

In Lebanon, Can Hezbollah Be Tamed?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Before and After views of the Lebanese Port

When 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate that had been carelessly stored for six years in Hangar 12 at the Port of Beirut blew up on August 4, the loss of life and destruction was terrific. 154 people have died so far, 5,000 have been wounded, 300,000 are now homeless, and \$10-\$15 billion in damage has been done in Lebanon, a country that had already been facing economic collapse.

This is what we know so far. The ammonium nitrate had been the cargo on a ship owned by a Russian businessman, Igor Grecheshkin. The ship was seized by Lebanese authorities in 2013, its cargo of ammonium nitrate was removed in 2014, and stored in unsafe conditions in Hangar 12 at the Port of

Beirut. That's where it remained for six years; customs officials sent repeated warnings to higher-ups about the reckless way the ammonium nitrate had been stored, but their warnings went unheeded. On August 4, according to the Lebanese Defense Council, welding work being carried out on a hole in the warehouse at the Port of Beirut started the massive blast.

What is still not yet known is whether Grecheshkin had simply abandoned the cargo, or whether he managed to sell it to Hezbollah, or whether Hezbollah asserted its ownership over the abandoned cargo. The terror group was, and is, well aware of the possible use of ammonium nitrate as a weapon. Four years ago, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, threatened to shoot a missile that would set fire to the ammonium nitrate stored at the Port of Haifa which would, he boasted, explode "like a nuclear bomb."

If the chemicals had been sold to Hezbollah, or Hezbollah claimed ownership, all the while keeping them stored so dangerously, this would be one more example of the damage Hezbollah has caused to Lebanon. In 2006, the Shi'a terror group dragged Lebanon into a war with Israel that the country did not want, and having hidden its arsenal of weapons in civilian buildings – schools, restaurants, schools – Hezbollah ensured that Israel would be forced to inflict damage on the country's civilian infrastructure while hitting Hezbollah's weapons stores, even as it tried to minimize civilian casualties through its "knock-on-the-roof" warnings.

Hezbollah has steadily grown in political and economic power, as it has received vast shipments of weapons, and \$800 million a year (until 2019, when less was forthcoming from the belt-tightening Islamic Republic), from Iran. Hezbollah is now a state within a state. It has more weapons and more fighters than the Lebanese National Army. It controls the Lebanese cabinet, not only with ministers who are Hezbollah members, but also through non-Hezbollah collaborators, such as the Maronite President Michel Aoun, who do Hezbollah's bidding.

When Lebanese began protesting last October against the mismanagement and corruption they have endured for decades from the “permanent regime” of ministers who play musical chairs with their posts, it was Hezbollah’s bullying bezonians who came out in force to beat up the non-violent protesters. Hassan Nasrallah, from his hideout (“even I don’t know where my hideout is”), had given the word to smash the protests, for he had no intention of letting protesters bring down a government that he controlled. It is Hezbollah alone that keeps the appalling government of crooks, cronies, and kickback artists still in control, and while many Lebanese – Christians, Sunnis, and even many Shi’a – recognize this, there is nothing they can do.

Aside from its Iranian subsidy, Hezbollah has also managed to make ends meet by siphoning off pieces of the Lebanese economy, amounting to between \$500 million and \$1 billion a year. Its chief instrument is that of many criminal organizations: it makes legitimate businesses offers they can’t refuse. Hezbollah is not only one of the largest drug traffickers – cocaine, heroin – in the world, but also a practiced master, in Lebanon, of extortion. Hezbollah gets rid of those standing in its way by, among other suave techniques, blowing them up, as it did to Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. It has steadily increased its representation in Parliament and now has, through the compliant Michel Aoun (who now dares to suggest that a “foreign attack” might have caused the Beirut blast – a transparent Hezbollah-inspired attempt to frame Israel), acquired complete control over the presidency. It also has a parallel army to that of the state, one more powerful than the national army; it controls the country’s foreign policy, making sure that Lebanon remains adamantly hostile to Israel and friendly to Iran. It has hidden an arsenal of 150,000 missiles, some with new precision-guidance systems, supplied by Iran, throughout southern Lebanon and south Beirut, again hidden among civilian buildings that, should there be another war, Israel will be compelled to

destroy.

Hezbollah's presence, and power, in Lebanon, have had a devastating effect on the economy in still another way. The Gulf Arab states that in the past gave aid to Lebanon, lent money to Lebanon, invested in Lebanon, stopped doing so when they realized that Hezbollah controlled the country and any aid, or loans, or investments, would profit the terror group, allied with the Gulf Arabs' mortal enemy, Iran. Why would Saudi Arabia, or the UAE, or other Gulf Arabs, wish to help Hezbollah, and through Hezbollah, Iran?

Western investors are also reluctant to lend to, or invest in, Lebanon, in part because of Hezbollah's well-deserved reputation as a terror group, and in part because of the group's constant threats to drag the country into what would be a very destructive war with Israel. The threats, and the likelihood of major violence erupting in Lebanon, has to be factored into the risk-reward calculus of potential investors, who have no stomach for investing in what at any moment, thanks to Hezbollah, might well become a war zone.

Hezbollah is also the guarantor of the regime that has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the Lebanese people and, through its mismanagement and corruption, that regime has brought the country to financial ruin. Lebanon now has a debt-to-GDP ratio that is the second highest in the world. Its currency has cratered. Its unemployment rate is skyrocketing. Many Lebanese have lost their life savings. Young Lebanese, their career hopes dashed, dream of emigrating. Meanwhile, Hezbollah violently suppresses nonviolent protesters in the streets. In keeping the unpopular and illegitimate government in power, Hezbollah actively prevents competent and honest technocrats from being appointed who might actually help to right the listing Lebanese economy.

The Beirut blast, and the misery it has caused, may at long last create such a firestorm of rage against the government,

for its crookedness and sheer incompetence, that even Hezbollah will be wary of suppressing this latest tsunami of protest. If the government falls, as so many in Lebanon are ardently hoping, and technocrats take the place of the self-serving crooks now in power, there's a chance for Lebanon to pull back from the economic brink. If Hezbollah itself can be suppressed by a new "Government of National Unity" in Lebanon, one in which Hezbollah is downgraded from its present position as a state-within-the-state to becoming just one more political party, like Nabih Berri's Shi'a Amal Movement, then the Gulf Arab states that have deliberately held off supporting Lebanon as long as Hezbollah has been ruling the roost in Beirut, would likely re-assume their previous support for the country, through grants, loans, and investments. And Lebanon, for so long held in thrall by Hassan Nasrallah and the Party of God, will once again have a chance to survive, and even, just possibly, eventually again to thrive.

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