

To Realize its Interests, Lebanon Must Navigate Away from Confrontation with Israel

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Brief Analysis

On announcing the recent framework for Lebanese negotiations with Israel, mediated by the United States under the auspices of the UN, the Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri used language that marked a sharp departure from decades of vitriolic discourse aimed at the “Zionist Entity.” Berri repeatedly spoke of the desires and interests of “the governments of Lebanon and Israel.” This speck of linguistic normalcy, in spite of Berri’s deep alliance and allegiance to Iran’s proxy in Lebanon, which has virulently denounced any reference to Israel by name as treasonous normalization, provided a sense of what Lebanon could obtain were such language and attitudes normalized.

The pro-Iran media machine has since overworked itself attempting to explain Berri’s stance as somehow “another victory for the resistance.” Irrespective of such protests, a taboo has been lifted — whether deliberately and strategically in recognition of reality, or tactically in the pursuit of an “insurance policy” against hostile action in the expected volatility of the next months. Given the current configuration of power in Lebanon, there will not be any kind of normalization with Israel. Yet, with pull and push factors converging, meaningful change may become a necessity.

Beyond the calculations and confusion in the “resistance” camp, a paradigm shift recasting Israel from the “enemy”—a status axiomatically assigned to it—to a normal neighbor and potential regional partner could reset the course of Lebanon’s history, redirecting it towards a destination it has missed. By de-escalating and potentially reconsidering its martial posture, Lebanon could again become an open, secure, and prosperous society. Lebanon can achieve considerable gains if it chooses to engage constructively. It may suffer irretrievable losses if it does not. The peace accords between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel are a harbinger of new regional arrangements. They also permanently close the possibility of a Lebanon with a hostile pro-Iran posture siphoning funds from the Gulf.

If well-managed, the new regional environment may coalesce into a wide zone of productive economic cooperation stretching uninterrupted from Israel on the Mediterranean towards the Arab states of the Gulf. Not incidentally, the Palestinian people—a population denied control over its own fate—is presented with better opportunities towards a fair resolution in such a setting.

Given its socio-economic composition, mercantilistic legacy, and wide pool of professional talent, Lebanon would be

a natural fit for such a zone. Its civil society, business community, and even its compromised political class are endowed with a considerable potential to negotiate and assume a role in such a putative Middle East—one that is in fact a reflection of their historical self-image. The main obstacle in the way of Lebanon's participation in this solution to its economic, fiscal, and political disintegration is that a foreign power—Iran—has made significant investments into transforming Lebanon from a functioning country into a strategic asset and an advance military position.

It is increasingly understood in many Lebanese circles that the country's current trajectory as guided by Iran and Hezbollah spells the end of Lebanon, the liquidation of its pluralistic society, and the dissipation of its potential. This gloomy scenario is not mere “pro-Israeli propaganda” or part of what pro-Iran media designates as the alleged U.S. “creative chaos” policy and sanctions, but a visualization of Lebanon's current path, and the factual description of a near-inevitable end without a significant societal restructuring.

Hezbollah's Cooption of Lebanese Communitarianism

The militarization of large segments of the Lebanese Shia community into a proxy army—openly loyal to Iran and without any national Lebanese accountability—is not a passing “incident” in Lebanese history or simply another iteration of Lebanon's tumultuous historical experience with foreign interference. Rather, it is by nature and actions the negation of Lebanon that will destroy the country if allowed to continue.

Hezbollah is a far more potent version of past cases of communitarian mobilization. While previous instances were fundamentally defensive reactions to a perceived lapse in the realization of a unified and balanced Lebanon, Hezbollah's reincarnation of an ancestral Iranian “satrapy” has deliberately nurtured a separate reality presenting the country's Shia as a separate ‘warrior-caste’ in Lebanon. Shia Lebanese have in fact resisted the “resistance” and defended their individual and collective spaces. Still, it is undeniable that Hezbollah has succeeded in altering the outlook of a considerable fraction of Shia Lebanese society, both ideologically and materially.

Hezbollah has worked to foster a sense of separateness and privilege in this community by taking advantage of their historical marginalization in order to obtain the principled and/or transactional loyalty of many.

By projecting mission and power beyond the Shia community, Hezbollah has also benefited from the ensuing capitulation and remedial arrangements sought by Lebanese of other communities. In 2006, this suzerain-vassal arrangement was formalized with one major Christian-dominated faction, the “Free Patriotic Movement” (FPM). In submitting to Hezbollah and its Iranian allegiance, FPM leader Michel Aoun was imposed on Lebanon's political scene as President of the Republic, providing a convenient face for seemingly sustainable Iranian control of Lebanon via Hezbollah.

Through these methods, Hezbollah has undermined the state of Lebanon itself, reducing it to a card in Iran's deck as it handles its regional and international confrontations. Moreover, Hezbollah has also fractured the state by nurturing the kleptocratic behavior of its political class—which in turn provides the cover for its armed presence—and by creating a sense of despair within the Lebanese population alienated from a power arrangement detrimental to its interests and values.

Yet **Hezbollah's control (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/lebanon-hariri-tribunal-verdict-hezbollah>)** is not a “closed system.” Sustaining it requires a perpetual infusion of funds from both Iran itself and the international community via a combination of enticement and threat. The international community has been repeatedly pushed to wonder: can Lebanon, even Hezbollah, be “peeled” from Iranian control? Should non-Hezbollah Lebanon be provided with additional support to resist, persist, and survive? Affirmative answers to these questions and the ensuing funding has meant that the novel model of Lebanon's Iranian occupation has been effectively funded by its presumed detractors.

Yet the United States' recent approach of “extreme pressure” on Iran has presented a tangible challenge to the status

quo in Lebanon, forcing Iran to demand that Hezbollah rely more on local sources for its funding. This has increased pressure on an already overdrawn system.

Iran and its Lebanese proxy have executed contingency plans to outlast the current phase of pressure: awaiting either a change of U.S. administration after the November 2020 elections or merely a change in course in U.S. policy. Their hope is to return Lebanon to the previous arrangement, in which a propped-up, internationally-supported kleptocratic political class serves as a facade for total Iranian control. But by now, it is too late for the restoration of the status-quo. Even France, which had sought to avoid the immediate collapse of Lebanon in the wake of the disastrous explosion of the Port of Beirut on August 4 by re-introducing the tried-and-failed formula of reform from within, has since had to recognize the unmitigated dominance of Iran, via Hezbollah in de-facto occupied Lebanon.

With this dynamic finally recognized internationally—and without an infusion of funds from the IMF, the Gulf, or the West—the power sharing arrangement between kleptocracy and satrapy is no longer viable. A Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon is now faced with two grim alternatives: entropically dissipating by depleting its own un-renewable Human Resources as the dwindling middle class face further attrition through the emigration of talent; or, whether by design or accident, exposing itself to a devastating war with Israel to which the hyper-militarization of Hezbollah has doomed it.

The Role of Israel as Enemy

Even outside of Iranian influence, a peace treaty between Lebanon and Israel would be difficult, requiring the two countries to revisit, reconsider, and resolve a painful history. Yet, while arduous, this would not be an impossible task were Hezbollah removed. The ubiquity and intensity of enmity to Israel in the Lebanese public discourse is just as much a reflection of its role in the extensive Iranian media operation in Lebanon as it is historical reality—with Hezbollah becoming heir to nationalist, leftist, and Islamist narratives that have failed to gain actual traction in Lebanese political society.

The Hezbollah media machine's enmity to Israel combines principle, propaganda, and folklore. It fosters the memory of the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory—where Israel engaged in many brutal, repressive, and disproportionate actions—and keeps it alive in the Lebanese public space through a saturated information campaign that highlights Hezbollah as repeatedly victorious. As such, the substance of the messaging is just as key to solidifying an image of Hezbollah as victor as it is to maintaining enmity with Israel.

What this media chooses to ignore completely is the even more brutal, more repressive, and longer Syrian occupation of a greater portion of territory in Lebanon, where the occupying power exhibited an established proclivity for collective punishment. The fact that Hezbollah fighters are celebrated while dispatched to Syria in support of Lebanon's former oppressors provides a stark reminder of how balance of power in Lebanon is tilted in favor of Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors, and that Lebanese can work with even the most brutal of its past enemies.

Hezbollah's formula for power is one from which many in the Shia community benefited—whether in actual patronage dividends from Hezbollah or through the moral satisfaction of communitarian paramountcy. But this formula is set to end, and the consequences of this dynamic have pushed the country towards a truly existential threat.

Lebanon now faces a stark choice. Will the ideological leadership of Hezbollah succeed in forcing the Shia community, and all of Lebanon, to adhere to the Faustian terms of its subservience to Iran, effectively amounting to communal and national suicide? Or will voices across Lebanon, and notably from within the Shia community, assert that no return to the previous order is possible or desirable, and the path to prosperity, with no surrender of dignity or principle, is through a paradigm shift away from violent confrontations and futile warfare?

If many private and public courageous voices highlight reason and national interests in challenging the ideological intimidation sought by the pro-Iran media machine, Lebanon could become free from Iran and choose the peaceful path. And by choosing to work with other Arab states in renegotiating the role of Israel, Lebanon could in turn be supported in any attempts to return to a more vibrant and open society, steering it away from the collapse to which Hezbollah has otherwise doomed it. ❖

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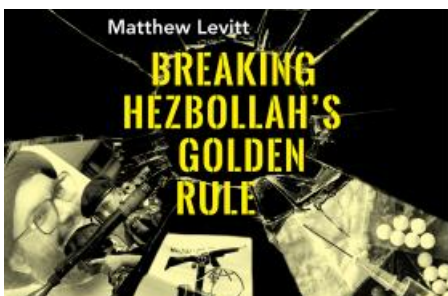
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