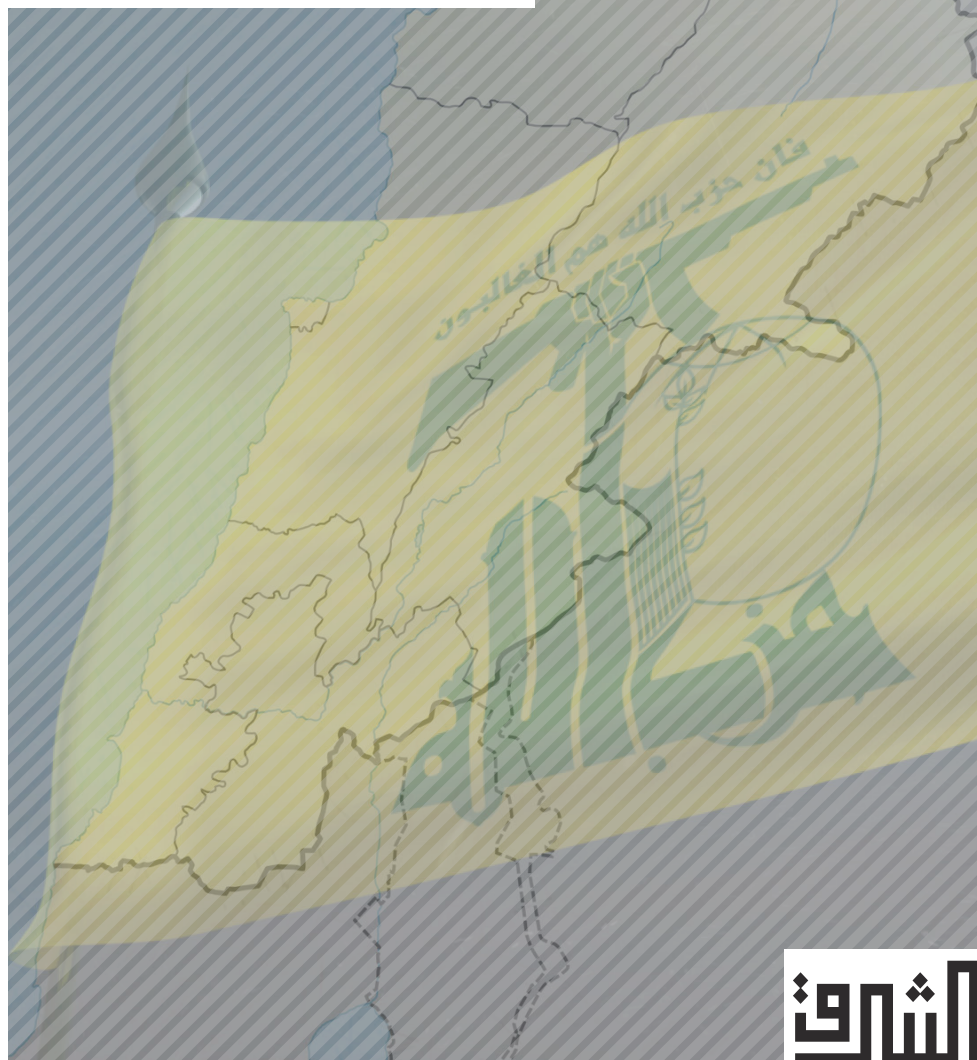


LEBANON'S HEZBOLLAH DILEMMA

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LEBANON'S HEZBOLLAH DILEMMA

MONA ALAMI

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Executive summary:

Prime Minister Saad Hariri took his country by storm on Nov. 4¹ when he announced his resignation as head of the Lebanese government, blaming his decision on Iranian interference in his country's affairs. Hariri's statement, given from Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh, underlines the Saudi decision to ramp up confrontation with its regional nemesis Iran and possibly to introduce a new deal in Lebanon.

Hariri issued a strong condemnation of Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah: the Shiite militia and political party that is part of the 30-member national unity cabinet he previously led. Lebanon is governed by a sectarian political system, divided between a coalition aligned with Shiite Hezbollah and Iran, another siding with Saudi Arabia, and a third with Arab and Western countries.

Since 2016, Lebanon's rival blocs have essentially agreed to put their disagreements aside and join forces in a unity government. Hezbollah, which fought the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon until the year 2000, is currently the strongest Lebanese faction because of its powerful militia, and has served since 2013 as an Iran's expeditionary force in Syria.

"Wherever Iran settles, it sows discord, devastation and destruction, proven by its interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries," Mr. Hariri said, adding that Iran's "hands" in the region "will be cut off".

Despite a more conciliatory approach upon his return to Beirut, where Hariri' stated "our relations with our Arab brothers should be the basis and we must seek all the means to enable Lebanon to have a real disassociation policy, not just in words but also in deeds," ², the Lebanese PM clouds with uncertainty the golden phase enjoyed by Hezbollah since the election in 2016 of its long-time political ally Michel Aoun as president. This golden period allowed Hezbollah to assuage its dominance over various sectors of the Lebanese state. This paper looks into Hezbollah's assertion of power in Lebanon and the dilemma faced



by the land of the cedars toward the militant group, one that in light of recent events could threaten the fabric of the country.

Introduction

After a decade of tumultuous relations with the Lebanese state - namely since the 2005 killing of the Sunni Prime Minister Rafic Hariri which was attributed³ to four of its members - Lebanese Hezbollah appeared to be entering a golden phase within the Lebanese political system. This summer's military operation launched by Hezbollah against militants of former al-Qaeda affiliate Heyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the mountainous area of Aarsal shows the undisputable monopoly developed by the organization in matters of Lebanese defense and security. The following August⁴, an operation by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) against the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Qaa-Ras Baalback area was dovetailed with a Hezbollah offensive on the Syrian side of the border, resulting in a controversial deal that allowed ISIS fighters to be transported to western Syria.⁵ Both military operations appear to have been suspended. The debate now revolves around Hezbollah's military arsenal and the organization positioning itself as the prominent military and fighting counter-terrorism force in Lebanon. The ISIS deal was another attempt by Hezbollah to make use of its army-people-resistance triptych to minimize LAF achievements in the battle against ISIS.

Until 2000, Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite Islamist political party and militant group, spearheaded the Lebanese resistance against Israel, which ended its occupation that year. With support from Iran, Hezbollah has been able to develop and maintain an extensive security and social services network in Lebanon. Often labeled "a state within the state", Hezbollah's power and influence have grown even further both locally and regionally with its involvement in Syria, where it has backed Syrian President Bashar Assad against a largely Sunni opposition. Despite the militant's group placement on international terror lists ⁶ and the opposition of large Lebanese factions to its local and international behavior, Hezbollah has been able to consolidate



its position in Lebanon, neutralize its enemies and co-opt political players by granting them more influence.

The ISIS deal was another attempt by Hezbollah to make use of its army–people–resistance triptych to minimize LAF achievements in the battle against ISIS.

Hezbollah's golden phase within the Lebanese political system was kick-started in October 2016 with the election of General Michel Aoun, Hezbollah's staunch ally as president, followed by the formation of a

Lebanese government under Hezbollah's longtime foe Prime Minister Saad Hariri.⁷ These two events consecrated Hezbollah's cooptation of the Lebanese system and its growing clout over various dimensions of the Lebanese political environment. Since then, the Lebanese government has attempted a difficult balancing act between a moderate foreign policy toward Gulf countries and the international community and a domestic policy accommodating to Hezbollah. This has proven to be an increasingly difficult task, given complex regional dynamics, regional powers accusing Hezbollah of being Iran's foreign legion, as well as the enmity between the organization and its backer Iran towards the international community and Gulf countries. The tightening of U.S. sanctions on Hezbollah could also worsen already dire Lebanese economic conditions and increase pressure on the country's vital banking sector. The Hariri resignation was combined with escalatory statements made by Saudi Gulf Affairs Minister Thamer al-Sabhan. According to an article published by Reuters,⁸ the minister threatened to deal with the Lebanese government "as a government declaring war on Saudi Arabia" because of what he described as aggression by Hezbollah. Faulting the Hariri-led administration for failing to take action against Hezbollah during his first year in office, Sabhan said "there are those who will stop [Hezbollah] and make it return to the caves of South Lebanon", the heartland of the Shi'ite community. In an interview with Al-Arabiya TV, he added, "the Lebanese must all know these risks and work to fix matters before they reach the point of no return."



The Lebanese state is thus faced with a growing Hezbollah dilemma, one that, if not tackled both at the local and regional level, could end up breaking the system. This research paper attempts to draw a picture of Hezbollah's relations with the Lebanese state and how they might evolve in the future by interviewing Hezbollah experts and politicians, some who are politically opposed to the organization and others who are close to the organization, in addition to a Lebanese army commander close to the militant group and a Hezbollah commander, a Lebanese banker and an economist. The latter sources preferred to speak on condition of anonymity due to the topic's sensitivity.

The Lebanese government has attempted a difficult balancing act between a moderate foreign policy toward Gulf countries and the international community and a domestic policy accommodating to Hezbollah. This has proven to be an increasingly difficult task, given complex regional dynamics, regional powers accusing Hezbollah of being Iran's foreign legion, as well as the enmity between the organization and its backer Iran towards the international community and Gulf countries.

The paper will first highlight Lebanon's historical relations with Hezbollah in the post-civil war phase. It will then look at Hezbollah's political role, its strategy in parliament and government, its influence over Lebanese security institutions, its use of a carefully balanced "threat and reward policy" aiming at increasing its clout over the political system, its foreign legions, and the resulting international pressure on Lebanon. It will conclude by looking at the sustainability of Lebanon's schizophrenic approach to regional and international politics in the presence of such a powerful and controversial non-state actor.

I. Hezbollah's relations with the Lebanese state

Originally comprised of a southern Lebanese group focusing on fighting the Israeli invasion that lasted from 1982 to 2000, Hezbollah has become a powerful paramilitary force. Relations between the group and the state went through a period of stability under Syrian occupation, before deteriorating significantly in the 2005 to 2017 period



in the wake of the Hariri assassination, broken by intermittent phases of uncomfortable stability.

In 1969, the Cairo Agreement sanctioned Palestinian militancy against Israel on the country's southern front.⁹ One Shiite group, Amal, founded by charismatic leader Sayed Musa Sadr, spearheaded the war effort against Israel until 1982. That year the organization splintered when its new leader, now speaker of the house, Nabih Berry decided not to challenge Israel's advance into Lebanon; a decision that was contested by the party's Islamic branch. The latter formation merged with other Shiite militants from South Lebanon and the Lebanese Bakaa and was trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (RCG) forces which had been sent by Iran to stop the Israeli expansion. "Lebanon's era of resistance started in 1984," explained a Hezbollah commander interviewed by the author, speaking on condition of anonymity.¹⁰ Hezbollah split off from Amal as a result and its founding was marked by two major events: the emergence of a politico-military command structure, and the Manifesto of the Nine, which called for jihad against Israel, emphasized Islam as the movement's doctrine and declared the signatories' adherence to the Iranian Ayatollah.

The modern Lebanese state was lumbered post-war with the 1989 Taif Agreement, which divided power equally between Christians and Muslims, consecrated Syrian tutelage over the country and recognized Hezbollah as the lone resistance movement that was allowed to preserve its military arsenal, while other factions such as the Kataeb, Lebanese Forces and Amal, among many others, were forced to disarm.

"(Lebanese) Hezbollah was born on the margins of the state because there was no state to speak of at the time," argued Brahim Beyram, a Lebanese journalist and AnnNahar columnist, who follows Hezbollah closely.¹¹

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Taif Agreement, which divided power equally between Christians and Muslims, consecrated Syrian tutelage over the country and recognized Hezbollah as the lone resistance movement that was allowed to preserve its military arsenal,¹² while other factions such as the Kataeb, Lebanese Forces and Amal, among many others, were forced to disarm. “Basically Hezbollah, with the backing of Iran, was handed a monopoly over Lebanese resistance against Israel,” says Ali Amine, a Lebanese journalist and a fierce Hezbollah critic.¹³ The relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state further consolidated when it participated in Lebanon’s first post-civil war election in 1992. With the organization officially included in the Lebanese political system, experts hailed the “Lebanization” of Hezbollah,¹⁴ which was now believed to be more locally focused, with analysts believing that with time Hezbollah would abandon its broader regional agenda. “Hezbollah was the only protection Lebanese Shiites had against Israel, with the Lebanese state failing to protect the Southern population against the onslaught,” a Lebanese army officer¹⁵ close to the organization and speaking on condition of anonymity said. Hezbollah pursued its fight against the Israeli occupation until the year 2000. By then, the high number of deaths among the Israeli military in Lebanon had increased by so much that it triggered strong opposition within Israeli society and led to the swift withdrawal of Israel from south Lebanon in May 2000. Israel’s unilateral decision deprived Syria and Iran of strategic access to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which forced them to engineer a new territorial dispute in the form of the contested Shebaa farms, which was considered Syrian by the United Nations.¹⁶

A billionaire businessman, Hariri wanted to turn Lebanon into the region’s economic and tourism hub, a decision that naturally clashed with Iranian and Syrian plans for Lebanon, who wanted it used as a pawn in the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Hezbollah’s clout over defense issues and its militaristic ambitions conflicted with the objectives of Lebanon’s Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who served as PM intermittently from 1992 to 2004. “Hariri wanted to make another Hong Kong out of Lebanon,” said veteran Lebanese journalist and analyst Paul Khalifeh.¹⁷ A billionaire businessman,



Hariri wanted to turn Lebanon into the region's economic and tourism hub, a decision that naturally clashed with Iranian and Syrian plans for Lebanon, who wanted it used as a pawn in the Arab–Israeli conflict. In order to consolidate its power over the country, Syria, backed by Hezbollah and pro-Syrian factions, moved to amend the Lebanese constitution to extend the term of then-president Emile Lahoud.¹⁸ The amendment was dovetailed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of all foreign armies from Lebanon, in a clear reference to Syrian occupation, and for the disarming all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias including Hezbollah.¹⁹ Analysts believed that Hariri was indirectly involved in Resolution 1559, which ultimately may have caused his demise. On Feb. 14, Hariri was killed in a massive bomb blast alongside 22 others.²⁰

The Hariri killing was followed by weeks of street protests – dubbed the “Cedar Revolution” – which prompted the resignation of pro-Syrian Prime Minister Omar Karame and his cabinet. Along with international pressure, it forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. The loss of such a powerful backer in the domestic sphere forced Hezbollah to enter talks for the first time with the Lebanese government, which it had long considered illegitimate. “Hezbollah’s issue with the Lebanese state is that it believed it to be a failed state and the Lebanese government irreparably corrupt,” a Hezbollah expert close to the party’s leadership said on condition of anonymity.²¹

The ensuing 2005–2008 relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government was tumultuous. Lebanon was basically split in two. The first part was represented by the Mar. 14 parliamentary majority, comprised of Sunnis, Druze and Christians, which demanded a full investigation into the assassination of Hariri, the establishment of a special tribunal for Lebanon that would prosecute the killers and called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The Mar. 8, which included Hezbollah and Amal and at a later stage the Christian Free Patriotic Movement led by General Michel Aoun (who had previously been a fiercely anti-Syrian figure), supported cordial



relations with Syria and opposed the establishment of an international tribunal to look into the Hariri killing. Aoun and Nasrallah had joined forces in 2006 after signing a memorandum of understanding which had consecrated their political alliance.²²

Relations between the parliamentary majority, the government and Hezbollah soured dramatically in 2006. That summer, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, triggering a massive Israeli land incursion that resulted in a costly war for Lebanon. "Israel is one of the main contributors to the rise of Hezbollah and now Lebanon is asked to treat it as a problem," said MP Alain Aoun, a member of the Free Patriotic Movement allied to Hezbollah.²³ The conflict further exacerbated sectarian tensions between Shiites and Sunnis, and was followed by a constitutional crisis between Hezbollah and the government of Prime Minister Siniora, the two factions at odds over the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.²⁴ "There was a clear attempt to delegitimize Hezbollah at the time," underlines Khalifeh.

In 2008, in what were dubbed the May 7 events, the organization deployed²⁵ armed militants in Beirut, besieging political figures and the government after a government move to shut down Hezbollah's telecommunication network and remove Beirut Airport Security Chief Wafic Shkeir over alleged ties to the group. Former minister Salim Sayegh,²⁶ a member of the anti-Hezbollah Kataeb party believed that Hezbollah considered that the loss of control over the airport a *casus bello*. "It ushered Lebanon into a phase in total opposition to the country's national pact," he points out. At least 18 people were killed and 38 wounded in three days of battles between pro-government gunmen and fighters loyal to Hezbollah. The violence crowned 17 months of political deadlock between the government and the Hezbollah-led opposition, which had paralyzed the parliament and led to a vacuum at the level of the presidency. The incidents triggered wide regional intervention leading to the Doha political agreement,²⁷ which allowed for a new consensual government providing a veto power to Hezbollah and its allies.



In 2013, the Lebanese government including Hezbollah ministers voted in favor of a policy of dissociation from regional conflicts, despite previous reports of Hezbollah militants fighting in Syria.

In the 2010 and 2011 period, pressures mounted on Hezbollah,²⁸ which was accused of participating, along with Syria, in the assassination of Hariri. Indictments – rumored to name members of Hezbollah – were submitted by prosecutor Daniel Bellemare to the pre-trial Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which was established by the United Nations and the Lebanese Republic to prosecute persons responsible for the 2005 attack assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. In turn, Hezbollah blamed the STL of being manipulated by the United States and Israel.

The crisis was crystallized on Jan. 2011 when the “March 8 ministers” resigned from the Lebanese “consensual coalition” government. The resignation was concomitant with the submission of the STL indictments. At the end of January a “March-8” dominated government was formed headed by Prime Minister Najib Mikati, which allowed for a normalization of the situation with Hezbollah.

The emergence of an opposition Sunni leadership in Damascus would put an end to Iran's expansionist policy in the Levant that aimed to link Tehran and Baghdad to Damascus and Lebanon. Hezbollah committed itself in 2013 to an all-out war to keep Assad in power, with the new conflict framed as a war of the axis of resistance (Syria, Hezbollah and Iran) against “terrorism”.

Lebanon was once again divided along sectarian lines when in 2011, a largely Sunni rebellion took up arms against the regime of President Bashar Assad, Hezbollah and Iran's ally. In 2013, the Lebanese government including Hezbollah ministers voted in favor of a policy of dissociation from regional conflicts,²⁹ despite previous reports of Hezbollah militants fighting in Syria. Hezbollah and Iran viewed protests in Syria as direct threat to their axis of resistance. “The



terrorists [Syrian opposition] aimed to weaken the axis of defense,” adds the Hezbollah commander. The emergence of an opposition Sunni leadership in Damascus would put an end to Iran’s expansionist policy in the Levant that aimed to link Tehran and Baghdad to Damascus and Lebanon. Hezbollah committed itself in 2013 to an all-out war to keep Assad in power,³⁰ with the new conflict framed as a war of the axis of resistance (Syria, Hezbollah and Iran) against “terrorism”. It was described by Hezbollah as a defensive war necessary to protect its Shiite popular base. This strategy has proved successful for Hezbollah; the organization emerged from Syria as a powerful fighting force and more importantly as a regional player.

At the local level, Hezbollah’s priority appeared to be maintaining internal stability, an expert speaking on condition of anonymity told me. This might explain Hezbollah’s move to agree on the appointment of his nemesis Saad Hariri as premier at the time of the election of its ally General Aoun as president. “With Aoun’s ascension to head of state, relations between Lebanese institutions and Hezbollah stabilized, with both parties avoiding controversial debates such as those over the country’s defense strategy or the disarmament of Hezbollah,” Khalifeh pointed out.

II. Hezbollah and the Lebanese political system

The aforementioned historical events can be interpreted through the prism of Hezbollah’s policy toward state institutions, its political allies and its enemies.

Hezbollah’s strategy within Lebanese political institutions has been marked by an alternative use of pragmatism, force and paralysis when the organization has felt threatened locally.

Khalifeh argues that Hezbollah’s influence is very subtle, and “there are open channels of communication between Hezbollah and the presidency and the army but there are no common operating rooms.”³¹ Yet Hezbollah’s strategy within Lebanese political institutions has been marked by an alternative use of pragmatism, force and paralysis when the organization has felt threatened locally.



Lebanese Hezbollah's pragmatism has been mostly evident in its integration into the country's political system at times considered by the organization as important turning points for the country and consequently for the future of the organization. After defining itself as a jihadi organization that only recognized the Muslim Ummah, Hezbollah later joined the Lebanese political system that it previously had not recognized, toning down its discourse and replacing it with one more Lebanon-centered and conciliatory, as mentioned by Dr Ali Abdallah Fadlallah in his book *Hezbollah Change of Discourse*. This evolution reflected the change of leadership at the head of the organization, where Sheikh Subhi Tufayli was replaced by the more flexible Sayed Abbas Mussawi, who himself was succeeded in 1992, by Sayed Hassan Nasrallah.³² "The change in leadership allowed the organization to open up to other factions and gain in pragmatism," says Beyram.³³ By participating in the Lebanese system, Hezbollah showed it was willing to play the country's democratic game for now: one it could tweak nonetheless using ideology backed by force thanks to its Syrian ally. In 1992, Hezbollah competed for the first time in the Lebanese parliamentary elections and won eight parliamentary seats (out of 128 total). Hezbollah resorted to two fatwas (religious edicts) at the time. Amine explains that one fatwa allowed the organization to participate to the Lebanese elections because "Hezbollah did not consider previously the Lebanese political system as legitimate," adds the journalist. Interestingly another fatwa³⁴ aimed at forcing Shiites to vote for the party: "Every man will be asked about his vote on judgment day – any adherent to the supreme Islamic interest should hold the list high and drop it as is in the voting box – and it is illicit to elect anybody else who is not on the list," read the fatwa.

Yet Hezbollah did not rely on religious edicts alone to ensure the political system tilted in its favor. It also got help from its ally Syria, which the Taif Accords had granted a full mandate over Lebanon. Syria was close to Amal, the other main Shiite party. During the year 2000 election, an Amal-Hezbollah alliance – the Resistance and Development Bloc – won all 23 seats in southern Lebanon³⁵ and more than a quarter of all seats in

When Syria withdrew from Lebanon, following Hariri's assassination in 2005, the national political landscape shifted dramatically and weakened Hezbollah's position. The organization felt at the time that to remain in control of the situation it had to increase its involvement in Lebanese institutions, namely the government. Pragmatism was once again needed.

parliament. The budding relationship between Amal and Hezbollah, who had previously been at odds, proved instrumental for Hezbollah's growing clout. Under Lebanon's 1943 National Pact, the prime minister is Sunni, the president a Christian Maronite, and the speaker of parliament a Shiite. By maintaining excellent relations with

speaker of the house Nabih Berry, Amal and Hezbollah forged a solid alliance, one that under the guidance of the head of the parliament, would allow them to create constitutional precedents favoring the militant group.

Hezbollah's newfound pragmatism was nonetheless increasingly challenged by the policies of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Hezbollah believed force was now necessary. Both Syria and Hezbollah in this phase agreed to maintain their ally, Emile Lahoud, as president. Syria imposed a three-year extension of Lahoud's presidential term in 2004. During that phase, Hezbollah enjoyed good relations with Lahoud while it grew increasingly opposed to the policies of Hariri's government decisions, from privatizing the electrical and telecom sectors to, more importantly, its ambition to pacify Lebanon.

However, when Syria withdrew from Lebanon, following Hariri's assassination in 2005, the national political landscape shifted dramatically and weakened Hezbollah's position. The organization felt at the time that to remain in control of the situation it had to increase its involvement in Lebanese institutions, namely the government. Pragmatism was once again needed. Hezbollah thus fought the elections alongside a faction of the March 14 anti-Syrian movement in certain regions, although politically it was part of the march 8 pro-Syrian movement and obtained ³⁵ seats in conjunction with Amal.³⁶ "The party had the ability to absorb the backlash of the Hariri assassination while maintaining its presence by engaging in new political and electoral



alliances,” said Michael Young, a Lebanese political expert and former Daily Star editor.³⁷

In addition, for the first time, Hezbollah participated in government, sending two ministers (energy and labor) to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's cabinet. “Generally, cabinet portfolios are not important to Hezbollah, whose

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priority is that sovereign ministries be held by close allies, mainly in matters of defense, foreign affairs, telecom and finances,” argues American University professor and political scientist Hilal Khashan.³⁸ Hezbollah also cares about ensuring cooperation with ministries on all security issues, he adds. For Khalifeh, Hezbollah's entry into the Lebanese government was mostly motivated by the need to monitor what was going on to avoid any legislation that could be unfavorable to the party's long-term viability and its general interests.

Hezbollah's conciliatory disposition was quick to come to an end. Hezbollah entered into a confrontation with the government majority in the wake of the 2006 war. Pressure was already mounting³⁹ between different blocs on the issue of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. That year, Hezbollah and its allies pulled their ministers out of the Lebanese government and required the formation of a national unity government.⁴⁰ It also demanded that representatives of Christian leader, Michel Aoun, its new ally, play a role in the cabinet. In addition, on Oct. 31 the organization's general secretary Hassan Nasrallah left the government with two choices: either agree to a national unity government, or face demonstrations. Hezbollah and its allies argued that the government was not more legitimate since the Taif Agreement required that every major sect was to be represented, which was no more the case with the resignation of the Shia ministers. In addition, Speaker Nabih Berri refused to convene parliament, which allowed Hezbollah and its allies to enforce paralysis over all institutions:



a policy that would determine the next phase of relations between Lebanese State and the militant group.

The next two years witnessed riots, clashes in the streets of Beirut and the closing down of all the main streets downtown, which reflected on the country's security and economic situation. For Khalifeh, the period was one of uncertainty for Hezbollah, which felt cornered. The May 7 crisis, which caused 67 deaths, only came to an end with the May 21, 2008 Doha Agreement between the warring Lebanese factions. Painstakingly brokered in Qatar's capital with the support of the nations of the Arab community, the peace deal also stipulated the election of consensus president Michel Suleiman. The agreement provided 16 cabinet seats for the governing majority, 11 for the Hezbollah-led opposition and 3 to be nominated by the new president. The Doha Agreement heralded a significant shift of power in favor of Hezbollah, and more importantly it introduced a constitutional precedent by putting an end to majority rule and replacing it by consensual rule, requiring unanimous⁴¹ support for cabinet decisions. This was used by Hezbollah every time it was in opposition.

Hezbollah's paralysis of the Lebanese system was again tested in the wake of the 2009 elections. While early opinion polls had pointed to a landslide sweep⁴² for the March 8 opposition that included Hezbollah, it was surprisingly the March 14 coalition that won the majority of the parliamentary seats. With 19 seats in the 2009 parliament, the Free Patriotic Movement became the second largest party in parliament. Hezbollah and Amal Movement both came third with 13 seats each. According to The New York Times at the time that "since Hezbollah had accepted Lebanon's peculiar political system as it is, it realized that influence within the Lebanese system is yielded by forming alliances and striking deals." With the FPM, support for the group eventually brought down the government of Saad Hariri⁴³ and it was replaced by a new government headed by pro-Syrian Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

The ensuing fall of the Mikati government and the formation of



another government by Tamam Salam, a figure close to the March 14 movement, in 2014, reflected Hezbollah's awareness of the threats it faced in a region in turmoil.⁴⁴ Hezbollah had been unofficially engaged in Syria since 2011 and things were not looking good at the time for the Syria–Iran– Hezbollah axis. For Hezbollah, forming a Cabinet was a first step toward preparing for the presidential election in May and the next parliamentary elections in November 2014, which have been postponed twice since.⁴⁵ The new Lebanese Cabinet of 2014 was heralded as a unity⁴⁶ cabinet that divided power equally between the various protagonists, mainly the Iranian-backed, Hezbollah-led March 8 movement, the Saudi-backed March 14 Alliance, and centrist figures. However, the government was not particularly efficient and remained gridlocked. After all, the Future Bloc⁴⁷ led by Hariri had declared that it would only form a cabinet if "Hezbollah returned from Syria"; an "impossible condition", according to Hezbollah. The paralysis extended to the presidential palace, which remained empty for until 2016 due to bickering between the political players. While Hezbollah did not actually block the presidential elections, it allowed political divisions to prolong the vacuum without seeking a solution itself, achieving its objective in that way, Young said.

Hezbollah is now the preponderant political actor and is enjoying the moment. Due to Arab weakness, the balance has tilted in favor of Iran. Aoun would have not been elected without Hezbollah, which means he owes it to them, and Hariri knows now his limitations, so he is behaving this time.

The paralysis lasted until the 2016–2017 period. That year, a change in the regional balance of power favoring Iran and Syria, which was backed by Russia, combined with a partial withdrawal of the United States from the region created a change of climate in Lebanon. Hezbollah's former enemies, who had slowly gone from right to the center as seen in the previous government, compromised with the organization. Hezbollah's victories in Syria, meanwhile, allowed the organization to neutralize its political opponents. The organization pushed for the election of General Michel Aoun, its long-term ally,

as president and compromised with the election of a weakened Saad Hariri as Prime Minister. “Hezbollah is now the preponderant political actor and is enjoying the moment. Due to Arab weakness, the balance has tilted in favor of Iran. Aoun would have not been elected without Hezbollah, which means he owes it to them, and Hariri knows now his limitations, so he is behaving this time,” explains Khashan. Alain Aoun, a member of the FPM, disagrees, arguing that “the political deal that took place was the best solution, it allowed us to put an end to the conflicts and made everyone happy.”

III. Hezbollah's role within security institutions

With a pro-Hezbollah presidency and a government considered incapable of countering Hezbollah's decisions, many experts increasingly perceived Lebanese security institutions – namely the LAF and the General Security Forces – through the Hezbollah lens, with the exception of the Internal Security Forces (ISF). Yet, while relations between Hezbollah and the security institutions are generally close due to a variety of factors, the Lebanese security institutions reflect to some extent wider Lebanese divisions in regard to the issue of the militant group.

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of security or defense and through appointments of security figures to important positions. Hezbollah's security depth has also taken an indirect shape. “There is self-censorship of security officers when it comes to controversial decisions that might upset Hezbollah and trigger a backlash,” says a high-ranking security official speaking on condition of anonymity. One example is the notorious May 7 events that led to the takeover of Beirut by Hezbollah militants. The Lebanese army stayed on the sidelines of the conflict and failed to crack down on the factions involved in the battles. “May 7 created a precedent for



the military institutions and set limits on their behavior,” adds the security official.

At the level of security appointments, Amine believes that there was a double infiltration of Hezbollah into Lebanese security institutions. “This took place by appointing officers and maintaining special relations with them. For example, General Abbas Brahim (Head of the General Security Forces) was brought to power with the support of Hezbollah. The organization generally blocks an appointment that may jeopardize its agenda, which would result in a vacuum. In addition, major security decisions that are controversial require political coverage that will simply not be provided if they go against Hezbollah’s interests.”

“Have you ever heard of a Lebanese security institution apprehending a member of Hezbollah who committed a crime?” Amine added.

However, the security official says Hezbollah’s infiltration into the Lebanese security system is much subtler. “Actually, it is the speaker of the House Nabih Berry who makes the security appointments. Hezbollah will only block the appointment of figures who could threaten its activities,” he said. The positions that matter to them are the head of security in South Lebanon, the LAF commander in chief, and the Head of Military Intelligence.

Experts interviewed for this report believe that relationships with Hezbollah vary from one institution to another. According to Beyram, coordination is carried out mostly at the levels of the General Security Forces and Military Intelligence.

Hezbollah has built its relationship with the Lebanese army on the equation “the Lebanese people, the army and Hezbollah.”⁴⁸ Relations between Hezbollah and the LAF have become closer in recent years. Both players share an enmity against Israel and extremist organizations. Since 2007, the LAF has engaged in several rounds against extremist organizations such as the terror group of Fateh Islam⁴⁹ in 2007 and

On Aug. 19, the LAF launched a military operation against the last ISIS enclave on the northeastern border with Syria. Simultaneously, the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah announced an assault on the militants from the Syrian side of the frontier. The week-long offensive resulted in the swift departure of ISIS fighters – about 350 of them and their families – in air-conditioned buses to western Syria close to the Iraqi border. The militant group's concern for striking a swift deal with JAN and ISIS appeared to be a clear attempt to steal some of the LAF's glory, after its successful offensive against ISIS.

the militants following Sheikh Ahmad Assir⁵⁰ in 2013. Both the LAF and Hezbollah have also been the target of Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and the Islamic State (ISIS). This has promoted closer collaboration mainly with the Military Intelligence Services as well as the Special Forces in order to further the war on radical organizations in Lebanon.

A feeling of unease has also prevailed over the most recent simultaneous operation by the LAF and Hezbollah on ISIS. On Aug. 19, the LAF launched a military operation against the last ISIS enclave on the northeastern border with Syria. Simultaneously, the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah announced an assault on the militants from the Syrian side of the frontier. The week-long offensive resulted in the swift departure of ISIS fighters – about 350 of them and their families – in airconditioned buses to western Syria close to the Iraqi border. Hezbollah justified its action by saying it wanted to determine the fate ⁵¹ of the remaining 9 Lebanese soldiers who had been held by ISIS since 2014 and who turned out to have been buried in the mountainous border area. The militant group's concern for striking a swift deal with JAN and ISIS appeared to be a clear attempt to steal some of the LAF's glory, after its successful offensive against ISIS. The Lebanese army officer disputes this opinion, however, adding that Hezbollah and the LAF have always coordinated operations whether against the jihadist threat or Israel, and "were united in their efforts against both enemies."

IV. Hezbollah's threat and cooptation policy.

Hezbollah's successful and creeping infiltration of the Lebanese security and political system has been coordinated with an efficient dual

strategy based on a threats and rewards applied to its political allies and enemies.

In the wake of the killing of Rafic Hariri, which was attributed to five Hezbollah members, a series of mysterious killings targeted strong figures who opposed both Hezbollah and Syria in Lebanon; namely Christian MPs Gibran Tueni, Walid Eido and Antoine Ghanem; Army Director of Operations François al-Hajj, An-Nahar columnist Samir Kassir, and Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation reporter May Chidiac.⁵²

In addition, Nov. 21 2006 witnessed the assassination of 33-year old Pierre Gemayel, a strong critic of both Hezbollah and Syria and a minister in the government.

Hezbollah's successful and creeping infiltration of the Lebanese security and political system has been coordinated with an efficient dual strategy based on a threats and rewards applied to its political allies and enemies.

Besides the targeting of political figures, other unsolved killings of security officers took place in the post-2005 phase. These assassinations involved the security figures in charge of the Hariri investigation. On Sept. 5, 2006, ISF Information Branch officer Lt. Col. Samir Shehadeh's convoy was hit by a remote-controlled bomb in the South Lebanon town of Rmeileh. In 2008, a powerful bomb killed ISF investigator Captain Wissam Mahmoud Eid. Both Eid and Shehadeh were involved in the investigation of the Hariri assassination. In Oct. 2012, the head of ISF intelligence Wissam Hassan was killed in a bomb blast in the Ashrafieh neighborhood of Beirut. While Eid was the first to link the Hariri assassination to a team of Hezbollah members, Hassan had uncovered evidence in a high profile case connecting Syria to a series of terror attacks in Lebanon.⁵³ Hassan had uncovered the collaboration of Lebanon's former information minister, Michel Samaha, with Syrian officials to plot bombings. No serious leads have been found for any of these killings up to the present day.

Hezbollah's savvy co-optation policy has been most apparent in its courting of Michel Aoun. A popular Maronite politician, Aoun, who



heads the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) felt victimized after his return from exile in 2005 when he was shunned by the March 14 movement. Aoun was an unlikely ally for Hezbollah, but in the post-2005 environment, in which Syria had withdrawn from Lebanon, the militant group needed to gain national legitimacy – and lose the sectarian and ideological stigma that plagued it. “Hezbollah had to present itself as a mainstream movement; it needed a Christian ally. Aoun was not accepted by March 14 and he gave Hezbollah much-needed legitimacy,” points out Khashan. Aoun’s FPM and Nasrallah’s Hezbollah shared converging interests. In 2006, the two party leaders signed a memorandum of understanding.⁵⁴ The agreement was the first alliance of its kind and was beneficial to both parties, allowing them to confront the powerful Sunni-led alliance together. “There is a mutual understanding of each party’s priorities between Hezbollah and the FPM; there is mutual loyalty to this alliance,” adds Alain Aoun. “Hezbollah also supported our battle to recover Christian rights and greater representation in government,” adds the politician, who believes the memorandum of understanding paved the way to a cohabitation between Hezbollah and its enemies at the local level, while calming down the Lebanese political climate.

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General Aoun’s backing of Hezbollah has proven to be a very successful endeavor for the FPM. After the end of Michel Suleiman’s presidential term in 2014, the main parties in the March 14 coalition jointly backed the nomination of Dr. Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces party, to succeed Suleiman against Michel Aoun.⁵⁵ The March 14 vote nonetheless split after Saad Hariri, at the time a candidate for the premiership, decided to back the candidacy of the Hezbollah- and Syria-



friendly Marada Movement leader Sleiman Frangieh as a 'consensus candidate.' "Hezbollah could have chosen Frangieh as a candidate, but it remained loyal to General Aoun," Alain Aoun said.

The end of 2016 brought important changes in Lebanon and crowned Hezbollah's smart cooptation policy, with Michel Aoun's election in October ushering in a new government of national unity under the premiership of Saad Hariri. Hezbollah's successful cooptation of the system was highlighted by Aoun's election and the neutralization of Hariri, which led to the final fragmentation of what was once called March 14. This political cohabitation forced March 14 into a much more ambiguous policy, according to Young.

These significant developments reflected ongoing shifts in the balance of power at the regional level and in the broader political dynamics within Lebanon. Hezbollah secured a double success by placing its ally at the head of the state and neutralizing its political enemy Saad Hariri.

Hezbollah's takeover of the system witnessed nonetheless an unprecedented blow on Nov. 4, when Hariri announced his resignation from Riyadh, accusing Iran of interfering in its country. Hariri's statement was followed by an escalation in Saudi rhetoric over Lebanon. Saudi

Gulf Affairs Minister Thamer al-Sabhan said⁵⁶ that the Lebanese government would "be dealt with as a government declaring war on Saudi Arabia" because of what he described as aggression by Hezbollah.

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Blaming the Hariri administration for failing to take action against Hezbollah during a year in office, Sabhan said "there are those who will stop (Hezbollah) and make it return to the caves of South Lebanon". Hariri's move heralds a period of uncertainty for both Lebanon and Hezbollah. The country will likely be ruled by a caretaker government



for a lengthy period of time, also resulting in the postponement of parliamentary elections scheduled for the spring of 2018.

V. Hezbollah's foreign legions

In parallel to its internal policy, Hezbollah beefed up its regional presence. Hezbollah's regional role came to the fore with the war in Syria. Although Hezbollah initially distanced itself from the protests in Syria, by the end of 2011, local Lebanese media outlet Ya Libnan reported the death of seven Hezbollah militants in Syria helping the pro-regime crackdown against protestors.⁵⁷ In Oct. 2012, Nasrallah admitted that some Hezbollah fighters were protecting Lebanese Shiites living in border villages on Syrian territory, while in Jan. 2013, combat videos of Hezbollah fighters in the vicinity of the Sayida Zeinab were circulated.ⁱ It was only in April 2013 that open war was promised by Nasrallah in Syria, who vowed the country would not fall into the hands of the United States, Israel, or extremist Sunnis (takfiris). "We were forced to fight in Syria, it was a war against our creed by takfiris, as well as against the axis of resistance. Everyone (Israel and the West) conspired against us but we won," boasts the Hezbollah commander.

It was only in April 2013 that open war was promised by Nasrallah in Syria, who vowed the country would not fall into the hands of the United States, Israel, or extremist Sunnis (takfiris).

The role of Hezbollah has been significant in Syria, and has taken several forms: offensive support during battle, holding strategic territory subject to frequent assaults and training pro-regime militias. Interviews with military experts and Hezbollah fighters have shown that in many cases Hezbollah was the ground assault force for the Syrian Army; something that first transpired in the battle for Qussayr. Hezbollah has also bolstered the Assad regime by creating and supporting paramilitary forces that operate alongside the Syrian army. Many of these groups are the result of a joint venture between Hezbollah and Iran, with Tehran generally bankrolling the groups while Hezbollah provides training.

i- Sayyida Zeinab is the site of the tomb of Zeinab, the daughter of Imam Ali, and is a major pilgrimage site for Shiites

Hezbollah has also landed a support and advice role to the Yemeni Houthi rebellion. Hezbollah and Iran back the Houthi rebels as well as the country's former president Ali Abdallah Saleh, while Saudi Arabia has launched a coalition in support of the transition government of Abdel Mansour Hadi. According to Foreign Affairs⁵⁸ quoting Saudi Arabia-owned Al Arabiya news network, a video posted last year showed a meeting between Hezbollah commander Abu Saleh and Houthi forces in Yemen. According to the publication, the video showed a man in military fatigues addressing a group in Lebanese-accented Arabic about training for assassination operations inside Saudi Arabia, including a specific attack against an unnamed Saudi commander of border forces. Sources close to Hezbollah have admitted that a small number of Hezbollah experts have been training Houthi rebels as well as providing them with political negotiation advice.

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Hezbollah has also been increasing its activity in Gulf countries. In July this year,⁵⁹ Kuwait protested to Lebanon over the alleged training by Hezbollah of 21 Shias convicted on charges of forming a terror cell. In September last year, Kuwait charged 26 people suspected of links to Iran's government and the Lebanese movement Hezbollah with plotting attacks against the Gulf state, according to Al Jazeera.⁶⁰ In April 2016, the United Arab Emirates prosecuted several Hezbollah members who were gathering intelligence on Emirates' political, military and economic activity.⁶¹ In June 2016, Riyadh first revealed links between Hezbollah and a cell assigned to launch attacks against security officials in the village of Awamiyah in the east province of Al Qatif, which is home to the Saudi Shiite community.⁶² Sources in Hezbollah have appeared over the last few weeks, and more still since the Hariri resignation, speaking of all-out war in the region. "Saudi Arabia has plotted against us in Syria... If (Hezbollah's) leadership asks us to go there (to Saudi Arabia) we will go," underlines the Hezbollah commander.

VI. Hezbollah regional role and increasing pressure on Lebanon

Hezbollah's sharp pivot toward the region combined with its enmity towards Gulf countries has not been without cost for Lebanon. Hezbollah regionalization has translated in a classification of the group as a terrorist organization with mounting pressure not only affecting the militant group but also the Lebanese economy. International pressure has been growing over Hezbollah since July 2011,⁶³ when the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) indicted Hezbollah members – including a senior Hezbollah official – for the assassination of Rafic Hariri. Nasrallah had publicly stated that his organization would not allow any members to be arrested. In 2013, the European Union placed the armed wing of Hezbollah on its terrorism blacklist, a move driven by concerns over the group's involvement in a deadly bus bombing in the Syrian war, as well as the role played by its militants in a deadly bombing in Bulgaria which took place in 2012 and was denied by the group.⁶⁴ Nearly three years later, in March 2016, The Arab League branded the Lebanese Shia Islamist movement as a terrorist organization, a week after a similar move was made by Arab Gulf states.⁶⁵

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This increased pressure has translated in several measures against Lebanon for supporting Hezbollah. Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia have upped the ante against the Lebanese militant group, forcing Lebanon into a difficult balancing act between internal and external interests. In 2016, Gulf countries declared Hezbollah as a terrorist⁶⁶ organization and cut \$4 billion in aid to the Lebanese army and security forces. According to Naharnet, Riyadh had previously sanctioned individuals and companies linked to the militant group.⁶⁷ Around the same time, about 90 Lebanese citizens were fired from their jobs in Saudi Arabia.



The recent escalation between Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Hariri resignation, which he later put on hold at the behest of President Aoun upon returning to Lebanon, could have several different serious impacts for Lebanon.

A prominent Lebanese economist speaking on condition of anonymity believed that Saudi Arabia could eventually decide on a series of measures, such as preventing Saudi banks from dealing with the Lebanese financial sector, stopping issuing visas for Lebanese businessmen and if they are residents asking them to leave the country.⁶⁸ In 2009, there were over 350,000 Lebanese residing in the Gulf. "The first impact will be on confidence, then on trade and banking," underlined the economist and added that Lebanon exports about a third of its products to Gulf countries. Already, due to previous tensions with Hezbollah and rampant instability, Gulf residents have largely exited the Lebanese real estate sector, while Gulf tourism, which represents a large portion of tourism revenue in Lebanon, has been timid, and will worsen due to the present situation.

Gulf countries are not alone in sanctioning Hezbollah. Former U.S. President Barack Obama signed the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015, imposing sanctions on financial institutions that deal with Hezbollah and its affiliated Al-Manar TV channel.

Gulf countries are not alone in sanctioning Hezbollah. Former U.S. President Barack Obama signed the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015, imposing sanctions on financial institutions that deal with Hezbollah and its affiliated Al-Manar TV channel.⁶⁹ "Lebanese banks are abiding by the Prevention Act and are complying immediately if a name is blacklisted," says a source in the banking sector.⁷⁰ This behavior triggered a backlash in 2016, when a bomb targeted the Beirut headquarters of BLOM, one of Lebanon's largest banks. "It was a clear message to the banking sector, as a few banks had put stringent measures on anyone suspected of links to Hezbollah," says the banker. According to the source, a deal was later reached with the Central bank: "Now if a bank wants to close a suspected account they have to contact the Special Investigations Commission, and if it

does not respond within one month, the bank has the right to close the account.”

As recent history has shown, Lebanese communities' neutrality toward Hezbollah hinge on two factors: maintaining security and economic stability. The party will be treading in dangerous waters if the country is thrown into financial and economic chaos.

The Donald Trump administration has also been ramping up efforts against Hezbollah, which the U.S. has listed as a “terrorist” group since the 1990s. Trump has spoken out against Iran, the nuclear deal and the U.S. Congress-approved additional sanctions on Hizbollah and foreign states that support it. According to Hizbollah

expert Nicholas Blanford these sanctions are likely to be further tightened. He said there had been talks in Washington to use the Patriot Act to designate certain regions of Lebanon “money laundering concerns,” a measure that if adopted would further increase pressure on the Lebanese economy and banking system. Lebanese banks are thus treading carefully. The fear of further tightening of Hezbollah sanctions and possible adverse repercussions on the Lebanon banking sector remain nonetheless. “We are witnessing an escalation in these sanctions,” says Former Minister Sayegh, who was interviewed prior to the Hariri resignation.

The impact of sanctions on Hezbollah have been ambiguous. The organization deals mostly in cash with the exception of organizations that are attached to it, such as hospitals and schools. Nonetheless, Hezbollah can be put under pressure if Lebanon is sanctioned as a whole, a situation which appears to become more and more a reality by the day.

So far, Hezbollah's confidence has been rooted in the indefatigable support of its constituency – while maintaining that is essential, the organization still requires the neutrality and cooption of Lebanese society to be able to pursue its expeditions elsewhere.

The recent resignation of Hariri (which was later put on hold), and the escalation of words between Iran and Saudi Arabia heralds a new phase in Lebanon, during which Lebanon appears to be inexorably drawn into a wider regional conflict.



As recent history has shown, Lebanese communities' neutrality toward Hezbollah hinge on two factors: maintaining security and economic stability. The party will be treading in dangerous waters if the country is thrown into financial and economic chaos.

While in 2005, the Lebanese political class appeared to be willing to rebuild the state in the wake of the withdrawal of Syrian forces, it has become increasingly comfortable with growing state failure. Failing institutions marked by nepotism and a lack of accountability – not just for Hezbollah but for the rest of the political class – has allowed the Lebanese political class, across all sects, to build significant fortunes thanks to rampant corruption.

VII. Conclusion: Can Lebanon's schizophrenic approach to Hezbollah be sustainable in the long run?

The recent resignation of Hariri (which was later put on hold), and the escalation of words between Iran and Saudi Arabia heralds a new phase in Lebanon, during which Lebanon appears to be inexorably drawn into a wider regional conflict.

In an interview with CNBC, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir described the situation in Lebanon as 'unfortunate', noting that it has occurred due to "Hizbullah's activities supported by Iran," and Jubeir accused Hezbollah of "hijacking the Lebanese system and placing obstacles in front of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government, and thwarting each initiative Hariri tried to implement."⁷¹

"Hezbollah continues to hold onto its militia, although it should hand over its weapons," Jubeir told CNBC, adding "there should be no weapons outside the scope of government institutions."

Yet, despite widespread Saudi and Western condemnation of Hezbollah's arsenal, the debate over integrating Hezbollah into the state by dissolving its militant arm appears impossible to achieve. Over the past ten years, Hezbollah has been able to consolidate its influence and power over the Lebanese state to such an extent that it is now



impossible for any government in the medium term to hope to disarm the militant group.

The organization is not alone to blame in this reality, as it could not have achieved its objectives without the complacency shown by the Lebanese political class. While in 2005, the Lebanese political class appeared to be willing to rebuild the state in the wake of the withdrawal of Syrian forces, it has become increasingly comfortable with growing state failure. Failing institutions marked by nepotism and a lack of accountability – not just for Hezbollah but for the rest of the political class – has allowed the Lebanese political class, across all sects, to build significant fortunes thanks to rampant corruption. Lebanon has moved from the 63rd position in 2006 to the 136th position in 2016 in the list of the most corrupt countries (the higher the ranking, the more corrupt the country).⁷² “The Lebanese political class accuses Hezbollah of wanting to stay out of the state and of hindering the establishment of a strong political system, but the question that comes to mind is the following: is it really in their interest to restore a sovereign state when it has so much to gain from a weak one?” the anonymous Hezbollah expert asked.

Hezbollah has successfully infiltrated the Lebanese state such that it has become very difficult to extract one from the other without inflicting significant damage to Lebanon. After all, Hezbollah has morphed from a non-state to a semi-state actor by ingraining itself in the various Lebanese institutions.

“Only a decision taken regionally can solve the issue of Hezbollah’s weapons,” underlines Khashan. Former minister Sayegh warns that Hezbollah has successfully infiltrated the Lebanese state such that it has become very difficult to extract one from the other without inflicting significant damage to Lebanon. After all, Hezbollah has morphed from a non-state to a semi-state actor by ingraining itself in the various Lebanese institutions.

Hezbollah semi-state status within Lebanon in the backdrop of a rapid shift in Saudi foreign policy, aiming to up the ante against Iran, is pushing Lebanon further towards the brink.



While it is still unclear when that escalation will happen and what form it will have, the current regional balance makes a conflict between proxies more of a possibility than a direct confrontation. In such a framework, Hezbollah being one of the jewels in the crown of Iran's revolutionary guard corps means that the organization, and consequently its home base Lebanon, will be targeted.

Lebanon will likely face rising economic and financial pressures and deterioration of its regional security situation along with mounting threats from Israel. Lebanon's schizophrenia appears to be coming to an end, with the whole country now left exposed to regional instability.



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Lebanon's Hezbollah dilemma

Prime Minister Saad Hariri took his country by storm on Nov. 4¹ when he announced his resignation as head of the Lebanese government, blaming his decision on Iranian interference in his country's affairs. Hariri's statement, given from Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh, underlines the Saudi decision to ramp up confrontation with its regional nemesis Iran and possibly to introduce a new deal in Lebanon.



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