Hezbollah’s Teen Military Recruits

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<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/565221-hezbollahs-teen-military-recruits>

Hezbollah [mourned](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565198-hezbollah-mourns-child-soldier) last week the death of a teenager killed “on jihadist duty” in Syria. The party’s Al-Manar television [reported](http://www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?eid=1181024) last Tuesday that “Hezbollah bid farewell to the mujahid martyr Mashhur Fahd Shamseddine.” Neither Hezbollah nor media outlets associated with the party made any reference to the boy’s age. Hezbollah only announced that he had died in a tragic accident while performing his jihadist duty. However, Arabic-language newspapers reported Shamseddine was only 15. Al-Araby al-Jadeed [reported](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/4/28/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A)that the teenager was killed a week ago in an Israeli raid on Hezbollah positions in the Qalamoun area.

Hezbollah did not explain what kind of jihadist duty the teenager was performing so close to a battlefield, but a close look at how the party recruits its young members is cause for serious concern, says political analyst Ali al-Amine. “Hezbollah does not think that low—they won’t bring a 15-year-old child soldier to the battlefield. They haven’t reached the stage of recruiting child soldiers,” he said. “But sources of Hezbollah said that [the boy] died while he was receiving a military training. This raises a question: why are you giving military training to children?”

**Hezbollah’s military greenhouse**

Getting into Hezbollah’s military ranks was not easy before the group got involved in the Syrian war. They recruit and start training at very young ages—typically at around 10-13 years old, when they join the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts, says 35-year-old Hussein, a former scout. Later, when the scouts are 16 or 17, they can join the party’s military ranks or opt to continue their education.

The Imam al-Mahdi Scouts were [founded](http://www.almahdiscouts.net/) in 1985 and are registered with the Lebanese Ministry of Education. The organization includes children from four to 17 years of age, split into Cubs, Scouts and Rangers. Besides outdoor activities and charity work, the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts also teach the young to be good Muslims, to volunteer at local mosques, and to defend Lebanon against Israel.

“This is no secret. I was a scout myself, but I did not join the military ranks,” Hussein told NOW. “It was the sheikh at the mosque who chose the ones who were fit for the military [the scouts get intense religious training]. Not all are selected. The family can refuse, of course. But usually they don’t. On the contrary; some bribe the sheikh to pick their sons, because the family gets perks like jobs or free education for the rest of the children.”

**The connections**

Hussein also said that Lebanese *wasta*[nepotism] is prevalent in Hezbollah. “Usually, the boys who have family members in Hezbollah have more chances to get picked for the military,” he says. Hussein’s uncle was a Hezbollah member and could have made it easy for him to be recruited, but his own father begged the uncle not to take the boy because his father was blind and Hussein was the only one who could support his family.

It all depends how good the boys are in school. “If you have good grades and a good family, you’re most likely to finish school and go to university. But all boys go to military training until they’re 14 and get the *brevet*,” Hussein said. The boys are trained in an annual summer camp located in a remote area. After they take their brevet, boys with good grades continue school while the military recruits start real combat training. These rules do not apply to girls. Hezbollah encourages women to join the party, but they are also encouraged to study and to graduate university so that they can later teach, Hussein explained.

“This is exactly what used to happen in the ‘80s and 90s,” Houssein said. “But the mentality has changed in the last 10 years or so. Most people now concentrate on studying and opt for the teaching career. I guess that’s why maybe they have this problem with recruiting fighters now.”

**Social class matters nowadays**

[*Mahdi Magazine*](http://www.mahdimagazine.com/magazine/index/13_17years), the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts magazine for boys between 13 and 17, teaches scouts how to avoid becoming an extremist, among other things. It also features a story about a scout’s first military mission. The boy is sent to scout an area and is not happy because it’s not a real fighting mission and, therefore, not manly enough. “My friend was joking with me. ‘When are you going to get married?’ he asked. ‘When I become a man.’ ‘And when would that be?’ ‘When I go on my first mission on the front.’ The boy is finally sent to the front, gets shot, and is taken to the hospital where he meets a nurse and falls in love with her.

It’s with stories like this that teenagers in the best schools in Dahieh and South Lebanon are enticed to join Hezbollah’s military ranks. A Hezbollah supporter who wished to remain anonymous told NOW his children go to one of the best schools in the southern suburbs of Beirut and frequently go on trips to Hezbollah museums and camps. They watch presentations about weaponry and are told stories of heroes of the Resistance.

He says, though, that despite the indoctrination, it’s up to the family to decide a child’s future. “I encourage my children to be very good in school so that they avoid a military career,” he said. He also says he’s committed to his support for Hezbollah because he feels protected. “I was never asked to join the party directly. But I know that I get a lot in return for being a supporter. If I lost my job, I would get another one the next day.”

**Recruiting from the street**

Hezbollah is in a very tight spot in terms of human resources on the battlefield in Syria. Its troops are stretched out and many experienced commanders have been killed in the fighting, by Jabhat al-Nusra car bombs and even by Israeli air strikes. There is a lot of recruiting going on in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Hussein said. “If you want to fight, you have to go to one of the offices and they can hire you. It’s not required, but they prefer that you’re a supporter; that you have the preliminary training.”

Al-Amine told NOW that Hezbollah indeed has a problem with the number of troops involved in the Syrian conflict and is recruiting fighters without proper experience. “A very large number of soldiers who went to Syria were not, in fact, proper soldiers of the Resistance, so they were poorly trained. They are supporters willing to fight for the party, rather than members of Hezbollah’s military ranks,” he explained. “The increasing fatalities of Hezbollah in Syria put pressure on the party, but the real pressure is the general feeling among the people that Hezbollah’s victory in Syria is unlikely. This feeling creates a kind of confusion, not to say a reluctance, to fight in Syria.”

Hezbollah has also endeavored to recruit soldiers from the Druze community in Syria, Al-Amin says, which indicates that Hezbollah can no longer rely on its supporters and sympathizers, adding that this is why the party is also accepting [Afghans and Iraqi Shiites](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-afghan-shiite-fighters-in-syria) in its ranks in Syria and Iraq.