

How Weak Is Hezbollah?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The story, posted at *The National*, a UAE paper opposed both to Iran and to its proxy Hezbollah, is [here](#):

Some would say that, given the crisis Lebanon is facing today, Hezbollah's project for the country is dead. Such statements, however, go too far.

With thousands of men under arms, a missile arsenal, Iranian backing and much of the Shiite religious community behind the party, Hezbollah remains a potent force in Lebanese society. Yet it is also true that today its ability to act as Iran's deterrent has been severely compromised by Lebanon's domestic situation, and this may not end any time soon.

Hezbollah has 140,000 missiles in its armory, hidden throughout civilian areas so as to make it more difficult for Israel to destroy them. But the Israelis have made clear that they will not be deterred in any future conflict; the Lebanese

will not be spared, and it is up to them to pressure Hezbollah to move those missiles out of civilian areas. Those who are not in Hezbollah – the Christians, the Sunnis, and even a growing number of Shi'a – are angry with the terror group for taking the country hostage. They remember the great damage inflicted by Israel on Lebanon's infrastructure in its 2006 war with Hezbollah, and have no desire to repeat that experience. The Lebanese are not consumed, as Hezbollah is, with a fanatical desire to destroy Israel whatever the cost. They are simply trying to survive in the face of their country's impending economic ruin and a political class of thieves and incompetents.

What is Hezbollah's plan? Principally, it is to turn the country into a so-called "resistance state" that acts as an outpost for Iranian influence, and another counterweight to Israel and the United States. The common assumption is that the militant party has succeeded in that effort.

But has it?

Hezbollah has power over the Lebanese state, but its sway has also helped to bankrupt and undermine Lebanon, negatively affecting the party's capacities.

Hezbollah has helped to bankrupt Lebanon in two ways. First, the war it began with Israel in 2006 led to massive destruction, costing the Lebanese state tens of billions of dollars to repair. Second, Hezbollah's support has kept the corrupt ruling elite in power, where they continue to siphon off for their own benefit large sums from the state treasury.

In protecting a corrupt political class and allowing it to continue its looting of the state, Hezbollah was partly responsible for the collapse last October of Lebanon's financial order. At the time, the party's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, had understood the risks of popular protests against the ruling class and tried to neutralise

public anger. He failed.

When Hassan Nasrallah gave his support to the regime that, through mismanagement and corruption, has helped to bankrupt the Lebanese state, by sending his fighters out to suppress the protests, his terror group lost whatever residual sympathy it might still have possessed among ordinary (i.e., non-Hezbollah) Lebanese.

For weeks Hezbollah sought to retain some control over a system that had lost all legitimacy, and in January it thought it had succeeded when a government formed by the party and its allies came to power.

But something was definitely broken. Lebanon was insolvent, hundreds of thousands of people were out of work and all of the political parties were forced to recalculate.

The change in government in January meant that Hezbollah was ever more closely identified with the regime – it had, after all, with its allies, been responsible for forming that new government. Hezbollah thought that “new” government – which kept many of the same figures – would satisfy the protesters. It did not. It only enraged them further.

As for the financial debacle, Hezbollah has had nothing to offer to solve Lebanon’s colossal problems. For years the country has been living far beyond its means, racking up debt. Some of that debt was e tens of billions in reconstruction costs, the damage a result of the war that Hezbollah instigated with Israel in 2006. Those in charge didn’t care very much, as long as they and their cronies could continue to divert funds to themselves. Then came the steep rise in unemployment, exacerbated by the closures of businesses due to the coronavirus. Lebanon now has a debt of more than \$100 billion, and no way to pay any of it back. The cupboard is bare.

A report on Lebanon, published by the Council on Foreign Relations, is hair-raising:

The Lebanese suffer from many afflictions: an insufficient voice in government, a lack of government transparency, limited economic opportunities, corruption, nepotism, and poor quality of life. Lebanon's infrastructure is crumbling, and the Lebanese experience daily electricity outages, garbage piled up in the streets, sporadic water cuts, and environmental degradation. Since October 2019, protesters have taken to the streets to blame the sectarian political system for their economic plight and demand a complete replacement of Lebanon's political system and leadership.

The protests ceased as the country went into lockdown over the pandemic of a novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, but difficult living conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 response reignited the protests in late April. Lebanon is suffering what is likely its worst-ever financial crisis. There is a dollar shortage, which in turn has seen the Lebanese pound lose more than 50 percent of its value on parallel markets in the past six months. In that time, banks—some of which are on the verge of collapse—have limited withdrawals of the Lebanese pound and entirely phased out withdrawals in the foreign currencies the Lebanese use to pay a variety of obligations, such as mortgages and tuition.²

Coronavirus-related restrictions have added to systemic economic problems, pushing the unemployment rate to over 30 percent and reducing incomes and economic activity. Multiple humanitarian organizations have warned of food insecurity.

And the ruling elite who have brought about these wretched economic conditions remain in power thanks mainly to the support of Hezbollah. No wonder the Lebanese masses are enraged with the Shi'a terror group.

This lost Hezbollah two of the essential prerequisites needed

to conduct a war against Israel, were Iran to demand it. The first is Lebanon's ability to absorb Israeli retaliation and rebuild, as happened in 2006. The second is a minimum level of consensus nationally behind Hezbollah's "resistance" agenda.

Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, Lebanon managed to rebuild despite the enormous damage done to the country's infrastructure by Israel's attacks on Hezbollah outposts in civilian areas. But Lebanon is now completely broke. If there is another war, instigated like the previous one, by Hezbollah, it will be unable to rebuild. And in 2006, there was much more domestic support for Hezbollah, which had been presenting itself as a movement of "national resistance." The Lebanese no longer believe that. They have seen how Hezbollah, at Iran's command, sent thousands of troops to fight in the Syrian civil war, which had nothing to do with any "national resistance" against Israel. Hezbollah was no longer seen as a Lebanese movement but, rather, as a Shi'a movement based in Lebanon, but directed from Tehran. It owed its allegiance not to Lebanon, but to Iran. That has decreased still further any residual support for the so-called "national resistance" agenda of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah now faces the worst crisis of its existence. It has thrown in its lot with a Lebanese regime widely perceived as both corrupt and incompetent; it has violently suppressed Lebanese protesting against that regime; it has shown it is not so much a leader of "national resistance" against Israel as it is Iran's puppet, by following Tehran's order to help Assad by sending thousands of its fighters to Syria. And it has lost a great deal of the funding from Iran it depends on, for Iran itself, with American sanctions reimposed, is deeply in debt.

Iran leaves countries so debilitated that its proxies end up controlling volatile and vulnerable sandcastles.

Lebanon's bankruptcy means that if there were a war against Israel, the country would be unable to recover from the destruction the Israelis would necessarily cause in trying to destroy 140,000 missiles dispersed throughout Lebanon. Worse, because of Hezbollah, Lebanon has isolated itself from the Arab countries – the rich Gulf Arab states – that might once have been willing to finance its reconstruction, but that have no desire to help Lebanon if it continues to be run by Hezbollah and its allies. This time, the damage would be enduring; the rebuilding will take many years.

An impoverished Lebanese state, as already noted, would not be able to reconstruct the infrastructure that, in any future conflict, Israel will certainly destroy. As Hezbollah's armory is now much larger and much more spread out –and still deliberately hidden in civilian areas – than the armory it had in 2006, the destruction will be much larger. If the Lebanese government were to ask the rich Arab oil states to help, they will refuse. They don't want to help Hezbollah, hated by the Gulf Arabs as the proxy of Shi'a Iran, but will insist, as a condition of any financial aid to Lebanon, that Hezbollah agree to disarm. And that won't happen.

Nor could Beirut call upon Iran, Hezbollah's economically strangled sponsor, to help, as it simply lacks the means to do so.

In 2006, Iran was prospering mightily from its sales of oil. Today, those oil sales have declined by 90% in just a year, thanks to the reimposition of American sanctions. In 2018, just before those sanctions were reimposed, Iran's oil output was 3.8 mbd. Now oil sales are about .25 mbd. Furthermore, the price of oil itself has declined by 60% in less than a year. The American government has also successfully pressured other countries to cease doing business with Iran altogether. Foreign investors have been scared off; so have potential trading partners. Just since 2018, the value of Iran's

currency has fallen by more than 60%. And that came on top of many previous years of steep decline.

There are no signs of improvement in Iran's economy. That is why Iran has had to cut its \$800 million-a-year subsidy to Hezbollah, though by what amount has not been made public. But it is known that the terror group has cut some salaries in half. Fighters are being furloughed or assigned to the reserves, where they receive lower salaries or no pay at all. Deliveries of food and medicines to the Shi'a poor – a useful recruiting tool – have ended. That's how bad things have gotten for Hezbollah – and for its financier, Iran.

The rifts in the political class as a result of the popular protest movement mean that there is no discernible consensus to back Hezbollah in going to war.

Today, the party's harshest critics come from its erstwhile allies in the Aounist movement, a predominantly Christian faction led by former foreign minister Gebran Bassil. Their criticisms may be linked to domestic disagreements, but when Ziad Aswad, a prominent Aounist, declares that Lebanon "cannot continue to hold a rifle when its people are hungry," he expresses a widespread view.

Ziad Aswad is simply making an obvious point: for Lebanon, the choice is stark: "Guns or Butter?" Hezbollah has chosen guns, while the rest of the country has chosen – or wants to choose – butter. Hezbollah has captured the state, and is holding Lebanon hostage to its own fanatical desire to help Iran destroy Israel.

Without domestic backing, Hezbollah's ability to wage war would be greatly hampered. The party would be blamed for sacrificing Lebanon for Iran. Hundreds of thousands of displaced Shiites would have to find refuge in areas hostile to the party, further stoking divisions and potentially leading to strife. This is a nightmare scenario for

Hezbollah, as it could plunge the party into a civil conflict that it could not hope to win, nullifying its usefulness to Iran.

Hezbollah has already lost what domestic backing it may have had in Lebanon outside its own members. Its doing Iran's bidding in Syria was the last straw for the Lebanese, who now see clearly that the terror group is a puppet of a foreign power, Iran. In a war, Israel would hit hardest the Hezbollah heartland in southern Lebanon, leading to hundreds of thousands of Shi'a, supporters of Hezbollah, to move elsewhere, into parts of the country populated by Sunnis and Christians. Those displaced Shi'a will not be welcomed by the Sunnis and Christians, who see them as supporters of Hezbollah, the instigator of a war with Israel that will inevitably lead to much destruction by Israel's air force, seeking to find and destroy those 140,000 missiles Iran supplied to Hezbollah. If Sunnis and Christians attack the Shi'a moving into their villages, Hezbollah will necessarily enter this internal conflict to defend those Shi'a. That is indeed a "nightmare scenario" for Hezbollah, which would then be involved in a civil conflict with 60% of the Lebanese population, while at the same time trying to fight the Israelis. Just as Hezbollah can no longer count on its previous level of financial support from Iran, Iran can no longer count on military support from Hezbollah, weakened both by Israel's relentless campaign to destroy its armory of missiles, and by the opposition of nearly two-thirds of the Lebanese, and the enmity of the Lebanese army.

Yet that usefulness is questionable even today. Hezbollah has hubristically assumed that Lebanon is solidly in the Iranian camp. Its command of the state may be assured to an extent, but its command over society is not. And even then, key outposts of the state, such as the army, merely play along with Hezbollah but remain autonomous and would manoeuvre away from the party if the power balance shifted.

Hezbollah has sided with the government against those many Lebanese protesters who have taken to the streets to demand that not just the leaders of the present government, but the entire corrupt class of the Lebanese elite, resign en masse. Hassan Nasrallah has directed his bezonians to beat up and suppress those taking part in these non-violent protests. This is why the protesters, who continue to show up (save for two months when the coronavirus kept them off the streets), now denounce not only the government, but Hezbollah itself. Nasrallah could have chosen to back the protesters but he did not; he picked the side of the government, underestimating the determination of the protesters to keep going, and the fury his actions have provoked among the great majority of Lebanese.

Another factor fundamental in determining Hezbollah's latitude to engage in war with Israel is the situation in Syria. Until the start of Syria's civil war in 2011, Damascus provided Hezbollah with potential strategic depth in any war. Weapons and men could be moved through Syrian territory to reinforce the party in Lebanon. But today, much of Syria's airspace is controlled by Russia and Israel, both of whom would oppose, by action or omission, Syria's transformation into an Iranian forward base.

The Israeli Air Force has conducted hundreds of sorties against the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and Iranian bases in Syria, with losses in the low single digits. It controls much of the Syrian airspace. Iran has thus found it impossible to deliver precision-guided missiles or other advanced weaponry to Hezbollah; the Israeli air campaign has managed to prevent nearly all such deliveries. Further, the IAF has been systematically reducing to rubble Iranian bases being built in Syria. By early June, Iran appeared to have decided that it no longer made sense to remain, and now appears to be pulling out of Syria altogether.

Iran's regional strategy involves feeding off the weaknesses of institutions in many Arab countries to advance its own interests. Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Syria have all paid a price. In each, Tehran built up autonomous armed groups that counterbalanced state structures, eroding the state. Indeed, Iran gains influence by destroying its host.

Today, Hezbollah's ability to carry the Lebanese state and society in the direction of its own regional preferences, strong-arm Lebanon's sects into approving its actions and secure legitimacy from the country's leaders has been crippled. The party remains powerful, but the foundations on which it built its order in Lebanon have collapsed. Perhaps that's the problem in Iran's approach: it leaves countries so debilitated that its proxies end up controlling volatile and vulnerable sandcastles.

As Iran looks at Lebanon, what does it see? It sees its local ally presiding over a state in ruin whose population is angry and refuses to suffer for Tehran. Nor can Hezbollah go to war against Israel without potentially destroying its own domestic standing. All of that won't make the Iranians alter their strategy, but it does raise real questions about the value of that strategy today

When Nasrallah answered Iran's command and sent thousands of Hezbollah fighters to help Assad kill fellow Muslims in Syria, he demonstrated that the terror group was a puppet of the Islamic Republic and not, as it claimed, a purely Lebanese "resistance movement" defending the state against the Zionists. When he took the side of the Lebanese government against huge popular protests that spread all over Lebanon, and even had his fighters violently suppress those protests, he embraced the corrupt elite that the vast majority of Lebanese wanted to see replaced with a government of technocrats. When he threatens war with Israel, he fills most Lebanese with dread, for they know what happened to their

country's infrastructure during the last Israel-Hezbollah War in 2006. They would like not to be dragged into Hezbollah's bellicose plans. They desire only a Lebanese government of technocrats intent on saving the nation's economy, and just as important, they would like their national army to be strengthened sufficiently, with Western or Gulf Arab military aid, to be able to face down Hezbollah, which has brought Lebanon nothing but misery and woe.

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