

Iran's Shadow over Lebanon

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Beirut's tilt toward Tehran has dangerous implications when it comes to countering Sunni radicalization.

Last week, a Lebanese military court sentenced local Sunni jihadi leader Sheikh Ahmed Assir to death. Assir has been in prison since 2015 for directing clashes between his supporters and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in Sidon two years earlier in which 17 soldiers were killed. While few Lebanese will shed a tear for Assir, the announcement of his impending execution nonetheless sparked Sunni protests across the state. For many Sunnis, the harsh treatment of Assir is emblematic of the Shi'a militia Hezbollah's increasingly overt dominance in Beirut.

The story of Assir itself highlights Hezbollah's preeminence in Lebanon. Back in 2013, the LAF engaged in a daylong military operation against Assir and 200 of his well-armed supporters in the Sidon neighborhood of Abra. Over the course of 25 hours, the LAF reportedly discharged some 400,000 rounds of ammunition while trying to dispatch the jihadis. Incapable of defeating Assir, the LAF called in Hezbollah backup, coordinating operations with the Iranian-backed militia to storm the militant's stronghold and finally vanquish the group.

Since then, objectively speaking, Hezbollah has been coordinating even more closely with state institutions, including the military, to fight Sunni Islamist militants. The LAF, for example, has tolerated if not facilitated the movement of Hezbollah fighters and military materiel into and out of Syria, where the organization has been fighting on behalf of the Assad regime against Sunni rebels since 2011. And to prevent domestic terrorist attacks perpetrated by Sunni militants targeting Hezbollah, between 2013 and 2014 the LAF and Hezbollah established joint security checkpoints in Beirut.

Most recently (and egregiously), Hezbollah and the LAF launched joint military operations this summer against Islamic State militants along the Lebanon-Syria border. During the course of Hezbollah ground operations in July, the LAF provided artillery cover, reportedly firing U.S.-provided 155mm shells in support of the militia's maneuvers.

The close cooperation and seeming congeniality between Beirut and Hezbollah -- an organization that the United States and most of Europe deems to be a terrorist organization -- stands in stark contrast to the state's treatment of its Sunni terrorists. Indeed, the widely held perception in Lebanon is that the state affords Hezbollah and its allies impunity for their terrorist actions.

Consider, for example, that the Lebanese state has not attempted to detain the four Hezbollah members specifically accused by the Special Tribunal investigating the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Premier Rafiq Hariri. These men are not fugitives in Lebanon; they are not wanted by the state.

Or former Minister Michel Samaha, a leading pro-Hezbollah figure and Syrian intelligence asset in Lebanon, who was arrested in 2012 for attempting to smuggle explosives to target Lebanese Sunnis. Samaha, who is designated by Washington as a "global terrorist," was sentenced to 16 years of hard labor for his crime but served less than five prior to his release last year.

And then there is Mustafa Husain Muqaddam, the Hezbollah militiaman who in August 2008 opened fire on an LAF helicopter in south Lebanon, mistakenly believing it to be Israeli. Muqaddam killed an army pilot, was arrested, tried by a military court, and sentenced to five years in jail. Subsequently, however, the sentence was reduced to ten months, and after six, he was permanently released on bail.

Today, Hezbollah sits in a coalition government in Beirut with its erstwhile Sunni political opponents and a broad range of Christian parties. These Sunni members of parliament, led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri of the Future Movement, son of the former premier assassinated by Hezbollah, were elected in 2009 on a pro-West, anti-Iran platform.

Yet Tehran's increasing domestic influence, coupled with more than a decade of intimidation and local murders, has led to a pragmatic detente between the Shi'a militia and Sunnis primarily focused on security. While Hariri's Sunni constituents generally seem to support the government's robust campaign against Sunni jihadis, the increasing lack of any semblance of neutrality has several concerning implications.

Last year, former (Sunni) Minister of Justice in Hariri's government, Ashraf Rifi, resigned from his post to protest the release of Samaha from jail. Ever since, he has been criticizing Hariri for what he characterizes as collaboration with Hezbollah. Rifi, who is from the Sunni city of Tripoli, is a fierce critic of Syria's Assad regime and the Iranian "project" in Lebanon, as well. In May, largely based on his Sunni sectarian rhetoric, Rifi came from nowhere to win the municipal elections in Tripoli. If he fares well in the 2018 parliamentary elections, it would split and further weaken the pro-West Sunni community with respect to Hezbollah, solidifying the state's tilt toward Iran.

This is not good news for Lebanon. But it's also not good news for the United States. Washington has a profound interest in Lebanon's stability -- primarily because the state borders Israel. To this end, since 2005, the U.S. government has been providing the LAF with financial support and training: in 2016, it gave the Lebanese military more than \$150 million. To be sure, this assistance has improved the capacity of the LAF to fight Islamist militants. Yet to date -- and for the foreseeable future -- it is all but certain the LAF will only be targeting Sunnis.

Notwithstanding resentments, Sunnis -- who comprise approximately 35 percent of the LAF's non-commissioned officer corps -- will not be defecting en masse anytime soon. Indeed, there is stiff competition to enlist among the legions of economically disadvantaged Sunnis. In the longer term, however, as Ashraf Rifi's strong performance in Tripoli's municipal elections suggests, the state's bias in favor of Shi'a is fostering grievances, which over time could lead to radicalization.

The trajectory in Lebanon is not isolated from regional developments; it is inextricably tied to Iran's increasing influence, which has for decades been ascendant in Lebanon, but more recently dominant in Syria and Iraq as well.

To prevent a deterioration in Lebanon, too, it will ultimately be incumbent on Washington to roll back Iran. Fighting Sunni militants without countering what is perhaps the primary driver of their radicalization is not a winning strategy.

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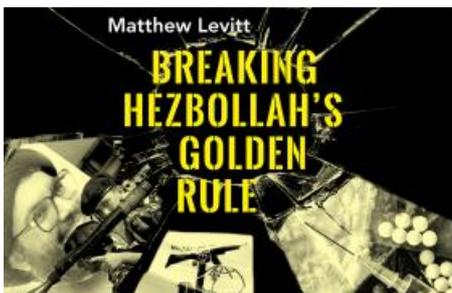
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