

U.S. Aid to Lebanon Helps Hezbollah

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Hezbollah is now, and has been for several decades, the most powerful political and military force in Lebanon. Yet it is also, following the Beirut blast for which it was entirely responsible, at the nadir of its popularity among the Lebanese. It is suffering financially, too, as its supporter Iran has itself been subject to great economic distress, and has had to cut roughly in half the \$800 million annual subsidy it had been giving to Hezbollah. The story of Hezbollah's travails, and American aid to Lebanon that Hezbollah manages to divert to itself, is told [here](#).

The massive explosion that rocked Beirut on August 4 not only inflicted warlike damage on Lebanon's capital city, it also exposed a subversive force hidden to most Westerners, that increases its control of the country daily.

It's inaccurate to say that Hezbollah "increases its control of the country daily." After the Beirut blast, the popular fury against Hezbollah reached its zenith. It was not only the fact that Hezbollah was entirely responsible, through its mishandling of thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate, of the blast in Beirut, but that even now Hezbollah continues to deny all responsibility for the explosion.

The detonation of 3,000 [2,750] tons of ammonium nitrate killed nearly 200 people, injured thousands and devastated Beirut's port. Perhaps the only good to come of the accident is its highlighting of Hezbollah's insidious role in Lebanon.

Many in Lebanon and around the world accused Hezbollah—considered a terrorist organization by the United States, Europe and in the Arab world—of owning the ammonium nitrate. This possibility is the more ominous since Hezbollah also operates as an unofficial state within a state, holding a vice-like grip on the Lebanese government, where it commands a veto on government policies and appointments....

It's not a "possibility," but a "certainty" that Hezbollah owned the ammonium nitrate that was stored in Hangar 12 at the Port of Beirut, to which only Hezbollah had entry.

Hezbollah was founded, funded and ideologically inspired by the Islamic Republic of Iran. While Hezbollah opposed Israel's military initiative in Lebanon's south to bring protection for Israeli citizens in the north, it was a full partner to the Syrian occupation of eastern Lebanon. Syria's brutal occupation of Lebanon only ended when former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, widely considered to be the main architect of the end of the Lebanese Civil War, was assassinated. Hezbollah members were recently found guilty of the murder by a United Nations tribunal.

When Hezbollah operatives murdered Hariri in 2005, this led to

an outcry in Lebanon against the Syrians, widely recognized as being allies of Hezbollah, and blamed for Hariri's murder; a popular uprising against the Syrian presence, known as the Cedar Revolution, led to the Syrian decision to remove their troops from eastern Lebanon. By that point, Syria was leaving in its place an indigenous proxy force, Hezbollah, supported also by Iran, that would do its bidding.

Hezbollah has built up a mighty military that is far superior to the Lebanese army. It has an arsenal of weapons equal to that of a medium-size national army and is generally considered the most powerful non-state actor in the world. The group is estimated to have 25,000 full-time fighters and perhaps 20,000–30,000 reservists...

Put even more starkly: Hezbollah now has more conventional arms than 95% of the world's armies.

While the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war led to great destruction of Hezbollah's hidden weapons, after the war the terror group lost no time in rebuilding its armory, with much greater numbers of advanced weapons, than what the terror group had possessed before the war. Hezbollah, thanks to Iran, now has an estimated 150,000 rockets and missiles in its current armory, hidden in civilian areas all over southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah has had its Iranian subsidy, formerly about \$800 million a year, now slashed in half because of Iran's own financial problems. It also has money – no one knows exactly how much – that it derives from its role as a drug trafficker, dealing mainly in cocaine and heroin, brought by its operatives from South American sources to customers in Europe and the Middle East.

Hezbollah also maintains a social services wing, a private school system and its own TV and radio channels, whose primary aim is propaganda and indoctrination. This is to serve Hezbollah's ultimate agenda of turning Lebanon—whose

now bombed-out capital used to be known as “The Paris of the East”—into a brutal and extremist Shi’ite state modeled on the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This misstates the case. Hezbollah’s goal is not to turn Lebanon into an “extremist Shi’ite state”; demography would prevent it. The Shi’a constitute only 29% of the population, while Sunnis are about the same, and the Christians 33%. But having become the most powerful political and military force in the country, Hezbollah’s goal is to retain that position.

With Near and Middle East politics now being split into a moderate wing, headed by pragmatic Sunni states, plus Israel, and an extremist wing, including Qatar and Syria, led by Iran, Hezbollah plays a major role in destabilization across the region. The group has been condemned and designated as a terrorist organization by both the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, for leading efforts to destabilize nations like Egypt, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Hezbollah is most active in Lebanon, then Syria, and then Iraq. Ever since a plot was discovered in 2009, involving two dozen Hezbollah members who planned to kill Israeli tourists in the Sinai, Hezbollah has been virtually absent from Egypt. It couldn’t possibly “destabilize” Egypt, as Shi’a make up only 1% of the country’s Muslim population. Hezbollah has stirred up trouble in eastern Saudi Arabia, where virtually the entire Shi’a minority – 25% of the total Saudi population – lives. Hezbollah has also been active among the restive Shi’a majority (60%) in Bahrain, who routinely protest against their Sunni ruler, King Hamad. It is an exaggeration to claim that Hezbollah “plays a major role in destabilization across the region.” In Syria, for example, Hezbollah supports the status quo – the rule by Assad. It is those Syrians who rose up against Assad who are the “destabilizers.” Hezbollah has expressed its support for the Shia protesters in eastern Saudi

Arabia and Bahrain, but in both places, the Sunni rulers have suppressed those protesters without difficulty. There's been precious little "destabilization" in either case.

Hezbollah has also been involved in countless atrocities in Syria in the service of Iranian interests in propping up the Bashar Assad regime and responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths since the conflict began in 2011. Hezbollah has been described as a crucial ally in allowing the Syrian regime and its Iranian backers to brutally quell any opposition in the country through its fighters in Syria.

The total number of Syrian casualties, on both sides in the civil war, has been estimated at 400,000 by March 2020. Assuming similar losses on both sides, that would be 200,000 deaths caused by Assad's troops, Iranian allies, and Hezbollah fighters. Assad's army was responsible for the vast majority of the deaths among the opposition fighters. It is simply not true that Hezbollah – which has lost only 1,700 fighters in Syria – could have been responsible for "hundreds of thousands of deaths." Only a few tens of thousands of Syrian dead, at the very most, can be attributed to Hezbollah.

With the help of Hezbollah, Lebanon has effectively become an Iranian colony. As Mordechai Kedar of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies wrote last year, "Lebanon has not existed for quite some time. The country's agenda is dictated by Tehran, and its military and economy are designed to serve the needs of Hezbollah ... The Lebanese parliament, government, president and all other state institutions are nothing more than a façade."

Ironically, with all this, Lebanon still receives billions of dollars in aid and assistance from the international community, much of it earmarked for the Lebanese Armed Forces, which is generally considered to be subservient to Hezbollah's agenda. Since 2006, the United States has

provided over \$1.7 billion to the LAF, even though that military has never lifted a finger to disarm or neutralize Hezbollah.

The Lebanese Armed Forces are much weaker than Hezbollah, and have refused to deploy in the south of the country, for fear of having to confront Hezbollah fighters. The LAF is not so much “subservient” as “passive” – it intends to stay well out of the way of Hezbollah and avoid confrontation. That attitude could change, but only if the LAF can be built up – more men, more weaponry – with infusions of aid from American, European, and Sunni Arab donors.

According to the U.S. government, this aid is provided specifically to “enable the United States to mitigate Iranian, Hizballah, and Sunni extremist threats and influence in the country. U.S. foreign assistance will build the capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) to secure Lebanon’s borders and disrupt and mitigate violent extremism.”...

The problem is that much of the aid “earmarked” for the LAF is not getting to it, but diverted by Hezbollah, which controls the Lebanese government, to other uses. The LAF cannot do its job as long as it remains weaker than Hezbollah, and it will remain weaker than Hezbollah until the U.S. and other donors finally recognize that they will have to build up the LAF , as a fighting force, outside the regular channels of the Lebanese government.

Hezbollah now dominates, through both its own members and those who collaborate with it, the Lebanese Parliament. It also has several ministers in the Cabinet. It controls the Maronite President, Michel Aoun, who does the bidding of Hezbollah, out of both fear (Aoun knows what happened to Prime Minister Rafik Hariri) and venality (he has amassed a fortune of \$90 million, while his ally Hezbollah has studiously looked

the other way). But it ought not to be beyond the ability of foreign donors, such as the U.S., to figure out how to get aid – money and weapons – directly to the Lebanese army, without going through the Hezbollah-dominated government, that routinely helps itself to some of that aid, and diverts much of the rest to uses other than what the donors intended.

At a minimum, nations that seek to help Lebanon should make their assistance dependent on disarming Hezbollah and ending its military and political presence, something demanded by United Nations resolutions, including U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701.

Such a demand by donor nations, for Hezbollah to agree to be disarmed, and to end “ its military and political presence,” asks too much. It would be better to proceed by slow degrees. First, the donors should build up the Lebanese Army with money and weapons that go directly to it, without having to go through the regular governmental channels that give Hezbollah the chance to divert such aid. Once the Lebanese army has been sufficiently strengthened so that it can at least hold its own against Hezbollah, then it will be the time to ask Hezbollah to give up, not all of its weapons, which it would never agree to, but the major weapons that are a threat to the state, because Hezbollah’s possession of those very weapons makes it more likely that Lebanon could be dragged into a disastrous war with Israel. This means Hezbollah should be asked to surrender its missiles and rockets to the Lebanese Army for safekeeping, or disposal – removing them, to the great relief of Lebanese civilians living nearby, from their hiding places in civilian areas – but could keep its small arms and armed vehicles. And it would not be asked to refrain from political activity, but should be encouraged to assume its proper role as one party among many, like the Shi’a Amal Party, representing the nearly 30% of the population that is Shi’a, and not attempt to dominate, through fear and force, the entire government, as it does now. And once that has been

agreed upon, the spigot of aid for Lebanon – some of which will benefit the Shi'a – might again be turned on.

With the region facing mounting challenges and changes, now is the time for the international community to end one of the greatest threats to security and stability. The United States should use its economic and diplomatic clout to pressure Lebanese authorities to establish their sovereignty over all of its territory and put an end to the perverse role of Hezbollah as a state within a state.

The Lebanese authorities cannot do much as long as Hezbollah remains stronger than the national army. The U.S. can “use its economic and diplomatic clout” to directly deliver both advanced weapons, and money to pay for more soldiers, to that national army. When that army has been sufficiently strengthened, it can at last redeploy to assert the government's control over South Lebanon. The next step is for the U.S. and other donor nations to let it be known that they will be willing to help Lebanon with aid as soon as Hezbollah has agreed to, and does, give up its major weapons to the Lebanese government. It will be allowed to keep its small arms, and encouraged to assume a new role, as a political party akin to Amal, representing the nearly 30% of the population that is Shi'a. But it will no longer be allowed to dominate, through threats, bribery, blackmail, and even murder (as happened with Rafik Hariri), the Lebanese government. Once that is accomplished – first the stick of building up the Lebanese army, and then the carrot of aid – then Lebanon will have a fighting chance to again become what it once was, a half-century ago, before the PLO, and then Hezbollah, did their level best to use Lebanon as a staging area for attacks on Israel: a multi-sectarian Arab state – Christian, Sunni, Shi'a – that was at peace both internally, and with all of its neighbors, and actually managed to thrive.

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