

AMAL

(The original name of this organisation is Harakat al Mahrumin, or Movement of the Deprived. It later became known by the acronym of its military wing, Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya, or Detachments of Lebanese Resistance. AMAL also means "hope" in Arabic.)

The Shia organisation founded by Iranian-born cleric Mousa Sadr in the early 1970's, which drew its support mainly from the poor Shia population in Southern Lebanon and the Bekka valley. Sadr came to Lebanon in 1959, and fostered a political agenda concerned chiefly with the plight of the South.

Predominantly Shia Southern Lebanon suffered badly from the consequences of the festering Israeli-Palestinian war in the region. Israeli retaliation for PLO attacks originating in Southern Lebanon rarely distinguished between civilian and military targets, or between Lebanese and Palestinians. Israeli policy was to punish the Lebanese for Palestinian military and political activity in Lebanon. There was a widespread perception among Shias in the South that the Christian-led Lebanese government in Beirut was unwilling, rather than unable, to protect the South. Mousa Sadr's movement stressed the predicament of the Southern Lebanese, and called attention to the general poverty and political disenfranchisement of the Shias in Lebanon.

After the still unexplained disappearance of Mousa Sadr in 1978 during a trip to Libya, Nabih Berri assumed leadership of the movement which became commonly referred to as Amal (Hope). Amal's fighting forces were originally funded by the PLO's Fatah movement and by Syria through its Palestinian organisation, Saiqa. In 1982, Amal militiamen fought under the PLO organisational umbrella during the Israeli siege of Beirut. Berri has been able to transform Amal into the mainstream Shia organisation in Lebanon, but has lost considerable support in recent years because of its compromising attitude towards Syria and the Christians. Their 4000 paid militia were re-equipped by Syria in 1986 with Soviet-built T-54 tanks and armoured personnel carriers, and transformed into regular forces. The Sixth Brigade of the Lebanese Army operates in conjunction with Amal's soldiers. Its main areas of activity have been West Beirut and the South, particularly around Sidon.