

Stabilizing Lebanon Is Iran's Way of Helping Hezbollah Take Over

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Brief Analysis

Despite issuing threats through its proxies, Iran shares the international community's interest in Lebanon's near-term stability, but its motivations are hardly benevolent.

Earlier this month, Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, showed up in southern Lebanon to issue threats against Israel alongside fellow Shia militants from Hezbollah. At first glance, highly publicized video of the incident seemed to signal that Tehran might expand its military activities from Syria into Lebanon. As he gazed along the border, Khazali announced that his militia was "fully prepared and ready to stand as one with the Lebanese people and with the Palestinian cause." In rhetorical terms, the move served as a message to Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who recently returned to Lebanon from Saudi Arabia, [recanted his resignation \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-regional-dimensions-of-hariris-resignation-will-iran-and-hizballah-comp\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-regional-dimensions-of-hariris-resignation-will-iran-and-hizballah-comp), and reiterated the country's policy of "dissociation" from regional conflicts. But for all its tough talk, Tehran does not want to spark a fight in Lebanon, which is far too important to Iranian interests to be turned into another battlefield—at least not before Hezbollah solidifies its grip there in the coming months.

STABILITY AT WHAT COST?

The video of Khazali's visit—a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701's prohibition on foreign forces in Lebanon without the consent of its government—coincided with the December 8 meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon, which took place in Paris and was attended by officials from Britain, China, Germany, Italy, Russia, the United States, the European Union, the Arab League, the UN, and the World Bank. In addition to

emphasizing implementation of Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, participants called on the Lebanese government and individual parties to preserve stability by staying out of foreign conflicts. Yet Beirut's dissociation policy will not force Hezbollah to withdraw from the Syria war or other regional clashes. Although the militant party's ministers agreed to the policy, they have not pulled their fighters and advisors from battlefields in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen, and no Lebanese political mandate seems likely to force them into doing so.

International reactions have unintentionally sent a similar signal to Hezbollah. After Hariri's defiant resignation and departure, French president Emmanuel Macron intervened to bring him back to Lebanon, while the U.S. State Department and White House issued statements supporting him as prime minister and highlighting the importance of stability. To Hezbollah's ears, the message was clear: so long as Lebanon is kept stable, the group will be left alone to continue its takeover there. At the same time, Hezbollah and Iran still needed to reaffirm that no one in Lebanon can stop the group from intervening wherever it likes—hence the release of Khazali's video.

In short, the past few weeks have simply confirmed the understanding that no one is willing to change the status quo in Lebanon. Europeans are worried about another wave of refugees, since Lebanon hosts more than 1.5 million displaced Syrians. Saudi Arabia was too busy with Yemen to continue its role in the resignation drama, while U.S. officials announced a new \$120 million military aid package after meeting with Hariri last week. But this kind of stability will come at the cost of helping Hezbollah, whose leaders know that the international community's fear of disrupting Lebanon's political dynamics is stronger than its desire to contain Iranian influence there.

HEZBOLLAH'S NEXT MOVE

Hariri's return protected Hezbollah from a crisis that it preferred not to deal with at the moment. Prior to his resignation, the group had managed to keep him as prime minister of a "National Unity Government" that provided political cover for Hezbollah operations at home and abroad. His reversal preserved that cover—since returning home, Hariri has been more critical of his own allies than of Hezbollah. On November 30, he told *Paris Match* magazine that the group is a regional problem, not a domestic one: "In Lebanon, Hezbollah has a political role. It has weapons, of course, but it is not using them on Lebanese soil." This caused outrage among his supporters, who were quick to note that Hezbollah members used weapons against the Lebanese people during the domestic unrest of May 2008 and are still under indictment for assassinating Hariri's own father in 2005.

Such critics are now under fire. Hariri has made hostile statements against former justice minister Ashraf Rifi and "Lebanese Forces" party leader Samir Geagea, while public figures and journalists associated with the March 14 coalition have been summoned for interrogation by security authorities. A number of other individuals—including Kataeb Party leader Samy Gemayel, March 14 member Fares Souaid, and journalist Marcel Ghanem—are being prosecuted for criticizing Hariri and President Michel Aoun as well as questioning the prime minister's rumored business partnership with Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, a Hezbollah ally.

Amid this intimidating context, Hezbollah can now proceed to take advantage of international support for Lebanon in order to prepare for its next move. The cover provided by the dissociation policy may buy the group enough time to position itself for victory in the May 2018 parliamentary elections. With the [new electoral law](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-new-electoral-law-for-lebanon-continuity-or-change) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-new-electoral-law-for-lebanon-continuity-or-change>) that Hariri's government passed this summer, Hezbollah will probably manage to bring its allies into parliament and consolidate its power democratically. This in turn would allow it to choose the next prime minister and president, make top military and security appointments, and even change the constitution as it sees fit.

For example, Hezbollah could alter the power-sharing distribution in parliament from half Christian/half Muslim to a three-way system between Christians, Sunnis, and Shia, thereby guaranteeing itself perpetual power in Lebanon's institutions. The group has revealed this idea in the past but failed to implement it for lack of a parliamentary

majority. That may not be a problem after the next elections—hence the importance of encouraging serious support for anti-Hezbollah candidates among all sects, including the Shia community.

CONCLUSION

Hezbollah and its Iranian patron do not want war in Lebanon for many reasons, so the status quo works very well for them in the short term. Tehran is still trying to establish its presence in Syria while awaiting the Iraqi parliamentary elections in April 2018, which it hopes will consolidate its influence in Baghdad. Yet Lebanon is more important than these other client countries because Iran wants to keep using it as a stable operations room for regional conflicts. Khazali's video tour was just the tip of the iceberg—all of Iran's Shia militias have a strong presence in Lebanon, and they are increasingly establishing political offices and media institutions inside the Dahiya suburb of Beirut. They also receive military training at camps in Lebanon, often by Hezbollah operatives.

Preserving Lebanon's stability remains important in a region rife with sectarian wars, but any state of calm that empowers Iran and fails to challenge Hezbollah will be a transitory one. Likewise, stability cannot safeguard Lebanon's politics or economy if it compromises democratic freedoms and bolsters corruption. On the contrary, it will only intensify tension between sects and further damage Lebanon's institutions. The international community should therefore buttress its talk of stability with a focus on reforming state institutions in order to protect Lebanon's values of freedom and diversity. Perhaps more important, Hariri's dissociation policy needs to be accompanied by more aggressive measures against Hezbollah and its regional operations, though that seems unlikely given his recent moves.

Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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