

The Temporary Success of Iran's Proxies in Lebanon Occludes a Deeper Shift in Lebanese Society

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Brief Analysis

More than two months after the eruption of unprecedented nationwide protests, Iran's proxy political actors seem confident that they have been able to thwart the threat to their power, which the vigorous expressions of the "October 17 Revolution" represented in Lebanon. It is clear that the Iranian proxy camp views their recent pressures on the street and the resulting reactions as a potential way to further enhance its stranglehold on Lebanon's politics and society by further controlling Lebanon's political scene.

However, what may at first seem a masterly maneuver on the part of the Iranian proxy camp is based on a misreading of the nature of events. The October 17 Revolution should not be misunderstood as another round in the local duel between pro-Iran and anti-Iran factions mirroring Tehran's regional conflict. It is instead the challenging of deeper problems endemic to Lebanon that political maneuvers—even temporarily successful ones—cannot dissipate.

The U.S. targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani, Iran's regional expansion chief strategist, has provided the pro-Iranian camp in Lebanon with the opportunity to ride on outrage and reclaim the national narrative, and may even allow it to engage in more forceful measures against its opponents. However, these developments do not alter the fundamental dynamics.

So far, Iranian proxies have treated the October 17 Revolution as yet another ephemeral challenge to their hold on the country, and have accordingly deployed their standard ground maneuvers against it. Rioters from the pro-Iran camp, armed with batons and gasoline tanks and chanting abject sectarian (Shia) slogans, have effectively targeted the protests by burning structures erected by activists and harming unarmed protesters. The security services with open allegiance to Iran-aligned politicians have also brutally dispersed demonstrations and have built cement walls to hamper the movement of activists—dividing the city. Meanwhile, media loyal to Iran has portrayed the October 17 Revolution as responsible for the aggravation of the economic and fiscal crises that served as its catalyst.

More substantively, the Iran proxy politicians have leveraged the events on the street to chart and force a provocative course of national politics to spark a return of partisanship to the street. The selection of Hassan Diyaab—a university professor with little political experience and no popular traction—seems specifically designed to incite communitarian resentment with the Sunni community. Moreover, the appointment process was rushed in order to

coincide with the pre-planned visit of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State David Hale; pro-Iranian media was subsequently able to suggest the existence of a not-so-tacit agreement between the United States and Iran regarding Lebanon's current political course, a tactic apparently designed to create a sense of alienation and marginalization within the Sunni Lebanese community.

On its face, these provocations appear to have achieved their intended effect. Many streets and squares have recently been occupied by angry rioters chanting abject sectarian (Sunni) slogans, lining up with the Iranian proxy camp's actions. The displays of hope and goodwill previously characterizing the Revolution have given way to riots on both sides, with a sense that the previous status quo of unrest, cynicism, and despair is being restored and that Lebanon will remain divided.

Lebanon's two main political camps of over a decade—the pro-Iran 'March 8' and the pro-West 'March 11' factions—have had a bitter rivalry. Yet their collective entanglement and partnership in the kleptocracy of Lebanon's post-civil war "Second Republic" has created a condition of a mutually assured survival. The continuing presence of its opponent allowed each camp to mobilize its supporters and excuse its own usurpation of national assets and public funds, and in Hezbollah's case justify their armed "resistance" force. This compromise was visible in the elections of Prime Minister Sa'd Hariri, son and political heir to Rafiq Hariri and the most prominent pro-Western figure in Lebanon, and the eventual election of Hezbollah's ally Michel Aoun to the presidency in 2016.

The source of this kleptocracy that has dominated Lebanon's "Second Republic" since the country's 1975-1990 civil war cannot be blamed on Hezbollah. Rather, the origins of corruption that has in effect fueled both sides of Lebanon's leadership can be traced to the clientelism and communitarianism that have plagued Lebanon since before its independence. Both were supposed to be gradually rooted out with Lebanon's independence in 1943, but successive Lebanese governments failed, in spite of social pressure towards more integration. And though the end of civil war was supposed to herald an era of sober reform, reconstruction, and nation-building, the subsequent accommodations of Iranian proxies simply reconsecrated clientelism and communitarianism in the "Second Republic."

Even so, the presence of Iran in Lebanon relies on this system of kleptocracy and corruption in order to survive. Therefore, though Iran is not the generator of corruption and factional divisions in Lebanon, the termination of the Iranian imperial project in Lebanon is a pre-requisite to ending both. However, how such a task could be accomplished is unclear: Iran's imperial project seems uninhibited and continuing to inflate, both as a result of strategic designs from Tehran, and tactical missteps from elsewhere. For example, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's efforts to disrupt the status quo by bringing Sa'd Hariri—who they supported—to Riyadh in 2017 and forcing his resignation actually decimated Hariri's stature and effectively ended the deeply frayed March 11 coalition and did nothing to disrupt Iran's proxies.

The October 17 Revolution has emerged due to the unabated corruption, mismanagement, and neglect displayed by the plutocratic class in Lebanon. In its early spontaneous manifestations, one of the more remarkable aspects of the Revolution was its ability to both identify Iran as a catalyst, if not a cause, of Lebanon's disaster, while also protesting the deeper failures of Lebanese governance as well.

The October 17 Revolution has emphasized the untenability of a political system subverted to allow the country's ruling class to usurp the country's wealth while maintaining the segmentation of society along communitarian lines, preventing the emergence of a common identity. In almost a century of existence, Lebanon has never experienced as strong of an expression of national determination for citizen empowerment as this Revolution, which has cut across communities to demand a total overhaul of the political class.

It is this unity that is threatening to Iran—and others'—control of the state. And while the Iranian proxy camp's

efforts to re-inject the street with sectarianism may buy it some time at Lebanon's helm, the Revolution's unprecedented identification of the true culprits of Lebanon's challenges suggests that this sectarianism has in some important way lost some of its hold. The street will rise again, as it is the only course available to Lebanese society in order to move forward.

Stake-holding Western and Gulf capitals have failed to contain Iran's ascendancy in Lebanon, and the facile position of "letting Iran sink in the mud it has created" may not excuse these powers of the responsibility of the severe, possibly fatal damage that Lebanon will suffer in the process.

While few Lebanese would expect that Washington, Paris, Riyadh, or Abu Dhabi would enter into a direct confrontation with Tehran over Lebanon, what is needed is the more delicate course of rejecting the charade of a local Lebanese conflict or normalizing the absurd political order that Iran has set in Lebanon without compromising or abandoning the genuine Lebanese social and political agents of change.

In the inevitable resurgence of the Revolution, the international community should defend values, not policies; it should insist on the protection of protestors, not political leaders. Such a stance may indeed be more difficult to articulate and implement, but it is what the Lebanese seeking a nation based on freedom, justice, and universal values expect from the friends and allies of a sovereign Lebanon. ❖

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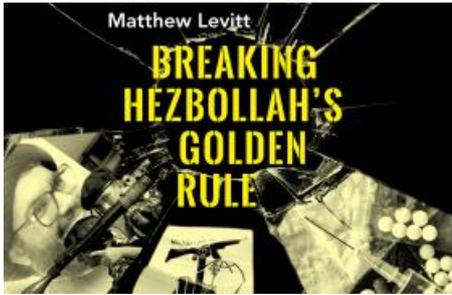
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