

# Lebanese Option Gathering: A Shia Alternative to Hezbollah

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I would like to start by saying a few words about my background. I'm not Syrian, I'm Lebanese. I know that it's a problem for Americans to pronounce the Assaad but just keep on long enough and you'll get there. When the war started in Lebanon in 1975 I went to school in Switzerland, and that's why I speak so many languages because in Switzerland you have to learn all the official languages that the Swiss speak, and there are many. After that I went to, of all places, Salt Lake City, Utah and that was quite an experience. I lived four years in Salt Lake City. I studied at the University of Utah and then went back to finish my master's in Holland in Amsterdam in mathematics. I started my business in Holland in 1988 and watched it grow. In 2003 I decided to go back to Lebanon for good.

Throughout this period I was going back and forth to Lebanon. I was visiting Lebanon once or twice a year and it was always in the back of my mind the idea of going back for good, not because I come from a traditional family that has been in the history and politics of Lebanon for 800 years but because I felt I could contribute, do something for Lebanon. In 2003 I decided to sell my business in Europe and go and live in Lebanon. Since then I've been a full time politician in Lebanon. The moment I arrived in Lebanon I started taking a very hard stance against Syria and Hezbollah. I believe that politics in the Middle East should be clear. We are tired of gray – we don't want gray anymore. We want things to be white or black. Gray is what got us here; gray, postponing not confronting the problem is what got us here. The Syrians let me, and some of you may wonder why the Syrians would let me, because let's not forget this is the time that the Syrians were controlling the country this was before the 2005 withdrawal of the Syrians. The Syrians and Hezbollah would let me go around making very hard speeches in the south because I have people on the ground—we have a lot of family support on the ground—and they figured that at this time Assaad doesn't represent a direct threat to us, a confrontation with him can be a headache to us so, therefore, let's ignore him. In 2005 I ran for the parliament election in the south of Lebanon. I knew there was no chance because of Hezbollah's monopoly and oppression, but still, a stand had to be made, a message had to be given. In fact all I received 12 percent of the Shia votes even though the Christians, the Sunnis, the Druze in the south of Lebanon did not vote because at that time they had an alliance with Hezbollah.

After the 2006 war I started working a lot because I realized that there was a change in the mood in the Shia communities. After 2006 people did not sympathize with Hezbollah any more and more people do not sympathize with Hezbollah any more. You have to understand that the idea that Shia in Lebanon are all with Hezbollah is a myth. Shia in Lebanon are not with Hezbollah.

Shia in Lebanon are people, and people wherever you go are people. They all want the same things. They all want stability, security, jobs, education, health care, a chance to have a bright and prosperous future. That is what we all want. And the money Hezbollah is getting from Iran is not enough to buy that standard of living for the Shias in Lebanon. It's enough to get that standard of living to minorities in the Shia community. The majority, however, craves change, but they are afraid, they are scared. You are dealing here with a very oppressive party—even more oppressive than the former Soviet Union because if you are against them not only do they accuse you of being a traitor but you are not a Muslim—you are not a Shia, you are not a man of God. So very few people are willing to stand up to them but deep down they do want change.

For eight months I negotiated with all independent Shias. There were a lot of Shias that would agree with me but did not want to translate this into a public statement because they are afraid. And I didn't want to leave anybody out. I didn't want to leave any name in the Shia community that I had not talked with to be with us in. So, after eight months of pushing and pressuring people that we need to do this, it's our responsibility, we Shia have to stand up to Hezbollah, Lebanese Option Gathering was launched in July 2007. We started with 16 board members, we are now 24. We are from all parts of Lebanon, parts where you have great Shia communities. The board members are not only politicians, they are intellectuals, business people, media people, important names in the Shia community. These are Shias that know that the only way to weaken Hezbollah is from within the Shia community. These are Shias that know that in order to move forward with Lebanon, we have to break the monopoly of Hezbollah on the Shia community. Why? Because what do we want? We want a Lebanon that is part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we want a modern country that really has the rule of law. In order to get there we have to move forward with all the big communities, including the Shiite community, and we cannot move forward if Hezbollah controls, or claims to control, the Shia community. It will always block that process because Hezbollah's agenda is not Lebanese, as we all know, it's an Iranian agenda. Iran and Syria want to keep Lebanon as leverage, each for his own reasons, towards the international community and the U.S. in particular. The Syrians have a problem with the international tribunal so by creating chaos in Lebanon they are giving a message to the world that if you want this headache to go away that is called Lebanon we are the aspirin, we are the Tylenol. But, on the other hand, you have to talk to us and make concession concerning the international tribunal. This is what the Syrians want.

The Iranians, on the other hand, have all these grand plans of building a new Persian Empire. It's good to have plans, it's good to have ambitions in life, but it's not good to have ambitions and plans on the back of people suffering. And this is what they are doing. They are creating a lot parties and movements like Hezbollah and Hamas and even the Taliban in Afghanistan, in order to put more and more leverage on the world community so that they become a major regional player.

We at LOG have a lot of activities. We meet every week, we have a press release every week that you can see on our website [www.Intimaa.org](http://www.Intimaa.org). We are Lebanese Option Gathering because what we mean by that is that we are Lebanese, Shia-Lebanese. We chose for Lebanon. We are not Shia-Iranians, that's what the idea of Lebanese Option Gathering means, we are Shia but we are first Lebanese. We go on television, on talk shows, and we have lectures on the ground in Shia communities. This is all very good and it's a base, but this is not enough. We cannot defeat Hezbollah just by doing this.

Let me say one thing here, Hezbollah is strong not because people believe in its rhetoric. Hezbollah is strong because it has tremendous social networks and funds from Iran. This is why

Hezbollah is strong. The good thing is that Iran is not sending enough money to buy all the Shias, otherwise I would be out of business. They are sending enough money to buy a part of the Shias. The rest of the Shias we want to get moving. We want them to start speaking out, to start confronting Hezbollah. We need to also start building another social network that will give the reflection of LOG being a strong alternative. We have to reflect that image because if we do not reflect that image, if people don't see hope they will not move—they will stay where they are. We all have seen the former Soviet Union. People in the former Soviet Union were voting for the Communist Party with 99 percent of the vote and the same Russians are now voting only 12 percent for the Communist Party. Why? Because they were oppressed then, now they can speak their minds. So, therefore, the Shias in Lebanon in order for them to speak out have to see the light at the end of the tunnel. When we start doing this social network on the ground, we will be able to reflect that image that is needed to free people.

Now, where do we get the funds? I truly believe the U.S. is the only place where we can get the funds because the U.S. is the only country that is serious enough and has the stomach to take Iran on. Unfortunately, the Europeans and others do not have the courage to do so. That's why I am here in the states and we have our plans ready and it will only cost a fraction of what Iran is paying Hezbollah. I'm not ashamed to say this. What I say here I say in Lebanon because I believe we have a great common ground with the West and with the U.S. in particular. I believe that after 9/11 the great enemy for the Western civilization, for the Western economy, for Western society, is the so-called Islamists because they are a big threat after communism had fallen.

Therefore, when the U.S. and the Western world say that they want to have democracies and freedom of speech in the Middle East I agree that the U.S. and the western countries are sincere about that. We do not agree all the time on the strategies being applied to achieve it, but I believe the intentions are good. Why? Not because the U.S. are well-doers, but because it is in the interest of the western world to have democracies in the Middle East because with democracies, with freedom of speech, with economic growth, with jobs, that's how on the middle and long-term you can confront the so-called Islamists. That's how you make them weaker.

I specifically say "so-called Islamists." Even though I was raised in the Western world I am also a Shia—a proud Shia—and these people who claim to speak in the name of Islam have nothing to do with Islam. Shia before the Khomeini regime never had problems with the U.S. or the Western world. The problems started after the Khomeini regime came into power. Therefore, I would urge people not to say any more that this is a clash of civilizations—which you hear a lot—a clash between the West and the East, a clash between Islam and Christianity. No, this is a clash between all of us and a bunch of people that have hijacked Islam. That is what it is. Now, this hijack has turned into another Cold War not with the Soviet Union but with Iran and all the movements allied to Iran.

The confrontation is taking place in three countries—Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. While it is very important to win that confrontation in all these three countries it is most important to win it in Lebanon. Why? Because if we cannot win in Lebanon, the Lebanon that has a history of democracy, that has a history of freedom of speech, that has a history of openness to other cultures, open economies, if in such a Lebanon we cannot win this war against the forces of darkness, how the hell are we going to win elsewhere? How? Therefore, in my mind, it's a very simple equation. Winning in Lebanon means being able to win elsewhere; losing in Lebanon, means that the rest of the Arab world will fall, in time, to these forces of darkness.



We at LOG have our share of responsibilities and we know that the key to putting Lebanon on the right track is by weakening Hezbollah. We know that by weakening Hezbollah not only do we put Lebanon on the right track, but we will give a devastating blow to all the so-called Islamists in the region. It will signal the beginning of the retreat. It will mark the turning point; it will show that we are starting to win this second Cold War.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

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