

Viewpoints
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The Demons Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip

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Hezbollah's main strength in Lebanon is not its weaponry. Its real backbone is its popular support, which guarantees Hezbollah's control over state institutions. Iran may be prepared to lose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but it is certainly not ready to lose Lebanon. Now that Hezbollah's popular support in Lebanon is waning, Iran will do whatever it takes to overcome the results of Lebanon's parliamentary elections in 2013.

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Hezbollah's dilemma

The air in Lebanon is loaded with fear and anger. It is hard for Lebanese to hope for a happy ending in the midst of the non-stop sectarian tension and clashes spreading from north to south. Hezbollah is losing its Syrian ally while suffering internal bleeding in popular support. The Sunni street has no leadership, and the Islamists are growing in power and popularity, while the Christians are as divided as ever.

In addition, Lebanon is trapped between the Syrian revolution against the regime to its north and the recent escalation of violence in Gaza on its southern border. With Hezbollah pushed to react to developments in both countries, Lebanon seems to be on the verge of a big explosion. The tension between the Shi'a and the Sunnis has not reached such levels before. But the main concern is knowing that Iran will do anything to maintain its control over Lebanon after the imminent fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Is Lebanon moving from an Iranian-Syrian hegemony to a purely Iranian one?

Hezbollah's tighter grip on state institutions and the Shi'a community is an indicator of Iran exerting more control over Lebanon through its Shi'a proxy.

Many people saw in the Syrian revolution a chance for Lebanon to rid itself of decades of Assad's influence and control over the Lebanese political scene. Although the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, its proxies managed to maintain control over state institutions with the help of Hezbollah. Today, Assad is on the verge of collapsing, and so are his allies in Lebanon. Without Assad's proxies, Hezbollah cannot handle everything on its own. With the upcoming parliamentary elections in June 2013, the Party of God has to prepare itself for the worst possible scenario: losing Lebanon.

Iran might be ready to lose Assad, but they are certainly not ready to lose Hezbollah and Lebanon. If their control cannot be maintained through constitutional and democratic means, i.e., elections, Iran might push Hezbollah to use violence again, something that could cost the party more popular support.

Hezbollah is in a crisis. They have to balance Iran's interests and their popularity, a delicate task that may not be sustainable for a long time.

Hezbollah is obliged to support the Assad regime in Syria and at the same time maintain its image as a resistance force in Lebanon, an effort that has proved to be nearly impossible. The

Gaza operation seems to have put even more pressure on Hezbollah. Despite his recent defenseⁱ of Gaza and Hamas and asking the world to stop Israel, Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah did not go beyond words. The party is now talking the talk in Israel but walking the walk in Syria.

Hezbollah's support of the Syrian regime, politically and militarily,ⁱⁱ for the past two years made it look less and less like a resistance force to the Shi'a. All the funerals of martyrs taking place in small Shi'a towns and villages can only be explained in one way: Hezbollah is sending soldiers to Syria.

At the same time, Iran forced the Lebanese government to adopt a policy of dissociation when it comes to the Syrian revolution. The problem is that this policy does not seem to work when the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is increasing by the day; so far, there are over 129,727 refugees, according to the UNHCR,ⁱⁱⁱ mostly situated along the Syrian border in the north. In the south, meanwhile, Hezbollah is training soldiers to kill the Syrian people.

Sectarian tension is rising and Hezbollah has been involved in street clashes with Sunni Islamists in the city of Saida,^{iv} making it harder than ever to justify the purpose of arms. Hezbollah's arsenal, which is supposed to serve as a deterrent against Israel – a justified aim for many in the Shia community in Lebanon – has practically lost its purpose since 2006 and has only been employed to fight other Lebanese.

After the October 19 assassination of Wissam al-Hassan, the intelligence chief of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces, it became obvious that as long as the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad stays in power, and as long as its allies in Lebanon are not held responsible for the recent deterioration of security and the economy, Lebanon will fall deeper and deeper into the abyss.

Hezbollah goes PLO

In the midst of Hezbollah's dilemma, reflected in its behavior on both the community and the country level, many Shi'a are reconsidering their support of the Party of God. They are constantly reminded of the PLO in the 1970s and are drawing striking comparisons between Hezbollah and the PLO when it comes to corruption, arrogance, and nepotism.

The PLO started with a lot of popular support because of their resistance against Israel, a cause that was considered just by many Lebanese. Yasser Arafat was not only the leader of the Palestinians but was the most powerful man in a Lebanon that suffered from weak state institutions. However, time proved that the Palestinian movement could not resist the corruption and nepotism that seeped through its ranks. The same thing is happening to Hezbollah today.

I was 8 years old when the Israeli army invaded Lebanon in June 1982. After a few days inside a shelter, we finally emerged to witness Israeli tanks entering our village in the south of the country. I was standing on my grandmother's balcony with my family to watch the Israeli soldiers come through the main street of my town. The scene was memorable and shocking.

All my grandmother's neighbors were celebrating, throwing rice and rose petals at the smiling Israeli soldiers as they moved forward in their tanks. Everyone was so happy and welcoming, and my mother explained that people were glad because the Israelis helped us get rid of the Palestinian militias.

The Party of God is losing its popularity because of the same reasons that led to the downfall of the PLO back in 1982. Of course, Hezbollah cannot be forced out of Lebanon the way the PLO was, simply because of the fact that they are Lebanese and are part of the social fabric of the south. However, this decline in popularity can be built upon in order to expose the real face of Hezbollah and consequently reduce their control over Lebanese state institutions.

Without its popular support, Hezbollah is fragile, even if it keeps its arms. The arms alone are useless because Hezbollah prefers to avoid a war with Israel. Hezbollah's real backbone is its popular support in Lebanon. This guarantees their control over state institutions, a very significant tool to protect the arms and decisions of war and peace.

Financial scandals and moral bankruptcy

Hezbollah has been suffering a serious corrosion of its image. A scandal pertaining to illegal pharmaceutical products was uncovered in Lebanon earlier this month amid reports that the brother of Minister of State for Administrative Reform Mohammad Fneish was involved in the case. Also, some media outlets reported that four of the implicated companies have relations with the Shi'a group Hezbollah.

The chief of Lebanon's Parliamentary Health Committee said on November 12 that the brother of a Hezbollah lawmaker was involved in the scandal.

This Hezbollah scandal is not the first. Earlier this year, Hesham and Jihad al-Moussawi – both brothers of Hezbollah MP Hussein Moussawi – were accused of producing and dealing Captagon drug pills. Captagon manufacturing was taking place in the basement of two Hezbollah religious seminaries in the city of Baalbeck and it was reported that Captagon fabrication machines were imported from Iran.

In 2009, Lebanese businessman Hajj Salah Ezzedine^v went bankrupt after thousands of residents in Dahiyeh, south Lebanon, and the Bekaa, including Hezbollah officials, had invested in his projects. Losses are estimated at \$1.195 billion. Although Hezbollah denied any relation with

Ezzeddine at the beginning, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah later promised to compensate the victims of the bankruptcy.

All these scandals have contributed in changing the perception of Hezbollah as the pure and most honorable group among the Shi'a community and have brought back collective memories of the PLO corruption stories in the south.

What to look for and what to avoid

As Hezbollah's weakness and deterioration increases, the chances of it losing the ability to strategize might also increase. The Party of God is a bleeding monster that could do anything to survive.

Hezbollah's strength and weakness are growing in close harmony. This was supposed to ease the disengagement between the Shi'a and the party.

Hezbollah is heading one of the worst governments Lebanon has had for a very long time. The security situation, the economy, and services have not been this bad since the end of the civil war in 1990. The deterioration of services, especially electricity, has pushed many Lebanese to the streets to demonstrate against the Hezbollah-controlled government, including the party's supporters from the southern suburbs and the south. For these people, basic needs such as electricity, education, and employment have become much more important than resistance, especially since they have not seen any real act of resistance since 2006.

Many Shi'a are fed up. Corruption, deterioration of services, and supporting a dictator in Syria are all too much to handle, especially with the tension with the Sunnis caused by Hezbollah's military support to Assad. However, tension with the Sunnis makes them feel unwelcome if they move away from Hezbollah, which has at least offered political empowerment and some kind of protection. Also, the lack of a serious Shi'a political alternative does not help in this disengagement. The problem is that the failure to separate the Shi'a community from Hezbollah's community will prove very dangerous for Lebanon.

The need to address, seduce and reassure the Shi'a into believing that there is a life worth living outside Hezbollah is more vital than ever. The first step towards that is to start with the Lebanese perceptions towards the Shi'a by stressing on the difference between the Shi'a community and Hezbollah's community.

Weakening Hezbollah is good for Lebanon, but one should be aware of the consequences in order to take the right action. A weakened but provoked Hezbollah will strike back violently and that's something no one wants to experience. Also, getting rid of their military capabilities by force is not going to work for two reasons: they are ready to fight and they can fight.

When the PLO were removed from Lebanon by force, a more extreme group, that is Hezbollah, was formed, and an even more fanatic military group could be formed if Hezbollah was removed by force. Using force will also bring the Shi'a community closer to Hezbollah.

In this case, change should happen from within, by realizing a good and credible alternative. This alternative has been in the making for the past two years. It all started with a Facebook group^{vi} and a virtual discussion on the Syrian revolution, but has now become more structured through a small political group that is gaining popularity slowly but surely.

The credibility of this group and what makes it different from others that were formed in the past is that it was formed away from the western-backed March 14 alliance and certainly outside western embassies in Beirut. It includes moderate Shi'a clerics, secular activists, and former communists. And it makes Hezbollah very worried.^{vii}

In the south of Lebanon, when people start referring to Hezbollah as the Taliban because it banned the sale of alcohol in a number of southern towns and cities, it means that Hezbollah is going through a very serious setback.

Conclusion

Fear and hate are synonyms in a country where death is a daily commodity and democracy is only a game. To be defeated in politics means that the whole community has to suffer humiliation and possible violence and assault.

Arrogance is a sickness that has hit all Lebanese at different levels. Add to it sectarianism, and this is a recipe for disaster. Now is the time for the Lebanese Shi'a to reconsider and try to save themselves. It is also a time for the other Lebanese to reach out without arrogance and try to understand that without the Shi'a in the same boat, Lebanon will lose. That's where the international community could intervene.



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

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- i <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=457068>
 - ii <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=451100>
 - iii This is the data as of 11/23/2012. Includes the number of refugees who have contacted UNHCR to be registered. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>
 - iv <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=455552>
 - v <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=113332>
 - vi <https://www.facebook.com/groups/242784009136638/>
 - vii <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=439692>

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