Over the last half century, the Shi’ite community in Lebanon has emerged from obscurity to become the most influential political and military powerhouse in the country. With Iranian financial and military assistance, Hezbollah—a predominantly Shi’ite group and a US-designated terrorist organization—dominates Lebanese politics, maintains a militia force stronger than the Lebanese Armed Forces, runs an extensive social welfare program, and functions as a state within a state.

Recently, Hezbollah’s intervention in the Syrian civil war has inflamed long-standing Shi’ite-Sunni tension in Lebanon, radicalized the Sunni community, and paralyzed the political system, threatening to plunge the country into another civil war. Moreover, with Damascus grappling with its own internal conflict and Washington’s engagement in the Middle East at its nadir, Iran has stepped up its hard- and soft-power efforts to fill the vacuum and has emerged as the most influential external force in Lebanese affairs at the expense of US geopolitical interests in the region.

**From Marginalization to Political and Military Dominance**

The history of Lebanese Shi’ites is marked by religious persecution, economic deprivation, and political marginalization. Under four centuries of Sunni Ottoman rule (1516–1918), Lebanon’s Shi’ite community suffered state discrimination for alleged ties with Persia, and sociopolitical life improved only marginally under the French mandate after World War I. In 1943, the Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims forged the National Covenant (al-Mithaq al-Watani), an unwritten agreement that laid the foundation for Lebanon’s independence and a government system based on sectarian distribution of political power: the Maronites, then considered a plurality,
secured the presidency, and the Shi'ite and Sunni communities won the premiership and speakership of parliament, respectively. Although it was agreed that other government positions would be distributed proportionally among Lebanon's then-17 recognized sects, the Shi'ite community remained underrepresented in the government.¹

Beginning in the 1950s, however, four key developments spurred the community's shift from acquiescence and marginalization to militancy and political activism: (1) demographic changes and internal displacements; (2) the arrival of Shi'ite cleric Musa al-Sadr from Iran; (3) the 1982 Israeli occupation; and (4) the 1979 Islamic revolution and Iran's creation of Hezbollah.

Demographic Changes and Internal Displacement

Following the 1948–49 Arab-Israeli wars, about 100,000 Palestinian refugees moved to southern Lebanon, and the number more than tripled by the end of the 1967 Six-Day War.² When Jordan expelled the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the early 1970s, the PLO relocated to Lebanon, where it set up several military training camps, usurped Shi'ite farmlands in the south, and forcibly recruited young Shi'ite men into its militia force. The southern Shi'ite heartland also became a frequent target of Israeli retaliatory attacks to the Palestinians' cross-border militant activity.³

As a result, many young Shi'ite men escaped the spiraling violence and grinding poverty in the south in search of a better life abroad, while poorer Shi'ite families moved to the suburbs of western Beirut—then notoriously called the “Belt of Misery.”⁴ In 1920, the Shi'ite community in Beirut numbered only about 1,500, but when the civil war broke out in 1975, Shi'ites had become the single largest community in Beirut—accounting for over 80 percent of the workforce in Beirut factories and for over 50 percent of service workers in Christian-dominated eastern parts of the capital.⁵

The Lebanese Shi'ites have also seen a demographic revolution in recent decades. There has been no official census in Lebanon since 1932, but the Shi'ite community is widely believed to have become the largest of the country's 18 officially recognized confessionals groups, constituting between 27 and 45 percent of Lebanon's 4.5 million people.⁶ When prominent Shi'ite cleric Musa al Sadr came to Lebanon in 1959, he was the first to capitalize on the Shi'ites' demographic changes to advance the community's political rights.⁷

The Arrival of Musa al-Sadr

Until the late 1960s, a small number of wealthy Shi'ite families dominated the community's sociopolitical life through extensive patronage networks, and they did little to improve the living conditions of their community.⁸ In the absence of a prominent Shi'ite religious party, many disgruntled young Shi'ites joined secular, leftist opposition organizations—such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Lebanese Communist Party, and pro-Syrian and pro-Iraq factions of the Ba'ath Party—as well as various Palestinian militant factions operating on the Lebanese soil. In 1959, however, Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, the most senior Shi'ite leader in the Iraqi city of Najaf, sent Iranian-born cleric Musa al-Sadr to unite and lead the Shi'ite community in Lebanon.⁹

The arrival of al-Sadr changed the life of Lebanon's Shi'ite community in profound ways. The cleric astutely turned the Shi'ites' grievances into political activism, relegated the power of the traditional Shi'ite elites, and gave the Shi'ites a new political identity—encouraging his followers not to follow the Arab nationalism blindly but to strive for their own rights and political power.¹⁰ In 1969, al-Sadr established the Shi'ite Supreme Islamic Council, and five years later, he united the fragmented Shi'ite communities in southern Lebanon and western Beirut under a new political movement, Harakat al-Mahrumin (Movement of the Deprived). When the civil war broke out in 1975, he created the organization's military wing, Afwj al-Muqāwama al-Lubnāniyya (the Lebanese Resistance Regiments, or Amal). In subsequent years, Amal military training camps in the south hosted not just Lebanese Shi'ites, but also Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi, and other Arab activists.¹¹

In the late 1970s, many young Lebanese Shi'ite clerics and future Hezbollah leaders, such as Subhi al-Tufayli and Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, escaped former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's crackdown and returned to Lebanon with a revolutionary goal of changing their societies through militant activity. Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, who became the most influential Shi'ite leader in Lebanon after al-Sadr's mysterious disappearance in Libya in 1978, urged the returnee revolutionaries to join Amal and change the party from secularism to militarism.¹² Al-Sadr's disappearance, and the
subsequent advent of the Iranian revolution and Israeli invasion, empowered radicals and sidelined the secular leaders of Amal—ultimately leading to the emergence of Hezbollah.13

Hezbollah: From a Proxy Militia to Political Ascendancy

Hezbollah (or Party of God) emerged in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon with Iranian support. The new revolutionary regime in Tehran saw Amal with suspicion: Amal’s political leadership was predominantly secular and unwilling to serve as a proxy to further Iran’s agenda in the region. It was against this backdrop that Tehran sought to create a more pliable organization that would emulate Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as its religious and political leader and fight on Iran’s behalf against the West and Israel.14 Even today, it is “an obligation and commitment” for Hezbollah members to emulate current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, while many non-Hezbollah Shi’ites in Lebanon are followers of Iraq-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.15

When a group of Amal revolutionaries came to Tehran for help in the wake of the Israeli invasion—including al-Musawi, Nasrallah, and Hezbollah’s current deputy leader, Sheikh Naim Qassem—Khomeini welcomed the opportunity and gave the visiting delegation financial resources and his blessing. Soon, Khomeini dispatched a contingent of 1,500 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to Lebanon to assist Hezbollah in its confrontation with Israel. With Syria’s approval, the IRGC set up training camps in Lebanon’s western Bekaa Valley. Even though Khomeini stopped further dispatch of IRGC forces because of logistical problems amidst the war with Iraq, Iran’s financial and military aid continued to flow into Lebanon.16

Indeed, Iranian leaders proudly take credit for Hezbollah’s creation. According to Hossein Sheikh al-Islam, a veteran Iranian diplomat, the IRGC’s Intelligence Directorate (which later became the Quds Force) and the Iranian Embassy in Damascus played an instrumental role in the creation and organization of Hezbollah.17 Iranian revolutionaries were active in Lebanon long before the 1979 revolution, and many of them who had trained in Amal and PLO military camps later became leaders of the IRGC. For example, Mohsen Rafiqdost, who became the minister of the IRGC after the revolution, had trained in the Bekaa Valley with the PLO, and after the revolution, he personally “organized” the training of Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon.18 Former Iranian ambassadors to Damascus Ali Akbar Mohtashemi (1982–86) and Mohammad Hassan Akhtar (1986–97 and 2005–07) have also acknowledged their role as Hezbollah’s “spiritual father” (al-ab al-rouhi) and “field father” (al-ab al-midani), respectively.19

Another senior IRGC commander who oversaw Hezbollah’s operations in the early 1980s, including the 1983 US Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, was Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan, whom Iranian President Hassan Rouhani appointed as his minister of defense last August.20 Speaking at a memorial service last December in Tehran for Hassan al-Laqees, a senior Hezbollah commander who was gunned down last month near Beirut, Dehghan acknowledged the IRGC’s role: “Martyred Sayyid Abbas Musawi and Hassan al-Laqees were among the individuals trained by IRGC forces.”21 When Dehghan served as the commander of IRGC’s training mission in Lebanon in the wake of the Israeli invasion, al-Laqees was his most senior aide.

While IRGC officials advised Hezbollah militants on the field, key decisions about Hezbollah’s leadership and its mission were made in the Iranian cities Tehran and Qom. When Hezbollah’s leader al-Musawi was killed in 1992, Khamenei sent a delegation headed by his confidant Ahmad Jannati, currently the chairman of Iran’s Guardian Council, to Lebanon to appoint Nasrallah the new secretary general for Hezbollah.22

Although Hezbollah’s stated primary goal was to fight Israel, the militant group launched a campaign of terror in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut to subdue rival factions, especially members of the Community Party and Amal’s secular leadership.23 On Iran’s order, Hezbollah also embarked on a campaign of terrorist attacks against Western targets. In almost-simultaneous attacks in October 1983, Hezbollah bombers killed 241 US Marine peacekeepers and 58 French troops.24 The subsequent pullout of American and French troops after the bombings consolidated Iran’s influence in Lebanon and paved the ground for a regional Shi’ite alliance of Iran-Syria-Hezbollah against not only the West and Israel, but also the regional Sunni Arab monarchies.

Today, Hezbollah is no longer a simple Iranian militant proxy, however. Under two decades of Nasrallah’s leadership, Hezbollah has transformed into Lebanon’s single most powerful military and political force: it dominates Lebanese politics and holds a veto power in parliament, its militia force is stronger and better
equipped than the Lebanese Armed Forces, it runs a media empire for propaganda and indoctrination purposes, and it implements an extensive social welfare program in Beirut and Shi'ite-dominated areas across the country with Iranian aid. In addition, while Hezbollah continues to receive about $200 million annually from Iran, it has diversified its sources of income by engaging in licit and illicit businesses at home and running a criminal enterprise abroad, including in the United States and Latin America.  

Since Hezbollah outlined its first manifesto in 1985, its core ideological and political objectives have largely remained unchanged, but the group has adopted a more pragmatic platform to achieve its goals. Throughout the 1980s, Hezbollah rejected the legitimacy of the established political system in Lebanon and called for the creation of an Islamic state in the country; however, after the 1989 Taif Agreement that ended the civil war, Tehran and Damascus encouraged Hezbollah to enter the political arena to reform the system from within.  

Senior Hezbollah members initially questioned the legitimacy and merits of entering politics, and al-Tufayli, Hezbollah's founder, abandoned the party in protest.  

At the end, Hezbollah's 12-member committee agreed that “the sum of pros outweighs the cons” and decided in favor of the move—arguing that participation in the government would help Hezbollah use parliament as “a political podium” to strengthen “resistance”; increase interaction with other sectarian groups; and enhance the organization’s stature domestically, regionally, and internationally.  

Hezbollah contested the 1992 parliamentary elections, winning 8 of the 128 seats, and it has participated in all subsequent elections, achieving a consistent degree of electoral success.  

Hezbollah's political clout gained a significant boost in 2008, when it militarily won a veto power over government decisions as part of the Doha Agreement. Hezbollah's showdown with the government initially began in 2006, when the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance began staging a series of protests in opposition to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government. In May 2008, the 18-month political crisis turned violent after the government tried to dismantle Hezbollah's secret communications network and remove the security chief of Beirut Airport over alleged ties to Hezbollah—measures that Nasrallah called a “declaration of war” against his party and demanded that the government retract them. “Those who try to arrest us, we will arrest them. Those who shoot at us, we will shoot at them. The hand raised against us, we will cut it off,” he warned.  

When the government ignored Nasrallah's threats, Hezbollah militants seized control of several western Beirut neighborhoods in street battles that left more than 100 dead and injured. With the Lebanese Army staying on the sidelines, allegedly to preserve its neutrality, militias loyal to the March 14 coalition were no match for Hezbollah's heavily armed fighters. Besieged in their offices by Hezbollah militants, government leaders finally backed down; their parliamentary majority counted for little when Hezbollah decided to settle the discord militarily. On May 21, 2008, all rival factions reached a compromise with the Doha Agreement to end the violence and form a national unity government.

The accord resulted in a significant shift of power in favor of Hezbollah and its political allies and highlighted the rising power of Iran and Syria at the expense of Lebanon's stability and American interests in the region. Both the US and Lebanese governments said the compromise was necessary, as the alternative would have been an all-out war. “We avoided civil war,” said Walid Jumblatt, a leader of the ruling March 14 coalition.  

US Assistant Secretary of State David Welch echoed a similar note: “It's not perfect as a solution, but you have to weigh it against the alternative.”  

Hezbollah's military and political triumph also demonstrated the failure of US efforts to strengthen the Lebanese state institutions and marginalize Hezbollah. When the crisis began, the Bush administration pushed the Siniora government to resist Hezbollah's threats, but Washington ultimately failed to provide the government with political and military support to compete with Hezbollah's Iran-funded arsenal.  

Western optimism about the prospect of peace in Lebanon in the wake of the Doha Agreement was premature. Even though the deal brought a lull in violence, it did not address the underlying reasons that provoked the crisis. Most importantly, the issue of disarmament of Hezbollah was postponed, and since then, the group has leveraged its rising power to undermine successive governments.  

In January 2011, for example, Hezbollah brought down the government of Saad al-Hariri after the latter pledged to cooperate with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigation into the 2005 assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.  

Najib Miqati, a Sunni millionaire businessman who succeeded Saad Hariri, was a Hezbollah choice, and Miqati's June
the grievances of the Lebanese Shi’ites, has allowed Tehran to function as the sole benefactor for the Lebanese Shi’ites over the past three decades.

More importantly, Iranian charity and cultural organizations provide a civilian cover for the IRGC’s secretive Quds Force operatives in Lebanon and Syria. In addition to the Iranian Embassy in Beirut, three prominent Iranian state-run organizations coordinate the Islamic Republic’s soft-power efforts in Lebanon.

**Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon.**

The Iranian government established the ICRL after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war to support Hezbollah’s reconstruction efforts in southern Lebanon. In August 2008, the United States Department of Treasury designated the ICRL as a terrorist entity because it “financed and facilitated Hizballah’s infrastructure and private communications network that enables the terrorist group to communicate securely,” and “has provided funding and engineering expertise to Hizballah’s construction arm, Jihad al-Binaa,” which was designated by Treasury in February 2007.

While the ICRL’s stated mission is to help Lebanon’s rebuilding, in reality, it is a branch of the Quds Force in Lebanon camouflaged as a civilian organization. Hessam Khoshnevis, who directed the ICRL since 2006 until his assassination in Syria last February, was a senior Quds Force commander disguised as a civilian. Khoshnevis, whose real name was Hassan Shateri, played an instrumental role in rebuilding Hezbollah’s military infrastructure and communication network after the 2006 conflict.

In February 2013, Hassan Hijazi, a senior Hezbollah official who worked closely with Shateri on reconstruction efforts in southern Lebanon, said Shateri had implemented 5,480 construction and rebuilding projects in Lebanon, including 168 educational centers, 36 mosques, and 18 hospitals and health clinics. According to former Iranian president Abolhassan Bani Sadr, Tehran spent around $1 billion on reconstruction projects in southern Lebanon between 2006 and 2010. Not all of ICRL’s reconstruction work has been for humanitarian reasons, however. In fact, Hezbollah’s secret fiber optics network, which triggered the 2008 crisis in Lebanon, was built with the “participation in the field” of the ICRL.

Several other Iranian-Hezbollah joint organizations also carry out reconstruction and aid projects for Hezbollah fighters. The Iranian Institute for Martyrs,
for example, provided families of Hezbollah militants who had died in the 2006 war with an apartment in south Beirut worth approximately $35,000, a monthly stipend, and a free pilgrimage to Mecca. The Shi’ite Amal party, in contrast, only offers employment opportunities for families of “martyrs.”

**Imam Khomeini Relief Committee in Lebanon.**

Ostensibly an ordinary charity organization, the IKRC is part of the Iranian regime’s larger soft-power network aimed at restraining dissent at home and expanding its political and ideological agenda abroad. While the charity and its assets are under the control of Iran’s supreme leader, IKRC works in close partnership with and provides civilian cover for the IRGC, Basij, and Quds Force inside and outside Iran. Most of IKRC’s $2 billion annual budget comes from the government, and about 25 percent is provided by public donations at home and fundraising activities abroad.

The Quds Force and the Basij Szendagi Sepah-e Pasdaran (Construction Basij of Revolutionary Guards) implement joint projects with the IKRC, recruit thousands of members for the organization and provide direct funding for its projects. IKRC operates in many countries, including Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Comoros, Syria, and Palestinian territories. According to the organization’s head, Hossein Anvari, IKRC’s goal is not merely to do charity work, but also to export Iranian culture and Iran’s model of Islamic governance. “The Islamic Republic of Iran benefits a great deal from IKRC’s diplomacy, which is indeed defensive diplomacy,” Anvari explains, adding that IKRC’s mission has opened a “new chapter in the country’s diplomacy,” which aims to “to neutralize threats against the Islamic Republic.”

In Lebanon, the IKRC initially began operations in Beirut in 1986 and was registered as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization four years later, with the help of some Lebanese lawmakers. According to Hossein Hojaj, vice president for civic participation of IKRC in Lebanon, the organization has over 10,000 Lebanese families under direct payroll, and more than 1,000 Lebanese individuals work with IKRC on “voluntary” or “probationary” basis. As part of Iran’s efforts to win hearts and minds, the Lebanese branch provides social services in more than 400 cities and rural regions in Lebanon and has 20 offices and institutions in the country.

IKRC’s aid programs in Lebanon include cash assistance, health services, educational programs, housing, informational trips for young Lebanese to Iran, emergency relief assistance at times of conflicts and natural disasters, interest-free loans, marriage assistance, and more. After the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, the IKRC raised 1 billion rials for rebuilding Shi’ite religious institutions destroyed by Israeli bombings.

In contrast to IKRC’s other foreign branches, which are run by Iranian officials, the Lebanon office is managed almost entirely by Hezbollah members. In August 2010, the US Department of the Treasury designated IKRC’s Lebanon branch as a foreign terrorist organization for being owned or controlled by Hezbollah and for providing financial and material support to the group. The Treasury noted that the “IKRC has helped fund and operate Hizballah youth training camps, which have been used to recruit future Hizballah members and operatives.” Nasrallah has acknowledged that IKRC is one of Hezbollah’s institutions funded by Iran.

The designation, however, has not affected the organization’s fundraising and services in Lebanon. Conversely, the organization raised a record $20 million between March 2011 and March 2012 from its 100 fundraising centers across Lebanon, a significant increase from $13 million in the previous year.

**The Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Beirut.** In 1987 the newly established Iranian Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance opened the CCI in Beirut with the aim of elevating Hezbollah’s popularity and depicting Iran as the “Vatican of Shiism” among Lebanese people. Although sanctions have weakened Iran’s economy, the CCI has no shortage of money: it pays $144,000 annually to lease a multistory building in Beirut and runs free cultural and educational programs across the country. Indeed, the center has recently increased its Persian-language courses in Lebanese schools and universities; for example, it has introduced new language courses for 4,000 students at Al Mehdi schools and 50 students at Lebanon State University.

In addition, the CCI supervises a chain of Iranian-funded schools, universities, and religious seminaries, mostly in Shi’ite-dominated regions. For example, the Islamic Azad University, which was inaugurated by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 and hosts more than 1 million students in its 350 branches inside and outside Iran, has branches in Beirut and al-Nabatieh cities.
The CCI also coordinates with Iranian state and private television and radio channels to promote Tehran’s propaganda in Lebanon. Iran’s Arabic television channel Al-Alam has more than 100 employees in its Beirut office alone. The Islamic Republic News Agency’s Middle East and Africa News Desk is also based in the Lebanese capital, which supervises branch offices in Ankara, Damascus, Abu Dhabi, Amman, and Kuwait. Other Iranian television channels operating in Lebanon are Press TV and Al Kawthar satellite channel, which draw modest audiences mostly in Shi’ite Lebanese cities. In addition, the CCI works in close partnership with Hezbollah’s cultural department to implement joint projects and functions as a mediator between Lebanon’s Shi’ite groups, including Hezbollah, and Iranian funding institutions.

Moreover, with Iranian financial and technical assistance, Hezbollah has built a media empire, which promotes not just its own but also Iranian and Syrian propaganda in the Arab world and beyond. Hezbollah’s expanding media network includes the Al-Manar television channel, Radio Nour, and about two dozen newspapers and websites. In addition, the organization uses social and new media tools such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and smartphone applications for information and indoctrination purposes.

Al-Manar, which first began its terrestrial broadcasting on June 3, 1991, is now one of the most popular satellite television networks in the Middle East. The channel was removed from US airwaves in December 2004, when the Department of State added it to the Terrorist Exclusion List. Twenty months later, the Department of Treasury also listed al-Manar as a Specifically Designated Global Terrorist entity because the channel not just supported Hezbollah’s fundraising and recruitment but also provided financial aid to designated Palestinian terrorist entities, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Nasrallah and Hezbollah’s Executive Council manage and oversee the budgets of al-Manar and al-Nour. The channel is also banned in several other countries around the globe, including in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Australia, and Bahrain.

The ban has not prevented Hezbollah’s media arm from reaching a global audience, however. To bypass the limitations, Hezbollah has stepped up activity in cyberspace, operating more than 20 websites in seven different languages. Recently, the group has added websites in Azeri and Spanish to expand its audience in Azerbaijan and Latin American countries. According to a report by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Hezbollah uses front individuals and companies to run its websites and changes Internet service providers frequently to prevent the US and European authorities from identifying and shutting down its websites.

**Syria’s Sectarian War Spilling Over into Lebanon**

Hezbollah’s risky intervention in Syria has deepened Shi’ite-Sunni tension in Lebanon and threatens to plunge the country into yet another civil war. For the first two years of the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah denied fighting alongside President Bashar al-Assad’s forces. On April 30, however, after separate meetings with Ayatollah Khamenei and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Nasrallah openly declared war in Syria and urged his followers to not “let Syria fall in the hands of America, Israel, or Takfiri (radical Sunni) groups.” Soon, he dispatched hundreds of his militiamen to help President al-Assad’s forces to retake the city of Qusayr, a rebel stronghold in western Syria close to the Lebanese border. On May 25, an emboldened Nasrallah hailed the Qusayr victory and vowed to continue fighting in Syria, warning that the survival of Shi’ites and Lebanon was at stake: “This battle is ours . . . Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the resistance cannot sit idly by while its back is being broken.”

Although Hezbollah succeeded in turning the tide of war in favor of the Syrian regime, the group’s sectarian adventurism has provoked a deadly backlash from the Sunnis inside and outside Lebanon. Over the past year, tit-for-tat bombings, street clashes, kidnappings, assassinations, and rocket attacks by rival Sunni and Shi’ite factions have become routine in Lebanon’s largest cities of Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon. On December 27, a car bomb in downtown Beirut killed Mohamad Chatah, a former Lebanese finance minister and a fierce critic of Hezbollah and Iranian and Syrian policies in Lebanon, who was reportedly a frontrunner to become Lebanon’s next prime minister. In other episodes of terrorism, al Qaeda-linked groups have carried out bombings and suicide attacks against the Iranian Embassy and the Iranian cultural center in Beirut, as well as against several Hezbollah targets across the country.

Hezbollah’s militarism at home and sectarian policies abroad have also radicalized Lebanon’s Sunni community,
which feels increasingly isolated from the Hezbollah-dominated political system. The Sunni community has yet to recover from the assassination of its influential leader Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Hariri’s son, Saad Hariri, who assumed leadership of the Sunni community as the head of Free Future Movement, lives in France for security reasons and has lost authority—leaving a vacuum that is being filled by radical Sunni groups with ties to al Qaeda.

For example, Ahmad Assir, a Salafist and previously a marginal cleric from Sidon, has drawn increasing support from young Lebanese Sunnis by capitalizing on rising anti-Shi’ite sentiment in the country. Portraits of Hariri and other moderate leaders in some Sunni neighborhoods are being replaced by the black flag representing the global al Qaeda franchise. Al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have both declared war on Lebanon and set up extremist cells in Sunni regions. The Sunni community is also increasingly becoming distrustful of state institutions, including the Lebanese Army, perceived by some Sunnis to be siding with Hezbollah.

Intervention in Syria may also bear political costs for Hezbollah. In the past three decades, Hezbollah, similar to its Iranian mentor, has portrayed itself as the champion of the Palestinian cause and the archenemy of Israel. The new mission, however, puts Hezbollah in a direct confrontation with a regional Sunni alliance, undermines the group’s cross-sectarian rhetoric, and could cost Hezbollah support among non-Shi’ite Muslims inside and outside Lebanon.

At present, Hezbollah enjoys broad support among Lebanese Shi’ites and maintains its alliance with Christian and Druze partners; however, as Hezbollah gets entangled in the protracted Syrian civil war, long-term support from its Shi’ite constituency and non-Shi’ite political allies remains in doubt. Some independent Lebanese Shi’ite leaders—such as the mufti of Tyre, Sayyed Muhammad Hassan al-Amin, and Supreme Shi’ite Islamic Council member Sayyed Hani Fahs—have already chastised Hezbollah’s sectarian role in Syria and called on their coreligionists to side with the Syrian opposition against the al-Assad dictatorship.

Despite the dangerous backlash for their involvement in Syria, but they may also have calculated that the consequences of inaction were costlier. The loss of Damascus, Tehran’s closest state ally, would degrade Iran’s ability to project its power in the Levant region and the broader Middle East. In the past three decades, Iran has not just used Syria as a key corridor to supply arms to Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad, but has also leveraged its strategic alliance with Syria in its rivalry against Saudi Arabia and Israel.

For Hezbollah, the Syrian regime’s survival is an existential need and perhaps outweighs other security and political costs. The Syrian conflict’s outcome will have a great impact on Hezbollah’s future: a clear victory by the al-Assad regime would empower Hezbollah and further solidify the group’s domination of Lebanon, whereas the fall of the Syrian regime would deny Hezbollah a crucial partner and a strategic lifeline for Iranian assistance.

What Is at Stake in Lebanon?

Notwithstanding its small size and population, Lebanon plays a significant role vis-à-vis regional stability and US geopolitical interests in the Middle East. In a meeting with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman in December 2009, President Barack Obama rightly said, “Obviously Lebanon is a critical country in a critical region, and we want to do everything that we can to encourage a strong, independent, and democratic Lebanon.” Since 2006, the US government has pledged over $1 billion in military and economic assistance to promote democracy in Lebanon and strengthen the country’s security institutions.

The growing political and security turmoil in Lebanon, however, demonstrates that US policy has largely failed and requires a reset. Hezbollah’s political power is rising while the influence of the pro-West March 14 coalition is in decline, Hezbollah’s expanding arsenal and alleged smuggling of advanced missiles from Syria risks another war with Israel, the Lebanese Armed Forces are not yet capable of maintaining security and policing the country’s borders, al Qaeda-linked groups are gaining a foothold in Sunni regions of the country, and the spillover of Syria’s sectarian conflict has pushed Lebanon to the brink of another civil war. Moreover, with Syria engrossed in its own internal strife and Washington’s role in the Levant region shrinking, Iran has stepped up its hard- and soft-power efforts to fill the vacuum and has emerged as the most influential external actor in Lebanese affairs.
The United States cannot afford to continue the status quo and ignore Lebanon’s descent into chaos. A sovereign, secure, and democratic Lebanon is vital for regional stability and containment of US enemies in the region, namely Iran, Syria, and al Qaeda.

To promote stability in Lebanon, the United States and its allies need to adopt a multifaceted strategy that counters Iranian influence and strengthens Lebanese state institutions, primarily the Lebanese Armed Forces and the ISF. Above all, the Obama administration must partner with moderate leaders from all Lebanese ethnic and religious groups, including the Shi’ites, to contain and marginalize Hezbollah. Indeed, leaked US diplomatic cables from the Beirut Embassy indicate that American diplomats have done little to empower and work with independent Lebanese Shi’ite leaders who oppose Hezbollah and Iranian and Syrian policies in Lebanon. Until Hezbollah is disarmed, Lebanon will continue to be on the edge of anarchy and violence.

Notes


8. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


22. Interview with al Islam.


27. Qassem, Hizbullah: The Story from Within, 267–83.

28. Ibid.


40. “Al-Shaheed Al-Amid Hassan Shateri Nafaza 5480 Mashroon Enmeyan va Emnayan fi Lebanon” [ Martyred Brigadier Hassan Shateri Implemented 5480 Urban Development Projects], Islamic Republic News Agency, February 15, 2013, www.irna.ir/af/News/80545237/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%DB%8C%8A%8B%D9%85%DB%8C%8A%8B%D9%85%DB%8C%8A%8B%D9%85%DB%8C%8A%8B%D9%85%DB%8C%8A%8B%D9%85%DB%8C%8A%8B%D9%85%DB%8C%8A%8B.


42. Simpson, “Lebanon Deal Boosts Hezbollah.”


45. “11 thousand Lebanese under Imdad’s Coverage” [11 Thousand Lebanese under Imdad Committee’s Coverage], Asr Iran, June 19, 2011, www.asriran.com/fa/news/1695411/%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D8%AD-%D8%AA-%D9%BE%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%DA%A9%D9%85%D8%8C%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AF-%D9%87%D8%B3-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF.

46. Jahiziyeh-ye Komiteh-ye Emdad.”

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