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Canada

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

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19 December 2013

**LBN104694.E**

Lebanon: Amal Movement, including areas of operation and control; instances of forced recruitment, particularly of youth; activity, including checkpoints and roadblocks within Beirut (2011-December 2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### 1. Background

Sources indicate that Amal is an acronym for "Afwaj al-Muqawa al-Lubnaniyah" (START n.d.; *Political Handbook of the World* 2013), which, according to the *Political Handbook of the World,* means "Groups of the Lebanese Resistance" (ibid.). The word Amal also means "hope" in Arabic (ibid.; START n.d.). The Amal Movement was founded by Imam Musa Sadr (*Political Handbook of the World* 2013; START n.d.) in the 1970s (ibid.; Conciliation Resources 2012, 96). The *Political Handbook of the World* states that, "[a]lthough allied with the Palestinian left during the civil war, Amal subsequently became increasingly militant on behalf of Lebanon's Shiites, many of whom had been forced from their homes in the south, and in support of the Iranian revolution of 1979" (2013). Conciliation Resources, a UK-based NGO dedicated to peace building (n.d.), describes the Amal Movement as a "Shia group that grew in response to the marginalisation of Shiites and their frustration at the domination of Palestinian groups and Israeli attacks," and adds that "Amal became one of the most important militias in the civil war and an ally of Syria" (Conciliation Resources 2012, 96).

### 2. Government

Conciliation Resources indicates that Amal has been represented in the government since the end of the civil war, and has "extended patronage powers" (ibid., 97). Amal is led by Nabih Berri (US 1 Feb. 2011, 19; *Political Handbook of the World* 2013). Sources indicate that Berri has led the Movement since 1980 (*Al Akhbar* 23 Oct. 2013; Small Arms Survey May 2010). Berri is the parliamentary speaker (International Crisis Group 22 Nov. 2012, 11; US 1 Feb. 2011, 19), and according to the US Congressional Research Service (CRS), he has been the speaker since 1992 (ibid.).

### 2.1 Relationship with Hezbollah

The *Political Handbook of the World* indicates that "Amal joined Hezbollah in the Lebanese cabinet in 2005 and allied itself with Hezbollah and other opposition parties in the legislative elections of June 2009, when it won 13 seats" (*PHW* 2013). The *Political Handbook of the World* also says that, in 2011, "Amal joined its March 8 Alliance allies in the new government led by Najib Mikati" (ibid.). Sources indicate that the March 8 Alliance consists of the Amal Movement, Hezbollah, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, and other groups (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2012, 4; International Crisis Group 13 May 2013, 7). The International Crisis Group indicates that the name of the alliance "refers to a massive demonstration organized by pro-Syrian Lebanese parties on 8 March 2005, expressing gratitude to Damascus" (13 May 2013, 7).

The CRS has described Amal as "more moderate" than Hezbollah and as "Hezbollah's junior partner in the Shiite coalition" (US 1 Feb. 2011, 19). The International Crisis Group indicated that Hezbollah's alliance with the Amal Movement has been "resilient" and stated that

the two Shiite movements have grown closer since 2005 for a variety of reasons: Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon; the 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel; the confrontation between the pro-Western March 14 and the Hizbollah-led March 8 coalitions; as well as growing Shiite-Sunni polarisation. Due to these developments, Amal - historically dependent on Damascus - increasingly has had to rely on Hizbollah as a shield against its foes and in order to ensure that the larger, stronger, more popular Shiite movement not monopolise the Shiite field. (22 Nov. 2012, 12)

The International Crisis Group adds that "Amal has followed in Hizbollah's footsteps at every stage of escalating domestic tensions" (22 Nov. 2012, 13).

Media sources have reported on clashes between Hezbollah and the Amal Movement (Naharnet 3 Aug. 2011; Ya Libnan 9 Nov. 2013). On 9 November 2013, Ya Libnan reported that Hezbollah and Amal supporters clashed in the town of Ankoun after an Amal official reportedly was stopped at a Hezbollah checkpoint. On 3 August 2011, Naharnet, an independent digital news site in Lebanon (Naharnet n.d.), reported that clashes that took place "several days earlier" between Hezbollah and the Amal Movement had been resolved.

## 3. Areas of Operation

The *Political Handbook of the World* indicates that "[m]ost of Amal's support today comes from coastal cities in Lebanon's south" (2013). CRS indicates that, "in recent years," Hezbollah candidates and Amal party representatives have been winning seats in municipal elections in southern and eastern Lebanon (US 6 Nov. 2012, 4).

Sources indicate that Amal does not "control" areas in Lebanon, and that the only militia that can "control" areas is Hezbollah (Professor 6 Dec. 2013; Visiting Lecturer 13 Dec. 2013).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a visiting lecturer on human rights at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, who has also worked for several international organizations in the Arab region, provided information based on his personal knowledge. He stated that the

Amal movement is present in the areas that are known to be predominantly populated by Shias. These include the areas between Southern Sidon to most of the [b]order areas with Israel, the Southern suburbs of Beirut and most parts of Northern Bekaa. In addition, they have a low profile presence in areas where Shias live with other sects such as some areas in Beirut city (Shias and Sunnis) and mixed areas in the South (Christian-Shias or Sunnis-Shias). (ibid.)

The Jamestown Foundation, a research and analysis institution that provides information on issues that are strategically important to the US (n.d.), reports that "[p]redominantly Shi'a regions of Lebanon, such as in the southern suburbs of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Beka'a Valley, are secured by a mix of Hezbollah full-time fighters, auxiliary village-level militias and armed members of the Lebanese Shi'a AMAL movement" (2 Nov. 2012, 6).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of Middle East politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London indicated that the Amal Movement operates in parts of specific neighbourhoods in southern and western Beirut, such as sections of: Jinah, Ain-al Mraiseh, Ouzai, Raouche, "some very small blocks in Hamra," and Verdun where Nabih Berri's palace is located (Professor 6 Dec. 2013). The Professor stated that the Amal Movement also operates in parts of southern Lebanon, for example, in Nabatiya (ibid.). Ya Libnan, a Lebanese news website, reports that Ankoun, a Sidon suburb in south Lebanon, is "an Amal Movement stronghold" (9 Nov. 2013).

According to the International Crisis Group, "Amal played a part in Hizbollah's May 2008 takeover of West Beirut" (22 Nov. 2012, 13). Human Rights Watch similarly reports that, in 2008,

"[m]embers of the opposition groups - Hezbollah, Amal, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party - militarily took over parts of Beirut. They also attacked and shut down media offices affiliated with the Future Movement. Supporters of the pro-government groups-the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party-also resorted to violence in areas under their control, including the killing of captive opposition fighters in the northern town of Halba. (Jan. 2009)

Sources indicate that Hezbollah's take-over of West Beirut was "temporary" (Middle East Policy Council 2008; Guzansky and Berti 2012, 6). Human Rights Watch adds that, in 2008, Hezbollah, Amal, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party "used small arms and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs, often referred to as B7s) in densely populated areas of Beirut. These attacks killed and wounded numerous civilians" (18 May 2008).

## 4. Activities

According to the Professor, the Amal Movement, like all other political movements in Lebanon, has an armed wing (Professor 6 Dec. 2013). The Professor added that the armed wing "is not visible all the time, but has appeared on the streets at various moments (the last time being Spring 2008)" (ibid.). According to the *Political Handbook of the World*," Amal has been largely disarmed in recent years, as Hezbollah became the primary military opposition to Israeli forces in southern Lebanon" (2013). Similarly, the visiting lecturer stated that

Amal, as other similar groups, have largely downscaled their military infrastructure in the 1990's, keeping only a smaller number of fighters with a restricted scope of work; such as guarding the movement's premises and their perimeters, providing security services to their own senior members, security coordination (at neighborhood level) with Hizbullah, Lebanese Armed Forces, Internal Security Forces or other actors, etc. Although not fully trusted by Hizbullah, some Amal operatives are known to collect and convey intelligence information about their neighborhood to Hizbullah. On a larger military scale, the primary decision to undertake military activities against Israel (the official reason why Amal, Hizbullah and other groups use to maintain their armed groups beyond 1990) is monopolized by Hizbullah since the 1990's. Therefore, Amal did not undertake, in solo, any military campaign, [or] activity whatsoever during the period 2010- 2013. The Amal armed members are maintained and operate as a reserve regimen to the Hizbullah ultra organized militia. However, having a redundant group of armed people has opened the appetite of other actors to use them "as necessary." By doing so, Amal members do not operate on behalf of Amal itself but as mercenaries including but not limited to Syrian intelligence, organized crime groups, etc. (13 Dec. 2013)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The 2012 Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI), a global evaluation of transition processes, indicates that Hezbollah and Amal "maintain a standing military force of 'resistance fighters,' over which the central government has no control whatsoever" (2012, 5).

A report entitled *Arbitrary Detention and Torture: The Bitter Reality of Lebanon*, based on a 2008-2009 study conducted by four NGOs: Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), Coordination Committee of the Organizations for Voluntary Service (COSV), KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, the Permanent Peace Movement (PPM), indicates that

[d]uring this study, nearly all detainees arrested on suspicion of collaboration with Israel complained of torture, regardless of the interrogation services. In some cases, Amal and Hezbollah militias are involved in the arrest and practice torture on their 'detainees', with no legal grounds for their detention, prior to handing them over to the authorized Lebanese services. (CLDH Jan. 2011, 25)

The report added that it was "impossible to effectively assess the prevalence of allegations of torture perpetrated by Amal and Hezbollah militias, which arrest and interrogate suspects - at least in some cases - before handing them over to the competent security service" (ibid., 29).

Sources indicate that the Amal Movement filed a criminal complaint against the CLDH for reporting on the torture of detainees by people affiliated with Amal (AI 2012; Human Rights Watch Jan. 2012, 2). In March 2011, the General Prosecutor opened a criminal investigation of the organization (ibid.; AI 2012). On 12 October 2011, the OMCT indicated that two CLDH representatives were facing "ongoing judicial harassment."

The US *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011* states that, on 15 December 2011,

a fight between two individuals evolved into an armed clash between members from the Shia Amal Movement and the pro-Syrian Sunni Ahbash group in Bourj Abi Haidar in Beirut, leaving three dead and 11 injured. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) intervened to contain the clash. (24 May 2012, 2)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Media sources report on clashes between the Amal Movement and Palestinians in the Farhat neighbourhood (MTV Lebanon 30 May 2013; *The Daily Star* 30 May 2013), which the *Daily Star* indicates is in the southern suburbs of Beirut (ibid.). *The Daily Star* reports that there was an "extended shootout" and hand grenades were used (ibid.). *The Daily Star* adds that Amal Movement officials deny that they were involved in the incident (ibid.).

### 4.1 Use of Checkpoints and Roadblocks in Beirut

The Professor indicated that the Amal Movement has had checkpoints in the past, but that, to her knowledge, it does not presently have permanent checkpoints in Lebanon other than some in Verdun, near Berri's palace (Professor 6 Dec. 2013). However, she added that, "during times of car-bombing or unrest," the

Amal Movement does "set up checkpoints near 'their' neighbourhoods" (6 Dec. 2013). On 24 June 2013, Al Jazeera reported on 15 deaths that were the result of clashes in Sidon between government troops and followers of a Sunni Sheikh who is opposed to Hezbollah. Al Jazeera added that "[c]heckpoints have been erected, some by the Amal movement ... to prevent people from going through Sidon - they have been turning people back" (13 Dec. 2013). The visiting lecturer indicated that the

Amal movement does not carry out military activities by itself. Although rare, the presence of Amal members on checkpoints is limited to a secondary role in checkpoints managed by another party. Such checkpoints - if established at all- might be found in the Shia areas but never in mixed or other non-Shia areas. (13 Dec. 2013)

On 19 August 2013, the *Daily Star*, a Lebanese newspaper, indicated that Hezbollah set up checkpoints and inspected cars entering neighbourhoods in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and that "the Amal Movement also tightened security measures in south Lebanon."

According to the Professor, "all militias at one time or another use roadblocks, but the only permanent militia roadblocks and/or checkpoints are those belonging to Hizbullah (alongside, of course, the Lebanese military)" (6 Dec. 2013). The visiting lecturer indicated that "roadblocks are used to secure Amal's premises and residences of their senior officials" (13 Dec. 2013).

## 5. Recruitment

According to the Professor, the Amal Movement does not "forcibly recruit" people (Professor 6 Dec. 2013). The Professor indicated that Amal often recruits youth from Shi'a backgrounds "who are mostly secular" and "are attracted to Amal" (ibid.). The visiting lecturer indicated that

After 1990, there are no credible reports about Amal resorting to forced recruitment in general, including youth. It is certainly safe to assert the absence of such a practice in the last ten years or so. Amal recruitment of youth, allegedly declining in the recent years, happens mainly through a network of social and educational (schools and universities) institutions they fully or partially control, their communities' delegates, or through the scout organization, they have established. This is where Amal was mostly criticized: through attracting youngsters to youth/scouting activities, Amal enrolls youngsters and gradually trains them to some military skills while they are still below 18 years old. Another area where Amal is strong: governmental institutions. Actually, Amal is one of the very few movements in Lebanon who succeeded to flood all sorts of governmental institutions with members or supporters. This has contributed to the creation of a wide "Amal network" in almost every governmental institution which helps them in further enrolment. There are no reports or information about retaliation against people not willing to join. Such a possibility might exist for some senior members/cadre willing to leave the movement (especially if they were entrusted with security roles) but not those refusing to join. (13 Dec. 2013)

According to *Al Akhbar*, a Beirut-based newspaper, the Amal movement has indicated that they are "in the process of promoting a younger generation of activists into leadership posts" (*Al Akhbar* 23 Oct. 2013). *Al Akhbar* reports that they plan to "fast track younger party members, particularly from the universities, bypassing the existing bureaucratic practice of having to serve a long term in the lower ranks of the organization before even reaching mid-level positions" (ibid.). *Al Akhbar* also says that Amal will be establishing a permanent training school for new members, and developing youth groups like the scouts to "reverse the loss of members to Hezbollah over the past years" (ibid.). The International Crisis Group indicates that "[o]ver time, Amal's influence among Shiites declined dramatically as Hizbollah's increased" (22 Nov. 2012).

## 6. Targeting of Individuals

The visiting lecturer indicated that

the possibility for someone to be attacked or mistreated by Amal is limited to the following case scenarios:

    a. The person is suspected of having links to Israeli intelligence, radical Sunni movement or a terrorist group with a hostile agenda to Amal (or its allies). In this case, if Amal members know about such a person, they would go and arrest him/her, detain [him/her] for a period of time (few hours to few days) and then hand [him/her] over either to Hizbullah or to the Lebanese Army Intelligence Department. During the period of detention at Amal, it is very likely for the person to be ill-treated or subject to torture, degrading or other inhumane treatment.

    b. The person is involved in a personal conflict with an influential Amal leader/cadre: in this case, it would be more out of intimidation rather than actual arrest and detention. Detention period would be a couple of hours to a couple of days. Same risks of ill treatment (please refer to a) apply in this case.

    c. One or more of Amal members operate as mercenaries for an organized criminal group. This means that the situation is not anymore a politically justified detention but closer to a conventional kidnapping where ransoms or other demands are involved. The detention period and conditions in this case depend on the will of the "client" as well as the course of the negotiations between the client and the hostage['s] family.

One more note on this: there is a history of conflict between the Amal movement and most of the Palestinian armed groups, especially those based in Tyr, Sidon and Beirut. This makes the Palestinians, whether falling in one of the above described three categories or not, more vulnerable to Amal members' harassment especially in the areas where Amal retains some influence.(13 Dec. 2013).

The Professor similarly stated that the Amal Movement has "a history of mistreating Palestinians" (6 Dec. 2013).

### 7. Allegations of Impunity

The International Crisis Group reports that, according to two newspapers *Al-Akhbar* and *As-Safir*, there is a "feeling that persons closely connected to Hizbollah and Amal are beyond the reach of the law, unaccountable and immune from punishment" (22 Nov. 2012, 26). On 22 November 2012, the International Crisis Group stated that the "Military Tribunal, General Secretary, Airport Security division as well as several critical army positions all currently are headed by individuals with close ties to Hizbollah or its allies" (11). According to the European Council on Foreign Relations, a pan-European think-thank, a Salafi leader from the southern city of Sidon "who condemns Hezbollah" said that Hezbollah and Amal "control the state, they give jobs to their people while ours are unemployed, and they attack us on every front while the government does nothing" (Sept. 2012, 4, 12). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Al Karama; Associate Professor of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean History, University of Toronto; Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Toronto; Canada – Embassy to Lebanon; Carnegie Middle East Center; Centre for Lebanese Studies; Middle East Institute. The following individuals and organizations were unable to provide information for this Response: Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut; Human Rights Watch; Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH); Professor of Political Studies, American University of Beirut.

**Internet sites, including:** Canada – Public Safety; ecoi.net; Factiva; GlobalSecurity.org; Jane's Intelligence Review; Lebanon – Government of Lebanon, National News Agency; Lebanese Center for Human Rights; Minority Rights Group International; United Nations – Refworld; United States – Bureau of Counterterrorism.

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