

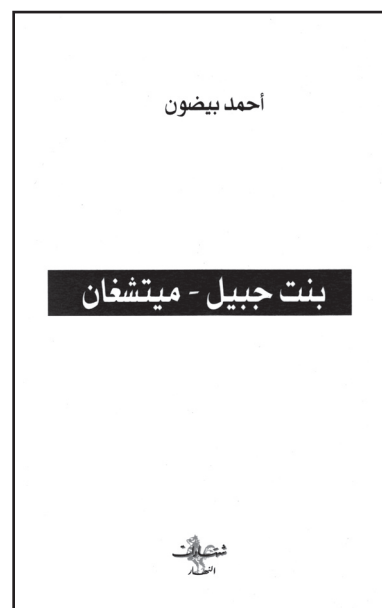
### From Dearborn with Love Hearts and Minds of the Lebanese (Shia) Diaspora in Michigan Talk with U. of Michigan Professor Farah Kawtharani

Most often, when the media addresses Hezbollah's global reach, it focuses highly visible areas such as the organization's capacity for conducting military operations outside Lebanon, the business ventures (illicit and otherwise) that fuel its domestic and international sustainability and others.

In general, this "network" of involvement depends heavily on expat communities around the world, but most notably in South America, West Africa and...Dearborn, USA, Dahiyeh's "sister city." While not strategic in terms of financial support, this predominantly Shia community that resides in the suburbs of the "great arsenal of democracy" maintains a connection with Lebanon through family, culture and media, all of which are immersed in the great wash of Hezbollah propaganda. As the US continues to ratchet up the pressure on that organization, *ShiaWatch* was curious to understand more about how Lebanese-Shia Americans are navigating the complex identities and loyalties which create an emotional bond between them and the sworn enemy of their adoptive and/or native country.

Farah Kawtharani is a Shia academic and the daughter of two renowned Shia intellectuals: prominent historian Wajih Kawtharani and Mona Fayyad, sociologist, university professor and author of several scholarly publications as well as the noted article "To Be Shiite Now," which questions Hezbollah's justification for the 2006 war.<sup>1</sup> Ms. Kawtharani completed her PhD in Islamic Studies at McGill University in Canada. In 2011, she began teaching at the University of Michigan in Dearborn, a suburb of Detroit that is "home to one of the most active Muslim communities in the country and the largest mosque in North America."<sup>2</sup> As a Shia born in Lebanon but working among the Western diaspora, she provides a unique insight. Ms. Kawtharani teaches Arabic Studies at Dearborn to students who are mostly second-generation Arab Americans, primarily of Lebanese, Yemini and Iraqi descent.

Farah Kawtharani's experience offers testimony to the power of Hezbollah's image overseas, and it reveals the static, symbiotic relationship between the diaspora and its metropolis. She argues that the attachment to Hezbollah of the Lebanese-Shia youth, not all of whom are necessarily religious, exists alongside their American citizenship rather than counter to it. The symbiosis of these two loyalties is possible because of the diaspora's estrangement from the realities of Hezbollah as an organization and Lebanese institution. That organization has preserved its relevance as "the resistance" despite an attenuated Israeli threat, which persists only because of Hezbollah's refusal to modify its regional agenda and relinquish its weapons. Despite the organization's weakening rationale, its demonstrable inability to lead the Lebanese government and its public embarrassments and duplicity, its presence and influence can be felt well beyond Lebanon's borders. Ms. Kawtharani concludes that while the Lebanese diaspora actively pursues the American dream, their community's emotional and nostalgic ties to Lebanon imbue them with romanticized images of their home and therefore of Hezbollah.



*In the consciousness specific to Lebanese Shia southerners, Michigan is the destination of choice among Bint Jbeil's diaspora. The kinship between Michigan and Bint Jbeil expresses itself in a variety of ways including literary essays. Of these, one of the most famous is a travelogue written by renowned Lebanese historian Ahmad Baydoun, who came originally from Bint Jbeil. The travelogue is titled simply "Bint Jbeil-Michigan!"*

*First, tell us about yourself. What brought you to the States and how did you come to instruct this subject?*

When I completed my PhD in Islamic Studies at McGill University in Canada, one of my professors [told me that] the jobs in my field are in the United States. About the time I was finishing my dissertation, I applied to a few positions at American universities as practice for future job interviews. I got an offer from the University of Michigan – Dearborn in 2011.

*What do you teach there?*

I teach Arabic Studies, which [includes] courses in the Arabic language at various levels and courses related to the “culture” and history of the Arab world.

*Can you describe the typical demographic makeup of your students?*

The majority of my students are Arab Americans. Most of them are second-generation Americans whose parents migrated from the Arab world, [particularly from]... Lebanon in the 1970s. That said, most are descendants of immigrants who arrived in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Very few [of them] have recently arrived in the United States, [and most are] Lebanese, Yemenis and Iraqis. I also have students from Syrian and Palestinian backgrounds.

*What’s your impression of the Lebanese Shia population in Dearborn? Did they arrive in the States at more or less the same time? How does the population differ generally from that in Lebanon?*

They arrived at different intervals. Some are descendants of immigrants who arrived at the end of the nineteenth century [via] South America. They landed first in Brazil or Cuba and moved northward to the United States. I have met some members of [that] community who [no longer] speak Arabic... or speak it with a heavy accent. [Of more importance]... is the great wave



Farah Kawtharani received her PhD in Islamic Studies from McGill University in 2012. The focus of her research is on Shia political thought and Muslim politics. Her PhD examined the concepts of government in Shia Islam and juristic critiques of willayat al-faqih. She is currently an assistant professor of Arabic Studies at University of Michigan-Dearborn.

of migration, which [occurred] in the 1960s and ‘70s. Their children, born and raised in the United States, make up the bulk of my students, especially in the introductory courses. The majority have rural backgrounds [and come from] villages in South Lebanon. Most of them came to the United States for economic reasons. [The US] provided... them unmatched opportunities and a significant change in their social status. Actually, the social makeup of this community differs considerably from the Lebanese communities of other North American cities such as Montreal, for instance. Whereas [Montreal’s]... Lebanese community... is very diversified in terms of socioeconomic [achievement] and professional status, [with few exceptions] the Lebanese community in Detroit-Dearborn [comes generally] from the lower middle class, has rural backgrounds [and had achieved] generally [meager] educational credentials in Lebanon. Many of these individuals have moved

up economically in the United States and became owners of small businesses.

*Why do your students take your class? What is their motivation? What are their passions?*

They come for different reasons. [Some, usually second-generation Arab Americans,] want to connect with their Arab background. There are also some who are originally from the Arab world and take my classes... to [preserve the] ties with their culture. They are not Americans in the sense that their early years and initial socialization [occurred outside] the United States. [As a result]... courses in the Arabic language or about cultural and social issues in the Arab world have... emotional value, as it helps [them] preserve their cultural bearings. The courses also immerse students in a familiar world... [As many of my] Arab students... are specializing in various disciplines, they take my courses to fulfill the elective requirements; Arabic courses are subjects to which they can easily relate.

*Are American Shia committed to Hezbollah's avowed image of "Resistance?" If so, why? What do they know about Hezbollah?*

[In the last two decades,] Hezbollah has succeeded in imposing its image as the only liberation movement [that stood] against the Israeli occupation before 2000. Most Lebanese Shia profess great admiration and support for the organization, which can be attributed to several factors.

The military resistance is... perhaps one of the most important reasons. Hezbollah's large-scale propaganda machine has managed to inscribe in the minds of many Shia that it [remains] the only resistance movement against the Israeli occupation; [however, this obfuscates] the memory of the Lebanese National Resistance Front, [which was launched in Beirut in 1982 and] included... secular and leftist forces.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason for Hezbollah's popularity among the Shia is the fact that it has

sponsored many philanthropic and charity organizations that have provided [a range of] services to community members, especially the most destitute... particularly at the end of the 1980s and 1990s. Hezbollah created a large network of hospitals, schools, agricultural funds, construction funds and charity organizations to help the injured and the families of the victims at an affordable cost. [That alone] won Hezbollah a large number of supporters. This extensive and effective network of essential social services coincided with the withdrawal of similar services by the Lebanese state, especially in the regions where Hezbollah operated.

Hezbollah has succeeded unequivocally in... [creating]... a complete [overlap] between its organization and its many affiliates, and the concept of *muqawama*, which refers to military resistance against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon. Many [of Hezbollah's] supporters fail to refer to the organization by its name and... call it instead *muqawama*. [In reality, however,] this is a grave conflation of two separate entities. [Where] Hezbollah is a multifaceted organization, [when] the *muqawama* [was conceived] in the 1980s, [it] was a diverse, grassroots, popular movement [with connections]... among the various Lebanese parties, confessional groups. [It included]... many individual initiatives, [which] united in its resistance to foreign invasion. [Further, it]... was independent of any affiliation with foreign states. [In contrast,] Hezbollah... boasts of its logistical, financial and ideological ties with Iran and Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Many [youth from the] Lebanese diaspora are unaware of the effort Iran has invested to create and fund [Hezbollah]... and the exorbitant amounts of money [Iran] invested [in its] support of the organization. [Likewise,] they are unaware of the systematic war that was waged against the Lebanese National Resistance



Front, JAMMOUL, to silence its activists, often through... assassinations, violent intimidation and the liquidation of many resistance officials.<sup>4</sup> This [remained]... undocumented and unspoken... because of the... oppression [directed against] that movement. [With the help of Pro-Syrian Lebanese factions,] the Syrian forces have worked systematically to eradicate... any [competing] resistance [movement]. Thus, the way was paved for Hezbollah to manipulate the act of resistance against Israeli occupation.

So while it is true that in 1980 Hezbollah engaged in acts of military resistance against Israel... it was not the only player [during that time]. Hezbollah's monopolization of the resistance was achieved at the expense of other activists and militants and with the full backing of Syria and Iran. The leftist parties had neither the media outlets nor the stamina to resist and denounce attacks [carried out by] the Syrian regime against the National Resistance and its symbols and activists. We can only wait for the fall of the Bashar Assad regime [so we can] start unearthing the crimes that have been perpetrated against the National Movement and of course, the many other crimes committed by that regime against the Lebanese, the Palestinians in Lebanon and the Syrians.

*What is your classroom response on the subject of Hezbollah and "the resistance?" How do your students react?*

I have not yet addressed the issue of Hezbollah in class. However, I addressed the situation in Syria and the calamities being faced by the Syrian people [due to]... the violent and criminal onslaught of the regime forces of Bashar Assad. Many Lebanese Shia were dismayed by [the sympathy I express for] the [Syrian people's] struggle... for freedom and dignity. [Some] accused the Syrian people of being traitors to Palestine. [However, that] is a naive reiteration of certain arguments adopted by... Hezbollah's media outlets



*On Sunday, September 23, 2012, the Lebanese Communist Party organized a rally in Beirut to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Lebanese National Resistance Front. Known as "Jammoul," the organization's retouched logo (above) became synonymous with resisting the Israel's occupation of Lebanon, with the organization conducting its first military operations against Israeli forces on September 16, 1982. During the rally's introductory speech, the presenter cited a host of Jammoul operations that occurred between the time the organization was founded and 1986. However, no explanation was given regarding why Jammoul's anti-Israeli resistance activities ceased in 1986 despite the occupation having persisted until 2000. In fact, the gap exists because in 1986 Hezbollah accomplished its monopoly of Israeli resistance organizations by preventing—sometimes forcibly—Jammoul and other similar movements from resisting the Israeli occupation. Of note, many militants who were affiliated with the various secular and nationalist fronts paid the price of Hezbollah's monopolization of resistance organizations with their lives.*

and the pro-Hezbollah, pro-Assad press in Lebanon. [Labeled] the "Anti-American resistance movement" by some leftists—but not all; there are many leftist currents in Lebanon and the Arab world—and pro-Hezbollah activists, [supporters maintain] that the Assad regime is the last bastion against [Israeli and US hegemony] over the region.

That being said, I have seen a spark of hope when pro-Hezbollah young people [visit]... me to clarify that they did not support the killings perpetrated by the Syrian regime against civilians. They acknowledged their awareness that the regime waged

many acts of violence against the Lebanese population and that it was no surprise it would do the same or worse to the Syrians. However, [these same young people]... seem [unable] to [actually]... denounce or contradict anything [said by Hezbollah's] Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Hezbollah's propaganda has managed to demonize any critic of the organization, which means that many in the community are held hostage by the organization and its propaganda machinations which stipulate that any criticism is to be denounced as treasonous to one's country.

How do their impressions compare to those held by Lebanese Shia youth in Lebanon? Let's assume that a great number of the Lebanese Shia youth in Lebanon are still pro-Hezbollah. The only Shia voices critical of Hezbollah [emanate generally] from the intelligentsia, activists, progressive leftists or descendants of leftist families [who] are horrified at the degradation of [Lebanese Shia] since the rise of Hezbollah. They have [witnessed]... the educational decline... of Shia, the... corruption and crime that is unprecedented in Hezbollah-dominated Shia locales and the presence of more drug trafficking, drug abuse and prostitution than ever before. Several Lebanese-Israeli agents even turned out to be Hezbollah members or officials in the organization. This reality [simply underscores Hezbollah's] internal degradation.

Some Lebanese Shia youth in Lebanon who still support Hezbollah are aware of the degradation [occurring] within the Shia population because they are present on the ground and are sensing and experiencing this change on a daily basis. The reason... most of them shy away from raising critical voices against Hezbollah and the corrupt milieu it has bred is [because they believe] that under the [gravely] sectarian culture of Lebanon and [the interpretation] of citizenship [that accompanies it], the Shia will be crushed by other religious sects in [the event] Hezbollah is weakened.

Regardless of the veracity of this hypothesis, Hezbollah's propaganda has exerted every possible effort to reinforce this sense and to fuel the [Shia's] fear of... other confessional groups and... Arab Sunnis.

However, US-based Shia are unaware of the developments [I mentioned above]... since they are physically removed from such realities and because they consume [only] pro-Hezbollah media. Most of the information... they have, which is not [particularly] substantive, is what they [glean] from pro-Hezbollah media and which they [consume via] their satellite television stations [including] Lebanese and Arab... channels [such as] *Al-Jadid* TV, *Al-'Alam* TV and *Al-Mayadin* TV. [These individuals] have [virtually] no knowledge of, for example, the many scandals that have plagued... Hezbollah.

It is also difficult to make them aware of this reality because they... have [become immune to any] criticism of Hezbollah. The organization has invested greatly in promoting its image as the downtrodden party that speaks for the wretched of the Earth and [all] marginalized citizens. Any criticism of... Hezbollah is interpreted by the organization as [taking a] pro-Israeli position. "You are either with us or with Israel against your own people." That is, you are a traitor. And the organization has invested [to the greatest extent possible] in that argument. Very few Shia have the [will] and most importantly the knowledge to challenge this... false equation. [In order to do so], people need to know about the circumstances that... accompanied the retrenchment of the leftist resistance against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in the latter 1980s and the conditions surrounding Hezbollah's rise.

Since many Lebanese Shia do not know these facts, they accept the Hezbollah discourse at face value without [subjecting it to any factual analysis]. Of course, [their] expatriate [status combined with the

strong emotional ties and romanticized memories of their ancestral home—[aspects shared by] all migrant communities—dilutes their [desire to criticize]... the facts [since the outcome might] contradict the romanticized images they [cultivate]. I think [that] because... they are away from home and [contribute] hardly anything to its well-being, [they are wracked with] guilt and are... less prone to criticize what [they perceive] as the only force that protects their homeland from foreign invasion.<sup>5</sup>

*How do they reconcile this commitment to Hezbollah with their American nationality?*

I don't think they perceive that there is any contradiction between their ideological commitment to Hezbollah and their commitment to the US. Their understanding of Hezbollah is that it is a resistance movement against Israel, not against the United States. They also do not perceive Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

Similarly, they do not see... any contradiction between their commitment to Hezbollah and their loyalty to Lebanon. Apart from its anti-American rhetoric, Hezbollah's aggression has been focused against the Lebanese state rather than the American state. [For example, the organization] prevented security forces from entering the areas [under its] control; the military occupation of west Beirut on May 7, 2008 and the ensuing murder of many Lebanese citizens; the use of heavy weapons in Beirut's residential [areas]... over the matter of a car parked in a spot declared by Hezbollah [to be] a secure area. The... clashes and the [use of] heavy weapons by Hezbollah members caused the death of several Lebanese citizens. [Another]... incident involved the assassination [of a Lebanese army officer] by a [Hezbollah] member. [These and similar] incidents have undermined the security of citizens and the sovereignty of the Lebanese state. Finally and most importantly, there is the accusation [by the Special Tribunal for

Lebanon which asserts that] Hezbollah was behind the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and George Hawi, the former chair of the Communist Party and a principal co-founder of the National Resistance Front in 1982.

From your impressions, do their views match those of their parents or are their views more extreme? Do you think any of your students are interested in returning to Lebanon to join the resistance?

I think the [students'] attachment to Hezbollah emanates primarily from their parents' convictions; it is not the result of their own reasoning. They have simply inherited their parents' opinions. They are sincerely proud to be American, and their parents feel very privileged to have immigrated to the United States and gained US citizenship. For [the elders, US citizenship] is... a passport to a better life and better opportunities. [Since the] parents have imparted their sense of gratitude to the US [to their children, the youths cannot] conceive of [living] outside the United States. While Lebanon holds sentimental value for them, it does not present... them with viable opportunities. When [and if] they visit Lebanon, they behave as tourists by appreciating the touristic and entertainment venues... the country offers, especially in Beirut. I get the sense that [these youths] feel more at home in Michigan. [Based on their parents' stories, they understand] that being in the United States is an advantage and seem [ready] to preserve and exploit [that benefit] by living the American dream.

I have also heard many of them being highly critical of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and other extremist and *Salafi* forms of political Islam. They like to make the point that *their* Islam, meaning Shia Islam, is very tolerant and non-militant [compared] to the extremist Islam of al-Qaeda.<sup>6</sup> Based on many of our discussions of contemporary novels, [the students] were very sincere in [their denouncement of] intolerant and



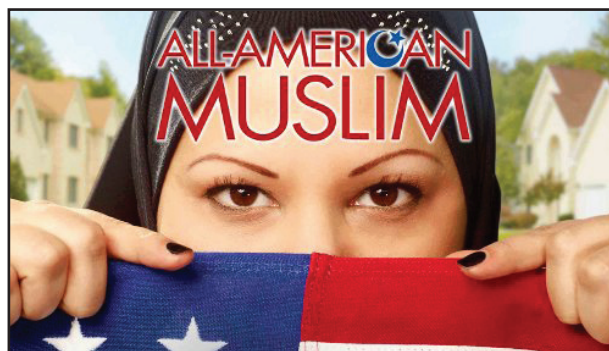
extremist forms of militant Islam. They adamantly denounce... the 9/11 attacks [and] believe [it] was a terrorist attack against all Americans, [including them since they are] American citizens.

In that sense, they are very different from the radicalized Muslim youth in certain European cities who suffer from an identity crisis, [are eventually] recruited by Jihadi movements and become involved in terrorist acts. [In my experience,] Dearborn's Shia youth are neither radicalized and militant nor anti-American. They are attached to the discourses of Hezbollah [but] believe that they are simply being patriotic and loyal to the land from which they came. [For them,] loyalty to Hezbollah is akin to loyalty to home. In that way, I see them as hostages of Hezbollah's propaganda [machine]. Many of them sincerely believe that Hezbollah is not subservient to Iran and that the ties... the organization maintains with Iran are [based] simply on the support... the movement receives from [Iran,] "which is truly and innocently vested in the protection of its fellow Shia co-religionists." For [the students,] supporting Hezbollah is just a way of being loyal to their land of origin.

There is also some romanticization and idolization of Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's chair. I have heard people [argue that] Nasrallah is a patriot [who]... cannot possibly have accepted any form of corruption in the organization or any fanaticism against non-Shiites. It is a very emotional discourse.

*What are your impressions of the reality TV show "All-American Muslim," which is set in Dearborn?*

I think it reflected a very positive view of the Muslim community in an American metropolitan area. It is true that [the show] only portrayed the Lebanese Shia [as having come] from South Lebanon, so [it was] certainly not representative of all American Muslims.... I believe [as well]



A US-produced television show, "All-American Muslim," examined the lives of five families from the Dearborn, Michigan area. Kawtharani praised the show by stating that it presented "an accurate picture of an Arab Muslim community that is well established in the US and that preserved its religion and language while being American."

that American Muslims who criticized the show on the grounds that it focused not only on the Shia, but [particularly] on the [Lebanese Shia], is accurate. In defense of the show, however, I know that the producer is a Lebanese-American [who hails] from that community and wanted the show [to be] a tribute to the community he cherishes. I think he did a very good job of presenting an accurate [picture] of an Arab Muslim community that is well established in the US and... was able to preserve its religion and... language [while] being American. [That community is very] well integrated in the sense that [its members] exercise their citizenship fully. They] are law-abiding [citizens who] work, pay taxes, go to college, love American sports, want to remain in the US and speak fluent English.

I also heard great feedback about the show [from Arabs and other] Canadians. They were happy [about the] positive image of Arabs [presented by the show], especially since it was an accurate depiction [rather than] an embellished version. They could relate to [similar] Muslim communities [located throughout] Canada, [particularly in] Ontario and Quebec. The non-Arab Canadians were intrigued to get a close-up view of North American Arab/Muslim families, regardless of which countries they came from [originally]. Considering

the debates that surround Muslims in the United States and the questions that [relate to] their integration and loyalty to the US in light of the 9/11 attacks, this show was welcomed and appreciated. I remember hearing a professor at UM-Dearborn saying that the show was bland in the sense that it just showed that these Muslim Americans were as American as everybody else. An Arab-American expert answered that this was exactly the point of the show; that sadly, we needed shows like these to prove to the rest of America

that Muslim Americans are just as American as [everyone] else. I [subscribe to Seyla Benhabib's observation of] Islam, [which holds] that "Like any civilizational tradition, like any great religion, Islam has its own arguments, its own debates, its own fanatics and its own tolerant people."

I wish there were more [programs] like [*All-American Muslim*] being shown in the US. [They] would [go a long way toward bridging] many of the cultural gaps [that separate] Americans.

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Madeleine Stokes contributed to this piece.

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<sup>1</sup> Mona Fayyad. "Lebanese Professor: 'To Be a Shi'ite Now...'" ME Transparent. August 23, 2006. [http://www.mettransparent.com/old/texts/mona\\_fayad\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_shiite\\_now\\_english.htm](http://www.mettransparent.com/old/texts/mona_fayad_to_be_a_shiite_now_english.htm)

<sup>2</sup> "All-American Muslim' Cancelled: TLC Cancels Controversial Series." Huffington Post. July 3, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/201207/03/all-american-muslim-cancelled\\_n\\_1327264.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/201207/03/all-american-muslim-cancelled_n_1327264.html)

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> <http://jammoul.net/>

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added.