

# For Hezbollah In Lebanon, It's Downhill All the Way

by Hugh Fitzgerald



**The demonstrations that began on October 17** in Beirut and Tyre have continued to rock Lebanon. They began as protests expressing specific grievances – the increase in taxes placed on tobacco, alcohol, and WhatsApp calls. But then they took on a life of their own, and became protests not against this or that policy, but against the entire political elite. The demonstrators wanted a complete change of government, which they charged with mismanagement and, above all, rampant corruption.

The mismanagement is there for all to see. Successive governments have borrowed so much that the national debt now stands at \$100 billion, or 150% of GDP, among the highest in

the world. Because Lebanese governments failed to invest in energy infrastructure, the country is now plagued with constant power outages. These affect not only ordinary Lebanese, who suddenly find themselves without electricity, but also plague factories, leading to the constant need to shut down production.

Another area where Lebanese governments have failed to plan ahead is in garbage disposal. In 2015, garbage piled up on the streets of Beirut. That crisis was caused by closing the Naameh landfill after years of protests by local residents about the toxic pollutants, and stench, of the site, which in any case had become filled to overflowing. It was closed down, and a large landfill built at Borj Hammoud. Ill-planned like the previous landfill, this new one sent toxic pollutants into the air and by mid-2019 was already full to capacity. Though the government had been made well aware of the coming problem with the the landfill, it had made no plans to deal with this new crisis in waste management. No alternative landfills were prepared; no garbage treatment plants were built. Since Borj Hammoud closed, Beirutis have disposed of their garbage and trash in one of two ways. The first way is to pile it up on open fields, and then set fire to it. The result is that toxic pollutants, untreated, fill the air. The second way the Lebanese now attempt to rid themselves of garbage and trash is to place it, in large heaps, on the beaches, and then to bulldoze the mountains of trash into the sea. Unfortunately, the currents push most of it back onto land, thus ruining many of the beaches for which Lebanon was once famous. The damage done to its once-flourishing tourist industry has been devastating.

And there was yet one more visible sign of government mismanagement: Lebanon has been plagued with the worst forest fires in many decades, and though they were finally put out, the government had showed itself as unprepared. It lacked a sufficient number of trained firefighters and of equipment;

help had to come from abroad, from Cyprus, Greece, Turkey and Jordan, before the fires could be put out.

The protests have spread throughout the country, and now nearly a million Lebanese have taken part, demanding that the government resign. The Prime Minister, Sa'ad Hariri, did resign, but this did not satisfy the protesters. They want the whole government to resign. The leading power in Lebanon is Hezbollah; its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, though not in the government, wields considerable influence. Both the President, Michel Aoun, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, his son-in-law Gebran Bassil, are Christians, but they are loyal to Nasrallah and do his bidding. Naturally, Nasrallah doesn't want to see them resign. During the first week of protests, the Hezbollah leader came out strongly against the government resigning. He claimed it would lead to a period of uncertainty when stability was needed to deal with the economic crisis. This enraged the protesters, who were made up of all the sects – Christians, Sunnis, Druze, and Shi'a, too. They began to shout slogans against Nasrallah and Hezbollah. Then Nasrallah compounded his error by ordering his fighters to violently suppress the protesters, which they did. The reaction to that was to call for Nasrallah to step down. Comprehending the danger to his own power, Nasrallah then did an about-face, and declared that he was behind the demonstrators after all. Hezbollah fighters have stopped beating up protesters.

Now Hezbollah faces the biggest challenge to its existence since it was first founded in 1985. In South Lebanon, in what is the Hezbollah heartland, the demonstrations by local Shi'a against Nasrallah and Hezbollah, even by some of its former fighters, continue. Will Nasrallah continue to endure such a challenge to his authority? How long can he pretend to support a change of government, when the current one is from his point of view ideally subservient?

Whatever happens now, Hezbollah has been weakened. For the first time, large numbers of Shia in south Beirut, the

Hezbollah stronghold, noisily expressed their anger with Nasrallah and Hezbollah, both for his initial call for the government not to resign, and for the attacks by Hezbollah on protesters, including fellow Shi'a who were not spared. Few believe Nasrallah's supposed change of heart – that he now agrees with the protesters that the government must resign. If the current government manages to ride out the protests and remains in place, Hezbollah will be largely blamed.

If, on the other hand, the government does resign, to be replaced by other political figures, Hezbollah will have lost its two most highly-placed Christian allies, President Michel Aoun and Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, who have always been responsive to Hezbollah's demands. Other Christian politicians who might replace them lack their standing, or still worse from Nasrallah's point of view, take a dim view of Hezbollah, such as the Lebanese Forces headed by Samir Geagea.

If the current government were to be replaced by a government of technocrats, which the protesters clearly favor, Nasrallah cannot count on their support. For technocrats, interested only in the stability and well-being of the country, know that the fiefdom created by Hezbollah in south Beirut is a challenge to the authority of the Lebanese state, and must not be tolerated. Nor should Hezbollah be allowed to drag Lebanon once again into a punishing war as it did in 2006, with huge damage to the country's infrastructure. A government of technocrats – Sunni, Shi'a, Christian, and Druze – will want to clip Nasrallah's wings, hoping to exploit the ill will he created in first denouncing the protesters. They could start by insisting that the 130,000 missiles the group now possesses, and has hidden all over Lebanon, be moved out of civilian areas, and be stored in south Beirut, where the Hezbollah fighters have their stronghold. A reassertion, by a government of technocrats, of Lebanese sovereignty should include building up the Lebanese army as a counterweight to Hezbollah, which has long overawed it.

Such a government would require much in the way of foreign aid. If it were understood that these technocrats were intent on decreasing the role of Hezbollah in the government, that should be enough to persuade Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates, too, to supply needed billions to pay for advanced weapons for the Lebanese army and for more soldiers as well. The more help the Gulf Arabs can give to a Lebanese government intent on curbing the influence of Hezbollah, the more likely it is that Lebanon will eventually be able to join the coalition of anti-Iran Arab states.

Others, too, including the Americans, might renew foreign aid to Lebanon if they became convinced that Hezbollah was no longer controlling the government, and that such aid money would not be diverted to it.

Meanwhile Hezbollah's financial woes only increase. It used to receive 70% of its money from Iran (the rest came from Shiites outside Lebanon, especially from Hezbollah supporters involved in the drug trade, bringing cocaine and heroin from South America to Europe); because of the re-imposition of American sanctions, Iran has cut its contribution to Hezbollah in half. This in turn has led to a great reduction in salaries for Hezbollah fighters, with some of them quitting the group to find other means of support.

Hezbollah has a lot to lose whatever happens. If the Lebanese political elite that now runs the government remains, the protests will continue. Hezbollah's allies in the government, including most importantly Michel Aoun and Gebran Bassil, will urge Nasrallah to support them. He will look weak if he abandons them, but if he stands by them, he and his terror group will be seen as part of that corrupt political elite that a million demonstrators have taken to the streets to protest. And if the current government were to resign, those replacing it, from the same political elite, would be less inclined to do Hezbollah's bidding than Aoun and Bassil, whose subservience to Nasrallah could not be surpassed. If instead

this government were to be replaced by a government of Lebanese technocrats, uninterested in foreign entanglements, and determined to re-assert the power of the Lebanese state vis-à-vis Hezbollah, surely among the first things they would do is increase the size and armory of the Lebanese army.

Hezbollah reached its political high-water mark just before the protests began in mid-October. Nasrallah miscalculated by his initial verbal attack on the protesters, followed by physical attacks on them by Hezbollah fighters wielding cudgels. Both he, and Hezbollah, have been the targets of fury even from many Shi'a. From here on out, whether the current government stays or goes, and whether, if it goes, it is replaced by other politicians less willing to follow Hezbollah's commands, or by technocrats determined to reassert the power of the state, for Hassan Nasrallah, and for Hezbollah, it's downhill all the way.

Frist published in the