

# In Beirut, Protesters Shout “No to Hezbollah”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As the coronavirus lockdown in Lebanon has eased, protesters against the government are back on the streets. While still shouting against the government for its mismanagement and corruption, and demanding its removal, the protesters have focused more of their attention on Hezbollah, the terror group that supports the government, violently suppresses protesters, and threatens to drag Lebanon into a war with Israel that would devastate the country.

The story of the latest protests in Lebanon is at *Middle East Eye* [here](#):

*Protesters poured into the streets of the Lebanese capital on Saturday to decry the collapse of the economy, as clashes*

*erupted between supporters and opponents of the Iran-backed Shia group Hezbollah.*

*More than 35 percent of Lebanese are unemployed, while poverty has soared to 45 percent of the population, according to official estimates. Lebanon is also one of the world's most indebted countries and defaulted on its external borrowing for the first time in March, according to AFP.*

Years of mismanagement of the economy, by the incompetent and the wasteful and the corrupt, have led Lebanon to its current state of financial ruin. The country has a GDP to debt ratio of 160%, one of the highest in the world. It has an unemployment rate of 35%. 45% of the population lives in poverty. Lebanon has a balance of payments crisis, a debt crisis, a bank crisis, and a political crisis – the government having lost all legitimacy in the eyes of most Lebanese, but still kept in power by Hezbollah and its political allies – and all are linked.

*For years, Lebanon's economy was sustained through overseas diaspora capital funnelled from the banks to fund a government beset by state waste, corruption and bad governance. But that system collapsed when the flow of money dried up and anti-government protesters took to the streets in October last year, leaving the state facing a gaping balance of payments hole, and a \$20.6 billion decrease in banks' shareholder capital.*

*The first big protests since the government rolled back coronavirus lockdown measures in mid-March came in early June as Beirut negotiated an International Monetary Fund (IMF) package it hopes will secure billions of dollars in financing to prop up its collapsing economy, Reuters said...*

*"No to Hezbollah, no to its weapons," said a sign held up by Sana, a female protester from Nabatiyeh, a city in southern Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold. "Weapons should be only in*

*the hands of the army,” said the 57-year-old.*

*“As long as there are militias that are stronger than the state, then the government will not be able to fight corruption,” said John Moukarzel, a real estate company owner...*

*A sign held aloft by protesters on Saturday called for “a government that eliminates corruption, not one that protects corruption”.*

*Diab’s government adopted an economic recovery plan in April and has begun negotiations with the IMF in a bid to unlock billions of dollars in potential aid.*

Decades of mismanagement, and corruption, by successive Lebanese governments have led to the present crisis. The Lebanese pound has lost more than 60% of its value just since October.

The Lebanese may be able to obtain a \$10 billion loan from the IMF but much more will be needed. And will the corrupt government agree to the kind of anti-corruption reforms the IMF will demand? The much larger amounts of aid Lebanon needs could only come from the rich Gulf Arab states, but they will not help Lebanon as long as Hezbollah, the ally of their enemy Iran, continues to be the most powerful military and political force in the country. If Hezbollah is disarmed, as most Lebanese – all of the Sunnis and Christians, and even some of the Shi’a – want, aid from the Gulf Arabs, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, may then – and only then – be forthcoming.

The shouts of “No to Hezbollah” from protesters is evidence of the growing unpopularity of the terror group, which has since the fall of 2019 taken on the role of violently suppressing protesters. Earlier protests, before the coronavirus lockdown, were non-violent, but now the protesters are back, and in signs of increasing anger and frustration, have been throwing

rocks and bottles at Hezbollah members trying to suppress them. Protesters are now holding Hezbollah responsible for keeping the current government in office, and therefore also responsible for preventing a new government, both competent and honest, to be formed in order to pull Lebanon out of the economic abyss into which it has fallen.

It is hard to see how Hezbollah can recover any support from non-Shi'a in Lebanon. Hassan Nasrallah made a fateful choice when he decided to have his group unswervingly support the government (which contains Hezbollah allies), and suppress the protesters. The overwhelming majority of Lebanese will not forgive him, or his terror group, for this. And they certainly have no desire to be dragged by Hezbollah into another conflict with Israel, a prospect which fills them with dread, for they remember the destruction that occurred during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war. They realize that should there be another Hezbollah-Israel war, Israel will have to destroy as many of the 140,000 missiles now in Hezbollah's armory and hidden in civilian areas all over southern Lebanon that it can, and , the destruction will be many times greater than in 2006.

"No To Hezbollah!" It's not what Hassan Nasrallah expected to hear from fellow Lebanese. What ingratitude, he must think, to those who are the central figures in the "national resistance." But from now on, it's all he's going to hear on the streets of Lebanon. Hezbollah chose to support the government in Beirut that so many Lebanese want replaced. He showed that Hezbollah was not so much a Lebanese group, but rather, Iran's puppet, when at Iran's command Nasrallah ordered tens of thousands of Hezbollah fighters to help Assad in Syria. As for the claim that Hezbollah is the heart of the "national resistance" to Israel, if Hezbollah did not exist, with its terror tunnels into there would be no need for such "resistance," as Israel would have no reason to attack.

Meanwhile, the anti-Hezbollah forces in Lebanon need to build

up the only other armed force in the country. This is the Lebanese National Army, which needs both money and weapons, which the country is too poor to provide. But money and weapons are what the Gulf Arabs can offer, in great amounts, in the hope that the Lebanese Army can eventually stand up to Hezbollah.

In setting conditions for granting a \$10 billion loan to Lebanon, let us hope the IMF insists on the disarming of all armed groups save for the Lebanese National Army, in order to lessen the likelihood both of internecine violence and of a destructive war with Israel. If Hezbollah refuses, it will be seen not only as the enemy of the protesters and protector of the corrupt political elite, but as the stumbling block to the IMF loan and thus to any possible economic recovery. It will have become the mortal enemy of all Lebanese who want to pull themselves, and the country, out of its economic abyss. Even many Shiites, who are also victims of the economic crisis, will be angered if Nasrallah refuses to disarm. Such a refusal to disarm, which thereby will prevent the granting of the I.M.F. loan, should lead to a further collapse in support for Nasrallah and his terror group, especially among the Shi'a, one that the malign goose-steppers of Hezbollah so richly deserve.

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