

In the Shadow of Aleppo's Fall, Hezbollah Grows New Wings Lebanon: Iran's Collateral Bonus

"If we let down the millions of Lebanese who yearn for a state that represents the aspirations of all Lebanese, we would create the conditions by which Hizballah can, by filling a vacuum, grow even stronger."⁽¹⁾

Jeffrey D. Feltman
June 8, 2010

On December 21, 2016, a spokesperson from the U.S. Department of State denied Israeli allegations that Hezbollah was using armored vehicles provided to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) by the United States. Regardless of whether Hezbollah obtained the vehicles on its own or simply borrowed them cordially from the LAF, this particular exchange between Israel and the outgoing Obama administration says a great deal about the prevalent approach being taken toward the unfolding situation in Lebanon.



Countering tradition, the annual Martyrs Day observance coordinated by Hezbollah every November 11 turned out this year (2016) to be an astonishingly quiet affair. Nevertheless, the placid nature of that formality had changed dramatically by Sunday evening, November 13, after several pictures were leaked of a Hezbollah military parade held to commemorate the occasion. Notably, those photographs showed mechanized and other heavy weapons being manned by hundreds of fighters. A few days later, Hezbollah's vice-secretary general said of the parade that Hezbollah had become "larger than a resistance."

The appearance of U.S. made armored vehicles in the Hezbollah parade certainly did not escape notice and prompted questions about how those assets had come into the hands of Hezbollah.

By November 16, the Lebanese Armed Forces published an awkwardly worded statement that read (verbatim), "Re what was circulated by some media outlets in terms of military >>>

⁽¹⁾ Testimony of Jeffrey D. Feltman, the Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.
<https://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/142857.htm>

vehicles, these vehicles do not originate from the Army's stock and do not belong to it."

For a further discussion of this matter in terms of Lebanese-U.S. military cooperation, see: Lee Smith, "The Lebanese Army Is Misusing U.S. Aid And that should come with consequences." *The Weekly Standard*, November 14, 2016. <http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-lebanese-army-is-misusing-u.s.aid/article/2005389>

⁽²⁾ For information about that battle, its importance and the vast number of refugees it drove into Lebanon, see: I. Schei and L. Slim, "Five Years of Syrian Asylum in Lebanon," *Hayya Bina and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, March 2016, p. 21.

⁽³⁾ Isabel Kershner and Ben Hubbard. "Hezbollah Is Using U.S. Made Military Vehicles in Syria, Israel Says." *The New York Times*. December 21, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/21/world/middleeast/hezbollah-us-made-apc-syria-lebanon.html?_r=0

⁽⁴⁾ According to 2015 figures, "...nearly 51,000 Syrian children were born in Lebanon since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict." According to the same UN source, "...36,000 newborn Syrian babies in Lebanon are stateless, with no identification documents." <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/150506060248502.html>

While details should always be given an appropriate degree of gravity, they should also receive their proper due when they are being wielded to hide the bigger picture—as is the case with those armored vehicles. Somewhere near the intersection of Israeli suspicion and American denial, Hezbollah indeed paraded the vehicles and other weapons publicly during the Martyrs Day celebration. It took particular pains to coordinate that event in the Syrian town of Qusayr, near Lebanon's northeast border with that country, where it fought one of its biggest battles in 2013.⁽²⁾ Almost as an aside, the same Israeli source noted, "Hezbollah was strengthening its grip on Lebanese state institutions."⁽³⁾

Understandably, Israel needed a stronger argument, as it was already wrestling with the Obama administration over the UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (published after the vote as UNSC resolution 2334). Clearly, it is in Israel's interest to ensure that it continues to publicize the military impact of the growing intimacy between Hezbollah and the LAF. Moreover, as the U.S. has steadily withdrawn politically from Lebanon over the last several years and no longer makes any effort to view the country from outside its tight focus on fighting (Sunni) terrorism (a focus the United States shares with Iran), the fewer headaches Lebanon causes for the United States the better. From a similarly self-involved perspective, the EU appears concerned with Lebanon only to the extent that it remains sufficiently stable to continue serving as a "refugee destination" for the million-plus Syrians displaced by the war in their country.⁽⁴⁾ Yet no one on the global stage seems to have any particular interest



Hezbollah never misses an opportunity to display its openness, tolerance and conviviality, or to highlight its own “brand” of Islam, which allegedly is different from that practiced by “others.” In this case, Hezbollah defines those “others” variously according to political developments and the nature of the public concerned.

Within its “inner circle,” the “others” might include all Sunnis (especially in times of high mobilization), it could be restricted to the vague groups of *takfiris* or it could even take a quasi-racist turn and encompass the “Saudis” as a whole.

For Christmas 2016, Hezbollah circulated the picture above, which dates back to 2013. The photo features the head of its “Military Media Office,” who was killed in Syria, saluting the statue of Jesus in the Cherubim Monastery in Sidnaya, Syria. The statue is perched at an elevation of 2,000 meters and overlooks the plains of Damascus and Lebanon’s mountains.

The caption reads, “Happy Commemorations – Public Relations – Hezbollah.”

in predicting and/or quantifying the short- to medium-term impacts of Iran’s unchallenged encroachment on Lebanon vis-à-vis Hezbollah. By extension, no other actor on that stage has demonstrated any genuine interest in assessing, much less aiding, any of the other Middle Eastern countries where Iran is seeking to impose that same encroachment model. Notoriously, the approach Iran has used (repeatedly and successfully) combines the

brutal application of violence (which may include dispatching Iranian fighters) with brokering deals between those states and its own non-state proxies. With each successive application of that approach, Iran has gained the ability to assert legalistic control over those countries. Finally, of course, in a region that is historically a mosaic of religious and ethnic diversity, Iran institutes heavy-handed programs allegedly to “protect” minorities.

Against this backdrop, it seems understandable that the international community is expressing joy over the fact that the Lebanese parliament finally elected General Michel Aoun president after the office suffered a two-and-a-half year vacancy, but here, clarity is essential: Aoun was Hezbollah’s own candidate. That same community can also be delighted that an inclusive national government was formed in record time. In this new government, Saad Hariri resumed the post of prime minister while a representative from the Lebanese Forces (the Christian element of the now defunct March 14 Alliance) was given the honorific position of “vice prime

⁽⁵⁾ The Gemayyel family's Kataeb party is the only one not represented in the new "national unity" government. Although Kataeb head Sami Gemayyel sought to give the impression that his party chose not to join the government on principle, his refusal reflects more accurately the exceptionally meager (arguably insulting) piece of the ministerial pie it was offered. Notably, Kataeb's MPs voted against electing Michel Aoun.... Overall, aside from being "just another detail," Kataeb's absence from the new cabinet is perhaps the only shortcoming in Hezbollah's characterization of this "national unity" concept. At the same time, it should not prove particularly difficult to overcome that deficiency.

⁽⁶⁾ For a detailed account of the composition of the "Recovering Confidence" government, see: Ramez Dagher, "Slicing the Cabinet Pie: Who Won?" While the allocation exercise described therein is entirely accurate and likely useful in understanding these and other "micro-Lebanese" standoffs, its weakness is that it is Lebanese centric. Moreover, it ignores the bigger picture, which cannot be explained via an arithmetic computation of the number of seats obtained by each political entity and/or the importance of the portfolios they control. The following excerpt offers a prime example: "Hezbollah have literally the smallest share in the cabinet in terms of quantity and quality (sports and industry)!"
<https://moulahazat.com/2016/12/19/slicing-the-cabinet-pie-who-won/>

minister." Thus, along with General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and speaker Nabih Berri's Amal Movement (and most of Hezbollah's minor allies on the Lebanese scene), almost all components of Lebanon's political spectrum are represented.⁽⁵⁾

Of course, there are still more variables to be considered. The chief purpose behind the formation of such a government is that Hezbollah's tour de force ultimately succeeded in redefining the very notion of "national unity" according to its "vision" for the country and the regional "mission" Hezbollah is expected to continue playing.⁽⁶⁾ The premise for Hezbollah's redefinition is based on accepting (similar to the largely imaginary distinction that has been made between its "political" and "military" wings) a somewhat tacit differentiation between Hezbollah's "domestic wing," with which it is both acceptable and respectable to partner "for the sake of the country," and its "regional wing." Notably, this regional wing unmistakably represents Iran's interests in Lebanon and the region via its direct involvement in various regional conflicts. Importantly, verbal disagreements with the actions taken by this regional wing are seldom permitted. Thus, it is axiomatic that Hezbollah's efforts to make this new "national unity" government as consensual and inclusive as possible do not stem from some sudden reawakening of its "Lebanese" roots. Rather, those actions underscore Hezbollah's will to obtain at least fractional and quasi-official recognition from all of the Lebanese components represented of its Janus-faced domestic/regional nature and consequently its supra-national mandate. After all, just as the time has long since passed when it was possible to think that the

⁽⁷⁾ According to plan, parliamentary elections are scheduled for next spring, so this new government will have an extremely short shelf life. However, without any consensus on a new electoral law, it is increasingly likely that the elections will again be postponed....

days of the Assad regime were numbered, it is no longer feasible or fashionable to condemn Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict. In general, and regardless of the durability of this new government, its pan-Lebanese composition represents a viable landmark in Hezbollah's enduring efforts to seize and rule Lebanon. ⁽⁷⁾

Consequently, we have no choice but to agree that Hezbollah's redefinition of "national unity," which will enable it to dominate Lebanon comfortably without appearing to impose its will on all other Lebanese via armed aggression, was a hard-fought achievement both literally and metaphorically. Yet that outcome did not follow simply because of the (Lebanese

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Shia) blood Hezbollah has shed in Syria and on other battlefields, nor was it due solely to Hezbollah's perseverance, skillful strategic planning and manipulation—supplemented by the indefatigable support Iran has long since provided.

Rather, this is the logical aftermath of what former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman (July 2004 – January 2008) noted so fatalistically. Relinquishing the "state" ideal, regardless of how many Lebanese "yearn for" it, will "create the conditions by which Hizballah can, by filling a vacuum, grow even stronger."⁽⁸⁾ Ironically, while the U.S. and its friends continue to show significant interest in assisting the LAF, the "state" appears increasingly less capable of countering Hezbollah's hegemony over Lebanon, especially since Hezbollah is now

⁽⁸⁾ Epigraph.



Of all the members of the newly formed “Recovering Confidence” government, the appointment of Salim Jreissati (pictured above, at left) as minister of justice is perhaps the most significant. After all, it speaks volumes about the revised balance of power as well as the magnitude of the concessions Saad Hariri had to make before he was blessed by Hezbollah to serve as prime minister—as well as the *nature* of the concessions he was expected to make. Jreissati, a retired judge, former member of the Constitutional Council and member of Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement, also served as Lebanon’s minister of labor between 2012 and February 2014 in the Mikati government. Notably, Jreissati is also Hezbollah’s judicial spearhead against the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which is tasked with investigating the assassination of Rafic Hariri. Seated to the right of Jreissati during an August 23, 2011 press conference is Mohammad Raad, who heads Hezbollah’s parliamentary bloc. During that conference, “Jreissati presented a 20-page legal study... [that] pointed out what [he described as] “various loopholes” in the STL’s indictment.” *The Daily Star*, August 24, 2011.

adding the state and its institutions to its arsenal!

While it may seem that crediting Hezbollah with such dramatic success suggests yet another appearance of the “uniquely Lebanese” tendency to blame “others” for the misfortunes that have befallen the country, that is actually not the case. In fact, a major influence behind the external and foreign

calamities visited upon Lebanon stems from a complete distrust of Lebanon’s leaders, primarily those who led March 14. Saad Hariri is certainly no less intelligent in 2016 than when the Saudis anointed him to succeed to his late father, and Samir Geagea is no less of a dreamer in 2016 when it comes to building a minority oriented entity than he was when he ruled Lebanon’s “Maronitistan.” Clearly, neither of them were big believers in the right of the state to monopolize the possession of arms and the exercise of violence, and both confronted Hezbollah continually—in the name of the state and as encouraged by their respective patrons. But when their patrons changed course with respect to countering Iran/Hezbollah in Lebanon, both chose to adapt to that new situation—for the sake of their own survival.

At this point, the damage to Lebanon has already been done. Considering the current regional and international conditions, there is almost no hope that anything is still capable of undoing Hezbollah’s “capture” of Lebanon and respectfully presenting the country to Iran as yet another war trophy. Nevertheless, it remains imperative to assess the cost Lebanon must pay for this *Pax*

Iranica, not the least of which will include the country's much touted "stability."

The day after the newly formed "Recovering Trust" government was announced, the editor in chief of pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* likened it to the "Aleppo government," in reference to the "victory" ultimately achieved by the "Axis of Resistance" in that war-torn city.⁽⁹⁾

In truth, the comparison is not entirely incorrect. After all, Lebanon has emerged as a "collateral bonus" for the years Iran has fanned the flames of war in Syria. Yet here, that description is somewhat lacking.

Hezbollah certainly must be proud not only

of having imposed its presidential candidate on the country, but also of having imposed on Saad Hariri, the son of the late Rafic Hariri—Mr. Lebanon—whom it stands accused of having assassinated, the requirement to form a new government.

As there is almost no hope that anything is still capable of undoing Hezbollah's "capture" of Lebanon and respectfully presenting the country to Iran as yet another war trophy, it remains imperative to assess the cost Lebanon must pay for this *Pax Iranica*, not the least of which will include the country's much touted "stability."

These lofty "achievements" illustrate clearly the new balance of power in Lebanon. Additionally, they prove that Hezbollah is the only entity capable of both absolving Samir Geagea and his Lebanese Forces of having collaborated openly with Israel and demonstrating to Saudi Arabia—on Iran's behalf—the limits of Saudi influence in Lebanon. But the true reality of Hezbollah's self-serving accomplishments is far more sinister. Ultimately, the "Aleppo government," disguised as yet another victory, also means that Lebanon is being propelled ever closer to the regional inferno.

⁽⁹⁾ *Al-Akhbar*. December 19, 2016.