Lebanon.



**Logo of Hezbollah's Municipal Activity Association
(website of Lebanon's municipalities, July 19, 2012)**

► Hezbollah's popularity among the Shiite population and its intensive municipal activity **were reflected in Hezbollah's landslide victory in the latest municipal elections (held on May 2016)**. Hezbollah's candidates were elected mayors in important Shiite cities such as Nabatieh, Jebchit, Bint Jbeil and Ghaziya in southern Lebanon, and Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley. Unusual in this context was the city of Tyre, in southern Lebanon, where a candidate who is not clearly affiliated with any political power but probably leans to the Amal movement was elected. **Hezbollah-affiliated mayors have the ability to contribute to Hezbollah's influence on the local population and develop Hezbollah's local civilian institutions.**

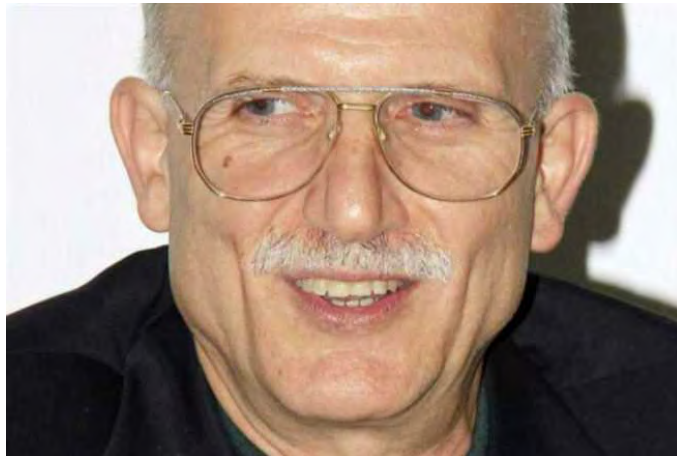
Structure of the study

► The study includes the following sections:

- ◆ Direction of the municipal activity
- ◆ Methods of the activity of the Municipal Activity Association
- ◆ Collaborations of the Municipal Activity Association with other institutions
- ◆ Hezbollah's branches in towns and villages
- ◆ Prominent figures on the municipal level
- ◆ Collaboration with local government officials in Iran

Direction of the municipal activity

► **The Municipal Activity Association** (which is also referred to as the Municipal Activity Unit) is the staff unit which regulates and directs Hezbollah's municipal activity. The chairman of the Association is **Dr. Mustafa Badr al-Din**, a physician by profession, former mayor of Nabatieh (Al-Akhbar, March 22, 2018). District officials are subordinate to him. Among them is the Association official in the First Region in southern Lebanon (south of the Litani River), **Sheikh Fouad Hanjoul**; the Association official in the Second Region in southern Lebanon (north of the Litani), **Hajj Hatem Harb**; and the Association official in the Bekaa Valley area, **Hussein al-Nimr**. The Association is recognized by the state, and Lebanon's President Michel Aoun even met with its representatives in November 2018 to discuss the forestation of southern Lebanon (Lebanon 24, November 16, 2019)



**Dr. Mustafa Badr al-Din, chairman of the Municipal Activity Association
(Al-Akhbar, March 22, 2018)**

¹ His son Mostafa was killed in battle in the Syrian Desert, fighting in the ranks of Hezbollah in June 2017. His cousin, the shahid Mohammad Hassan Na'ma, was killed during the breaking of the siege on the Khanaser-Aleppo Road in February 2016 (database used by the ITIC's study about Hezbollah's fatalities in Syria, January 2019).

Hezbollah's extensive spread on all levels of the local government systems (cities, towns, and villages) **provides it with major influence on the ground** and enhances its ability to win the support of large Shiite populations. Furthermore, according to Hezbollah's opponents, the organization exploits the positions of power which it acquired in the municipalities (inter alia, having run in the elections in joint lists with the Amal movement) **as a source of finance for the institutions of its civilian infrastructure**, for instance, the operation of the **Women's Organizations² and the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts³**. According to claims by Hezbollah's opponents, **the Municipal Activity Association outlines a work plan for every municipality where Hezbollah wields influence and determines to every mayor what projects they should carry out** in accordance with Hezbollah's interests (Janoubia, June 28, 2015; Al-Joumhouria, May 10, 2019).

► In addition, since 2014, claims resurface time and again **about Hezbollah and figures affiliated with it taking over lands under joint ownership in various villages in southern Lebanon**, while enjoying full backing of these villages' municipalities and mukhtars, who are Hezbollah's adherents (Janoubia, September 26 and December 3, 2014; May 19, 2016; October 25 and 29, November 13-14, 2017; January 28, August 28 and September 6, 2018).

Methods of the activity of the Municipal Activity Association

► In order to examine the content of the activity of the Municipal Activity Association, the ITIC selected as a test case the activity of **the Second Region in southern Lebanon (north of the Litani River) during August 2019**. In this month, the Association held **113 activities** in this region which can be divided into several main fields (Facebook page of the Municipal Activity Association – the Second Region, August 2019):

- ◆ **Improvement of infrastructure and assistance in daily life** (42 activities). For example: preparing and widening dirt paths, repairing water pumps, installing street lighting, and more.

² For further details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from August 2019, "Hezbollah's Women's Organizations Unit"

³ For further details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from June 2019, "**The Imam al-Mahdi Scouts Association**: Hezbollah's youth movement which indoctrinates youth with Iranian radical Shiite Islam and serves as a source of youngsters who join Hezbollah"

- ◆ **Vocational training and encouragement of small businesses** (18 activities). For example: cellular phone maintenance course and an exhibition of agricultural produce.
- ◆ **Activities of Shiite Islamic nature** (13 activities). For example: giving presents to children on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, and charitable activity in advance of Ashura.
- ◆ **Education** (10 activities). Mainly appreciation ceremonies for outstanding school students.
- ◆ **Sports** (eight activities). For example: a week of discovering talents in basketball and volleyball, and a soccer tournament to mark the anniversary of the Second Lebanon War.
- ◆ **General social values** (seven activities). For example: a “Say No to Drugs” trip.
- ◆ **Subsidizing leisure activity** (five activities). For example: a free trip to a children’s circus, and events marking the completion of the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts summer camps.
- ◆ **Jihadi trip** (four activities). For example: Trips to Hezbollah’s exhibitions and to the Hezbollah battle legacy sites.
- ◆ **Art and culture** (three activities). For example: a festival of the Resistance poetry held at the Mleeta Tourist Landmark of the Resistance.
- ◆ **Shahid glorification** (a single activity) – a ceremony honoring a shahid and laying the cornerstone for his monument.
- ◆ **Tourism** (a single activity) – assistance to the Rihan municipality in administrative work and preparations on the ground for the improvement of tourism in the area.



Improvement of infrastructure and assistance in daily life. Right: Preparation and widening of dirt paths prior to paving them in the village of Al-Dalafa⁴ (Facebook page of the Municipal Activity – The Second Region, August 20, 2019). Left: Maintenance of the street lighting grid in the village of Zalaya (Facebook page of the Municipal Activity – The Second Region, August 22, 2019)



Right: “Jihadi trip” organized by the Aramta municipality to the Tomb of Abu Rkab⁵ (Facebook page of the Municipal Activity – The Second Region, August 10, 2019). Left: Partnership with the state of Lebanon – procession marking Lebanon’s Army Day in the village of Mashghara (Facebook page of the Municipal Activity, August 3, 2019)

Collaborations of the Municipal Activity Association with other institutions

► The extensive activity of the Municipal Activity Association is carried out in collaboration with many institutions, including **civil associations** (NGOs), **the Amal movement**, and **the Lebanese government** (the Ministry of Social Affairs, water companies, the Agricultural Ministry, and the Ministry of Public Works). The Association **maintains close cooperation with Hezbollah’s other civilian and political infrastructure institutions**, such as the Sports

⁴ Village in the Hasbaya District, about 10 km south of Lake Qaraoun.

⁵ A person considered holy by the people because he believed in one god in pre-Islamic times.

Mobilization, the Islamic Health Organization, the Women's Organizations, the Mleeta Tourist Landmark of the Resistance, Jihad al-Bina, the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts, and the Loyalty to Resistance bloc in the Lebanese Parliament.

Hezbollah's branches in towns and villages

► **Hezbollah is also active on the local level of towns and villages.** The ITIC has no information on the hierarchy or organizational structure of the local branches (*shu'bah*) within Hezbollah's civilian infrastructure. However, it would be reasonable to assume that Hezbollah's local branches are spread in Shiite towns and villages in accordance with the spread of the rest of Hezbollah's civilian infrastructure. Such branches **actually coordinate the activity of the civilian infrastructure in each village** (Al-Jazeera, August 24, 2010; Ein Baal village website, October 23, 2012; Toura village website, March 15, 2016; Ya Sour, September 27, 2017; Ya Qana, April 27, 2018).

► As a test case for the activity of the branches, the ITIC selected the activity of the Hezbollah branch **in the village of Wardaniya, in southern Lebanon**, in August 2019. The branch held 13 activities in August, in the following topics:

- ◆ **Shiite Islam** (six activities). For example: Women's Organizations' Al-Ghadir ceremony and Ashura gatherings.
- ◆ **Education** (four activities). For example: awarding scholarships to outstanding schoolchildren; remedial lessons for high school students.
- ◆ **Jihadi trip and a jihadi meeting**, a single activity of each kind, around the anniversary of the Second Lebanon War.
- ◆ **"The Soft War"** – how to cope with psychological warfare and the battle for hearts and minds conducted against Hezbollah supporters; a single activity on the topic of social media (Facebook page of the Wardaniya branch, August 2019).



Activity of the Women's Organizations in the village of Wardaniya: a jihadi meeting with Hezbollah's wounded operative Mohammad Allouche at the Hussainiya (a Shiite religious-cultural club) of the village (Facebook page of the Wardaniya branch, August 8, 2019)

Hezbollah's prominent figures on the municipal level

► Hezbollah's major investment in the local municipal level and its popularity were reflected in the latest municipal elections in Lebanon. According to a report on Iranian TV's Al-Alam Channel, which provided a summary of the 2016 elections, Hezbollah recorded better results than in the previous elections, held in 2010 (Al-Alam Channel, May 12, 2016). A report on the Al-Mayadeen Channel (affiliated with Hezbollah), which provided a summary of the election results, stated that the alliance between Hezbollah and Amal (both having run in a joint list) won a landslide victory in most of the areas of southern Lebanon (Al-Mayadeen, May 24, 2016). According to Al-Alam Channel, Hezbollah won in the elections in all the towns and villages where it participated and enjoyed a high voting percentage: about 50% in the Bekaa Governorate and over 60% in the Baalbek District. As an example of Hezbollah getting stronger, the channel referred to the areas of Baalbek and Brital, where Hezbollah won all the municipality seats (Al-Alam, May 12, 2016). Indeed, an examination of the election results in main Shiite cities in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley indicates that the elected mayors are affiliated with Hezbollah. Thus, for example:

◆ **Dr. Ahmad Kahil** was elected **mayor of Nabatieh** (An-Nahar, April 23, 2016).



**Dr. Ahmad Kahil, mayor of Nabatieh
(Janoubia, May 23, 2014)**

- ◆ **Mohammad Jaafar Fahs** was elected **mayor of Jebchit** (Orient News, July 21, 2016).
- ◆ **Hajj Fouad Ballouk** was elected **mayor of Baalbek** (New Lebanon's YouTube channel, May 31, 2019)



**Hajj Fouad Ballouk, mayor of Baalbek
(Al-Mashriq, July 31, 2019)**

- ◆ **Hajj Ahmad Khalifa** was elected mayor of Al-Ghaziya (near Sidon) (An-Nashra, July 12, 2019).
 - ◆ **Engineer Afif Bazzi** was elected mayor of Bint Jbeil.
- **The city of Tyre** was an exception: the mayor elected there was **Engineer Hassan Dbouk**, who has no clear affiliation with any particular political power but apparently leans to the Amal movement.

The case of Sohmor

- **In the city of Sohmor** (in the western Bekaa Valley), Hezbollah and Amal reached an understanding on a rotation deal for mayor, following their running in a joint list in the municipal elections (Janoubia, July 18, 2018). On June 20, 2019, a ceremony was held in which Haidar Shahla, the Hezbollah-affiliated incoming mayor, replaced Mohammad al-Kheshn, the Amal-affiliated outgoing mayor. At the ceremony, which was held at the office of

the governor of the Western Bekaa, Haidar Shahla promised that **“the work will be carried out in accordance with Sayyid Abbas Musawi’s saying, ‘we will serve you as if you were the most dear to us’.”** He stressed that “all the resources will be dedicated to **the people of resistance and its embracing environment** (i.e., to the “resistance society”). We will act in accordance with the priorities and available resources.” Hussein Karim, **director of Hezbollah’s municipal activity in the Western Bekaa**, who also spoke at the ceremony, thanked the outgoing mayor Mohammad al-Kheshn and wished luck to the incoming mayor (AlKalima Online, June 20, 2019).

► **Institutions of Hezbollah’s civilian infrastructure have a major presence in Sohmor.** Therefore, it may be reasonable to assume that **the incoming mayor Haidar Shahla will work to promote them**, as he promised at the ceremony. Hezbollah’s main civilian institutions in Sohmor are:

- ◆ The Islamic Health Organization’s Western Bekaa Hospital
- ◆ Two troops of the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts (boys and girls)
- ◆ An active branch of the Women’s Organizations
- ◆ An active branch of the Sports Mobilization (in June 2019, a futsal tournament was held, sponsored by the Sohmor municipality, to mark the anniversary of the IDF’s withdrawal from Lebanon)

► After the Hezbollah-affiliated mayor entered office, **the Sohmor municipality organized a seminar** entitled “We will fund your business,” **in coordination with the European Union’s Economic and Social Development Fund**. The purpose of the seminar was to support small and medium business owners. It was led by Wassim Sanawbar, the fund’s regional coordinator in southern Lebanon (Facebook page of the Sohmor municipality and the Facebook page of the Municipal Activity – the Second Region, August 24, 2019).



Seminar on financing small businesses by the EU, organized by the Sohmor municipality, which is headed by a Hezbollah-affiliated mayor (Facebook page of the Sohmor municipality, August 24, 2019)

Collaboration with local government officials in Iran

- ▶ The Municipal Activity Association **operates in collaboration with local government officials in Iran** and organizes mutual visits of the municipal system's senior figures. Thus, for example, in October 2018, **heads of municipality unions from southern Lebanon visited Iran**. The delegation visited holy sites and the Tomb of Imam Khomeini, and then held a special tour in various municipalities in Iran, focused on local government issues such as waste treatment, vehicle traffic management, disaster management and more (Ya Sour, October 28, 2018).
- ▶ In July 2019, **a delegation from the Mashhad municipality (in Iran) visited the municipality union of the Bint Jbeil District and the Bint Jbeil municipality**. Members of the Municipal Activity Association accompanied the Iranian delegation in its visit to the Emergency and Civil Defense Center in Bar'ashit, in the agricultural training center in Al-Tiri, and in various sites (including the Shahid Garden) in Bint Jbeil. The visit also included the Iran Garden in Maroun al-Ras (Al-Manar, July 9, 2019).



Right: Delegation of senior figures of the municipal system in southern Lebanon visiting Iran. A photo of Imam Khomeini is visible in the background (Ya Sur, October 28, 2019). Left: Delegation of the Mashhad municipality (in Iran) visiting southern Lebanon (Al-Manar, July 9, 2019)