

Iran's Shadow Government in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Having come into existence by virtue of Iranian military and financial patronage, Hizballah has used massive Iranian support to transform itself from a purely military group into an armed political party that has had an enduring impact on Lebanese political life and served as an outpost of Islamic fundamentalism in the region.

Iranian Government Presence in Lebanon

Since the early 1980s, Iran has helped Hizballah equip itself with broadcasting, healthcare, and educational centers. Iran also established its own parallel institutions in the Shiite areas of Lebanon, which, though not formally part of Hizballah's network, work in close cooperation with the organization. Examples of these institutions include the hospital of Imam Khomeini in the Bekaa Valley, infirmaries in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and a number of charities in the south of Lebanon.

Almost every Iranian government ministry, including the Ministries of Intelligence, Education, Telecommunications, Health, Welfare, and Culture and Islamic Guidance, maintains offices in Beirut. Iran spends millions of dollars in Lebanon on the construction of bridges, roads, schools, and hospitals. More than ninety schools have been constructed in Lebanon with Iranian funds. Much of this work is done by the Reconstruction Crusade (Jihad-i Sazendagi), which is fully funded by the government. Also active in Lebanon are numerous Iranian institutions that operate largely beyond normal government control but which derive their resources from the state budget or from property transferred them by the government, such as the Committee of Imam Khomeini and the Iranian Red Crescent. A few years ago, the Iranian government launched its Arabic TV station, al-Aalam, which is run by members of Hizballah and located near the Iranian embassy in Beirut.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic and the second-highest source of imitation (Marja taqlid), or religious authority, among Lebanese Shiites, has his various offices in the suburbs of Beirut and in southern Lebanon. These offices serve as the official religious headquarters of the Ayatollah, but the Iranian intelligence service and Hizballah also use these facilities for information gathering, political and security meetings, and surveillance, and as military courts and to hold people in custody.

The Iranian government hosts hundreds of Hizballah-affiliated Lebanese students in Iranian universities and seminaries, especially in Qom. There is a separate school for foreign students in the Qom seminary, which has

different educational programs for the foreigners. At these special campuses, foreigners get political as well as theological training.

In short, Iran tries to convince Lebanese Shiites that the Islamic Republic not only assists them in their fight against the enemy—Israel—but it also responds to their primary needs. Hizballah has reaped the benefits of Iran's benevolence, gaining a reputation for filling in for the central government when it came to the welfare of the people.

Non-Iranian Shiite Trends in Lebanon

The Iranian-funded welfare programs for Lebanese Shiites are backed by a very professional propaganda machine, which results in a high degree of popularity for Hizballah as well as for the Islamic Republic among ordinary Lebanese Shiites. This has created problems for those Shiite leaders who are not in the Hizballah camp.

Arguably the most-followed Shiite Marja in Lebanon is Ali Hussein al-Sistani, who is of Iranian origin but has spent most of his life in Iraq. Sistani, who is the most important ayatollah in the Shia holy city of Najaf in Iraq, does not keep an official religious office in Lebanon like those of the Iranian clerics. Instead, he manages his religious affairs through a publication house, Moassat al-Aalbayt li Ihya-i Attorath, run by Hamid al-Khaffaf, Sistani's only official spokesman and his only nonclerical representative. But while Sistani is the most followed authority in Lebanon, he does not receive religious taxes from Lebanese Shiites and does not pay monthly salaries to the 2,500 Shiite clerics of Lebanon, who do receive funding from Iranian clerics, especially Khamenei. Because Sistani does not have the resources to compete with the Iranians, his influence is restricted; many Lebanese Shiite clerics who follow Sistani's rulings on issues of daily life also praise Hizballah.

The situation is even tougher for Shiite intellectuals. Though a considerable number of Lebanese Shiite academicians advocated in favor of the Iranian Revolution decades ago, a number of them have gradually changed their views. However, the mounting power of Iranian-backed Hizballah has forced these intellectuals to keep their criticism quiet.

There is another interesting intellectual minority that has suffered from Hizballah's dominance—former members of Hizballah who have graduated from universities and started to discover the theoretical principles of modernity. Under Hizballah's police-state-within-a-state, Shiite intellectual critics are left without any institutional means for expressing their ideas. Hani Fahs, a cleric and essayist once known for his support of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and is now a member of the Supreme Shiite Council in Lebanon, teaches a very unconventional interpretation of Shia Islam to his private students. For instance, he does not believe in the historical existence of a Hidden Imam, a central tenet of mainstream Shia Islam. One of his disciples, Sheikh Abdorrassoul Lari, published a book entitled *Development of Shiite Political Thought: From Shura to Velayat-e Faqih*, under a pseudonym. In his book, Lari examines and challenges the religious arguments for the existence of a Hidden Imam as well as the religious legitimacy of a Shiite government under a Shiite jurist. Hizballah's stifling role in Lebanese Shiite life not only forced Lari to publish under a pseudonym but also forced him to emigrate to London for his own safety.

Who Calls the Shots?

When Hizballah chief Hassan Nasrallah met with Iranian supreme leader Khamenei in 2001, Nasrallah publicly kissed Khamenei's hand, a gesture heavy with meaning among Shiites: it implied that Nasrallah accepts Khamenei as his leader. Iranian interests in Lebanon go far beyond supporting the "resistance" against Israel. Recent events in the region confirm that Iran is using Hizballah as a tool to increase its regional power and counter Western interests. Iran has helped Hizballah to reach to an incredible popularity among the Lebanese Shiite community. The popularity of Iran and Hizballah in Lebanon is not based mainly on Hizballah's military capability, but rather on Iran's economic support through public service institutions and charities. Without those economic mechanisms, Hizballah's guerrillas could not have become a political force in the country.

What makes Western countries and prodemocracy forces in the region worry about Hizballah's existence is not only its military power, but also its ideological alliance with Islamic Republic. Even if one day Hizballah is disarmed, either as a result of a voluntary agreement or successful Israeli efforts to devastate its arsenal, its social and political capital, so closely tied to Iranian power, will enable it to remain a real political threat in the region. That popularity may enable Hizballah to transform itself into the largest and most influential political force in Lebanon, a party that can use any potential free and fair election to become an important force in the government. Therefore, disarming Hizballah should not be considered a sufficient step for ending the group's threat. That will require the further step of pressuring Iran to cut off its economic support for Hizballah and to remove its nonmilitary organizations related to Hizballah and its shadow government from Lebanon. A total severing of ties between Hizballah and Iran is probably the only way to eliminate Hizballah's threat to the region and prevent Iran from using the group as an effective tool for its anti-Western ideological agenda.

Mehdi Khalaji is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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