

THE IRANIAN CRESCENT

THE QUEST FOR NORMALCY IN TURBULENT
WATERS

PART TWO – LEBANESE | IRANIAN RELATIONS

BY MAKRAM RABAH

PART TWO

LEBANESE – IRANIAN RELATIONS SINCE THE 1990s

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LEBANESE IRANIAN RELATIONS SINCE THE 1990s

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INTRODUCTION

To many, Lebanon at the moment is nothing more than a pawn manipulated by Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, to be used as a base for the latter to operate out of and pursue the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) expansionist regional plans.¹ Yet the Lebanese Iranian relationship and its multi-layered nature is more complex and complicated than the Iranian military hegemony of this small Mediterranean nation. As it recently celebrated its centennial, the Lebanese Republic founded in September of 1920 by the French Mandate, faces an existential threat manifested in the total collapse of its economic and political system, a collapse which was mainly due to Iran's overambitious regional project which Lebanon is a pillar off.

Yet, for Lebanon and its illustrious past, occupation or rather belonging to a regional and international axis is not that uncommon, and like many of the nation states around, Lebanon was part of different successive empires, the last being the Ottoman Empire which ran Mount Lebanon as a provincial province from 1516-1918.² Thus, this somewhat fraternal diplomatic relationship between Iran and Lebanon has morphed over time and reached a toxic level in which the latter's existence is in peril.

As it stands, Lebanon has entered a deadly political vortex that has accelerated its economic downfall and, like many of the countries in the region with noticeable Iranian hegemony, is

struggling to protect the last semblance of order as it faces a fate similar to Venezuela and North Korea.³

The following study is an attempt to trace the evolution of the Lebanese-Iranian relationship while delving deeper into the watershed moments between the two nations, and to go beyond the influence and challenges that revolutionary Iran has presented on the small Mediterranean nation which is currently struggling to keep afloat.

HISTORICAL SURVEY

The Iran-Lebanon affair is certainly not new but can be traced to ancient times going back to the Achaemenid Empire (539 -332 BC.), which covered the Phoenician coast. The Phoenician city-states of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos and Arvad were given autonomy to expand and benefit commercially as "the empire provided a huge market for the Phoenician traders, and as a result, the cities flourished, while the Persian rulers used Phoenician fleets in their war efforts against the Egyptians and Greeks."⁴ The Persian-Phoenician relationship ended when the Levant was incorporated militarily and culturally by Alexander the Great's conquest. However, the area had already been culturally Hellenized way before Alexander showed up on its shores.

Be that as it may, the relationship between Persia and what is now Lebanon germinated within the Ottoman-Safavid feud which transpired in the 17th century and which featured the Levant, particularly Mount Lebanon as one of its battlefields. The Ottoman-Safavid faceoff was not religious in nature but was essentially one that involved rivalry over regional empirical expansion. In theory, both the Ottoman and Safavids belonged to the Sunni branch of Islam, with the Safavid adopting more of the Sufi spiritual practices. The Safavid drive towards the adoption of a heterodox form of Islam, the Twelver Shiite faith, was partly an experiment by Ismail I, the founder of the Safavid empire, in creating a unique Safavid identity in opposition to the Ottoman Sunni Islam which was the state's official religion.⁵ This conversion process was the gateway for the Shiite clerics of Jabal 'Amil in the South of Lebanon, who were already made to feel unwelcome by the Mamluks and later the Ottomans, to immigrate to Iran and establish themselves as the guardians of the new faith.

Mount Lebanon, which was a peripheral province under the Mamluks and later the Ottomans, was ruled over by heterodox Muslim groups, first the Shiites and later the Druze, which at times led the central government to launch punitive campaigns to discipline their subjects, which were either playing regional political games or were merely not paying their taxes. These Mamluk and Ottoman campaigns would resort to theological fatwas, i.e. a formal ruling based on Islamic law, to justify their actions, for that, the more radical literature of Muslim clerics like Ibn Taymiyyah would often be utilized. Yet one should not be led to assume that the Ottomans practiced an institutionalized form of discrimination against the "Lebanese" Shiites as the Shiite immigration was restricted to the clerical elite as "up to a hundred Jabal 'Amil-born scholars emigrated to Iran to benefit from Safavid patronage and help institutionalize Twelver Shiism as the new state religion".⁶

Consequently, the marginalization of Lebanon's Shiites during the Ottoman rule equally extended to the French Mandate

as the Maronite dominance over the country's political affairs made all of the other sects, including the Shiite, ancillary and did not allow the Shiites to properly integrate especially that their traditional feudal leadership was not able to establish a unique and modern Shiite identity which would propel them into the 1943 post-independence Lebanon.

The link which was established between Iran and Lebanon was mostly an elitist affair as the cultural and religious exchange, at least towards Lebanon, was restricted to these Ulama class, that is clerics, and did not have a trickle-down effect on the Lebanese Shiites in general, until the emergence of the Iranian-born Shiite Lebanese cleric Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, who relocated from Qom – the second most important center of Shiite scholarship – to Lebanon in 1959. According to Fouad Ajami in his book, *The Vanished Imam* Sadr's move "reversed the 'normal' direction of the traffic. He came from a great center of the Shia world to a backwater [...]. Young Musa came from its apex; the Sadr's were one of the most celebrated clerical and scholarly families in that world. He brought with him into Lebanon the prestige of his lineage and his birthplace."⁷



1. See H. Mneimneh, "Iran in Lebanon: A Fatal Occupation", Hudson Institute, October 29, 2020. <https://www.hudson.org/research/16470-iran-in-lebanon-a-fatal-occupation>
2. See E. D. Akari, "The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon, 1861-1920", Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1993.
3. See F. Kane, "Can Lebanon avoid the Venezuela meltdown scenario?", Arab News, August 25, 2020. <https://arab.news/265n9>
4. H. E. Chehabi, H. Mneimneh, "Five Centuries of Lebanese-Iranian Encounters" in "Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years", H. E. Chehabi (Ed.), I.B. Tauris, 2006.
5. Babayan, Kathryn, "The Safavid Synthesis: From Qizilbash Islam to Imamite Shi'ism." *Iranian Studies* 27, no. 1, 1994, pp. 135-61.
6. S. Winter, "The Shiites of Lebanon Under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1788", Cambridge University Press, 2012, p.20.
7. F. Ajami, "The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon", Cornell University Press, 2017, p 31.

into a political movement to awaken a Shiite political identity which would later manifest itself in the party he labeled the movement of the deprived or Harakat al-Mahrumin.

“HAFEZ AL-ASSAD AND HAKAKAT AMAL DID NOT WELCOME AN IRANIAN PRES- ENCE IN THEIR OWN BACKYARD.”

Musa al-Sadr's relationship with the Shah of Iran remains shrouded with mystery. While many branded Sadr as anti-Shah, in reality he was not adamant on overthrowing the Shah nor was he, as many of his followers later branded him a revolutionary. He was rather a reformer bent on sketching out a role for the Lebanese Shiite in an entity dominated by the Maronites political establishment who were battling the Lebanese National Movement led by Kamal Joumlatt, the Druze chieftain and the head of the Progressive Socialist Party, who in the eyes of Sadr was using the Shiites as fodder.⁸ Yet, Sadr used the anti-Shah movement to his advantage and channeled it into building his own political movement through collaborating with Iranian dissidents who decided to call Lebanon their refuge. This collaboration created what Shaery-Eisenlohr termed as a transitional network that officially brought together the Lebanese and the Iranian Shiites, and would later set the stage for the rise of Hezbollah.⁹ While Sadr was not openly anti-Shah, he provided refuge to many anti-Shah activists in Lebanon, mostly members of the Nehzat-I Azadi-I Iran or the Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI), who in turn helped Sadr expand his Shiite reach, and to set up his political movement and later militia. The famous Mustafa Chamran was later leading these Iranian dissidents, whose friendship with Musa al-Sadr allowed them to cooperate; as Chamran was appointed as a director to one of the vocational schools Sadr established in the South of Lebanon, from which young men were recruited to join the Amal militia which Chamran supervised and trained.¹⁰

Chamran and other Iranian dissidents who worked closely with Sadr, contrary to popular believers, were not strict adherers of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini brand of Shiite Islam and would later be sidelined when Khomeini and his conservative figures took power in Iran in 1979.¹¹

Despite his disappearance in August 1978, Musa al-Sadr's political movement would rise to become the mainstream Shiite element on the Lebanese political scene and would slowly compete and ultimately overtake the Lebanese leftist parties for the hearts and minds of the Shiites both in the South and the East of Lebanon and around the so-called “belt of misery” that surrounds the capital Beirut where many of the Shiites relocated to in search for safety or livelihood.

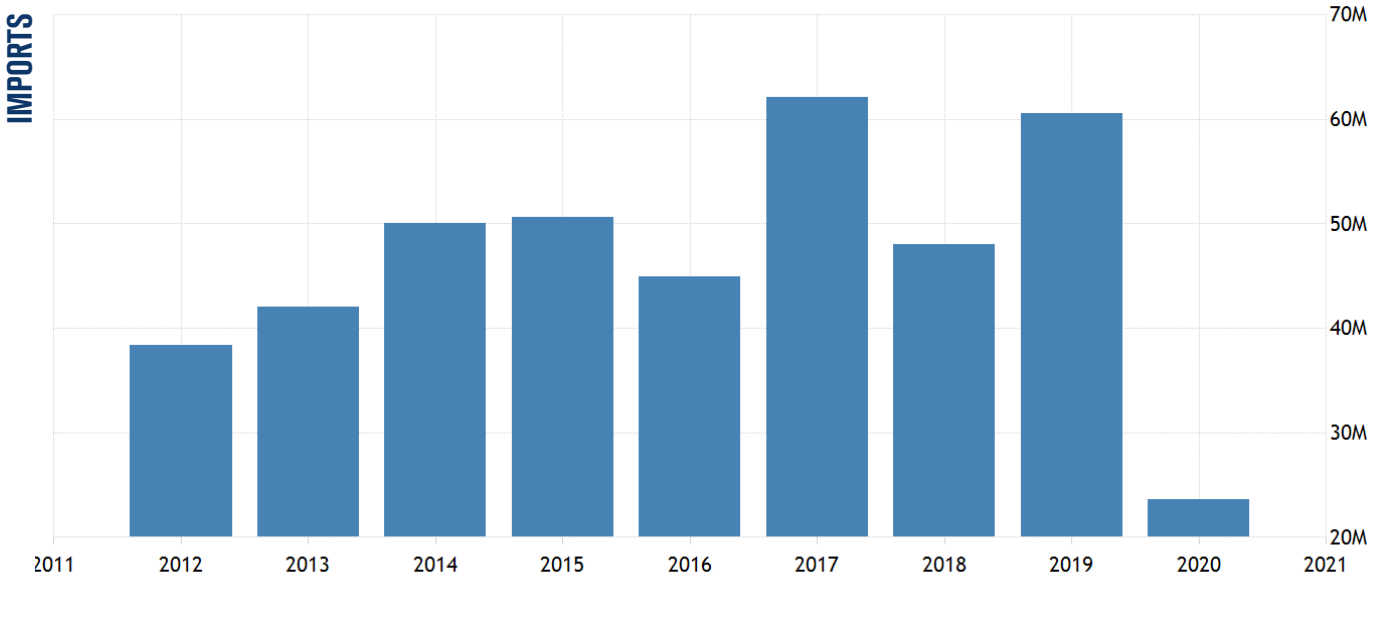
Following the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Lebanese-Iranian relationship took on a different direction. While Sadr and Amal had no real religious and cultural project, at least not one which could be branded as foreign, other than empowering the Lebanese Shiite community, Iran under Khomeini and the IRGC had other plans in mind, mainly to export and duplicate their brand of revolutionary Shiite Islam, which to many, including their Lebanese coreligionists, was both foreign and heterodox. While traditional scholarship on Lebanon places the rise of Hezbollah after the Israeli invasion of 1982,¹² in fact the genesis of Hezbollah in Lebanon began



as early as 1979 after the Iranian Revolution. Yet, their public appearance came in 1983 when a shady organization calling itself the Islamic Jihad declared its responsibility for the bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut and the Marine barracks which was part of the Multinational Peacekeeping Forces in Lebanon as well as a string of abductions of foreign diplomats and members of the Western press.¹³

Given that much of Iranian Lebanese outreach centered on Hezbollah, they soon found themselves at odds with the Syrian regime under Hafez al-Assad as Syria's former President and their Lebanese allies Harakat Amal, who simply did not welcome an Iranian presence in their own backyard. The latter, under the leadership of Sadr's replacement Nabih Berri, prevented Hezbollah from implementing its agenda in Lebanon. At that time, Berri's job was made easy by the fact that the mainstream Shiites saw in Hezbollah a totally alien religious project, one which clashed with their somewhat liberal religious practices.

AMAL MOVEMENT AND LEBANON FLAGS DURING A FESTIVE CEREMONY ORGANIZED BY THE SCOUTS OF THE AMAL MOVEMENT IN TYRE, LEBANON. COURTESY OF DROP MEDIA / SHUTTERSTOCK



SOCIO-ECONOMIC RELATIONS BUSINESS AND TRADE

The development of the relationship between Lebanon and Iran went through a very gradual and perhaps slow pace. The economic corporation would have to wait until the visit of the Lebanese Foreign Minister, Fares Boueiz, to Iran in 1991, when he announced the formation of a joint economic committee between the two countries. However, only in 1997, the committee convened for the first time.¹⁴ Consequently, Iran and Lebanon signed several economic agreements related to land and air transport and maritime trade in addition to a commercial agreement, but these agreements never bore any tangible results.

To date, Lebanon and Iran do not have a very balanced commercial and economic exchange as the numbers of the Lebanese Ministry of Economy indicate that the Lebanese exports to Iran are far lower than its imports from Iran. While exports reached \$7.02 million in 2020, Lebanon's imports from Iran equaled \$23.64 million in the same year.¹⁵

These economic imbalance have many objective reasons, primarily amongst them that the Iranian economy has been subjected to years of sanctions which has rendered it inaccessible to the Lebanese consumer which is traditionally more inclined to Western European and American goods, leaving the Lebanese to mainly import fruits and nuts from Iran worth \$14.76 million.¹⁶ In return, Lebanon's top exports to Iran in 2020 were oil seed, oleagifruits, grain, seed and fruits worth \$3.59 million.¹⁷ Besides imports and exports, Iran tried to help Lebanon in a number of ways, especially after the gradual lifting of sanctions after the signing of the Iran deal (JCPOA) in 2015, by supporting the ailing electricity sector or by offering the Lebanese Armed Forces weapons and training. However, these offers were never followed up by either side, and thus simply petered out.

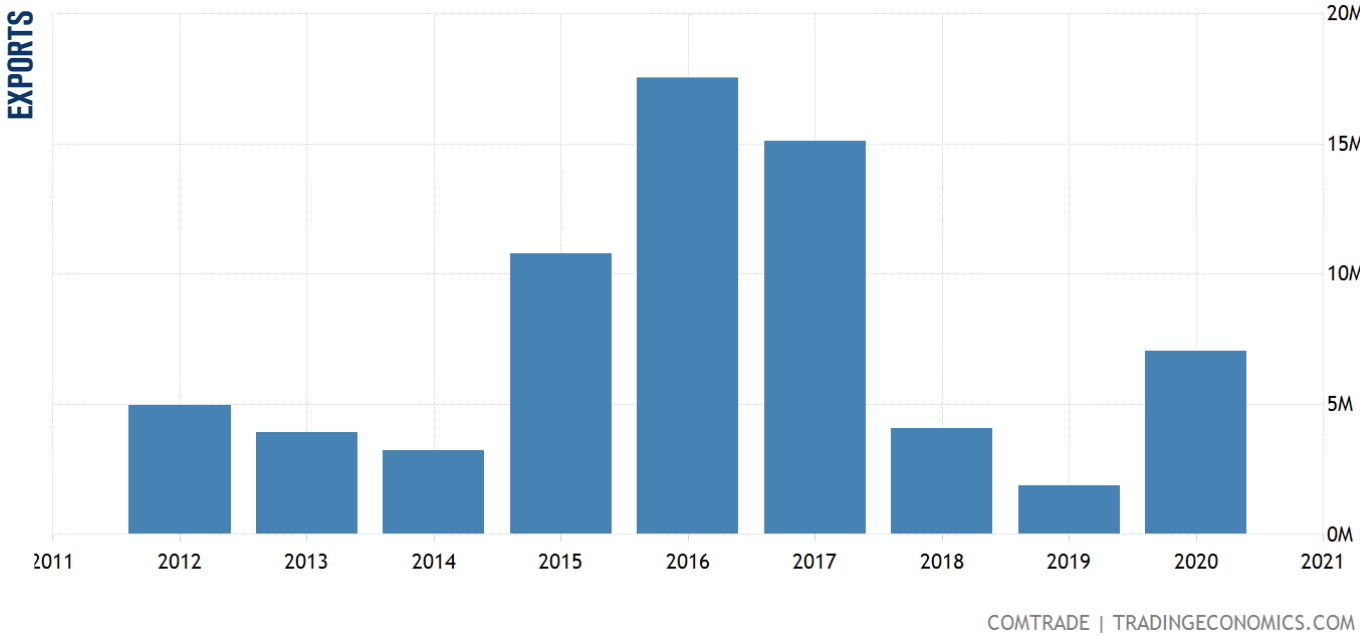
Instead of collaborating with the Lebanese government, Iran chose to increase its economic ties with Lebanon through Hezbollah., In 1982 Iran established its own version of banks

known as the al-Qard al-Hasan (the Good Loan), a hybrid of pawnshops and illegal banks, which grants small loans to its supporters. Under this umbrella, Hezbollah ran an elaborated money laundering system which was only exposed after al-Qard al-Hasan's servers were hacked in December 2020, and it was revealed that Iran and its Lebanese proxy had been in fact running these quasi banks without proper governmental licensees.¹⁸ Naturally, such illegal Iranian/Hezbollah economic ventures placed more pressure on Lebanon which was facing its own economic and political collapse, and further alienated Lebanon from the rich Arab Gulf states which had for decades subsidized Lebanon's service economy.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TIES

Culturally, before the Iranian Revolution, Iran offered scholarships to only ten students from the Lebanese Shiite community, but after Khomeini took power in 1979, and with the

8. See A. R. Norton, "Amal and the Shia: struggle for the soul of Lebanon", University of Texas Press, 1987.
9. See Shaery-Eisenlohr, Roschanack, "Territorializing Piety: Genealogy, Transnationalism, and Shi'ite Politics in Modern Lebanon", Comparative Studies in Society and History 51, no. 3, 2009, pp. 533-562.
10. Ibid, p. 275.
11. Ibid.
12. See K. Robinson, "What Is Hezbollah?", Council on Foreign Relations, Oktober 26, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-hezbollah>
13. See M. Sahimi, "The Fog over the 1983 Beirut Attacks", PBS/ Frontline, Oktober 24, 2009. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehran-bureau/2009/10/the-1983-beirut-bombing-attack.html>
14. See A. Mansur, "Lebanon and Iran: sixty-eight years of diplomatic relations" (Arabic) (لبنان وإيران: ثمانية وستون عاماً من العلاقات الدبلوماسية), Al-Akhbar, Oktober 13, 2010. <https://al-akhbar.com/Opinion/103299>
15. "Lebanon Exports to Iran", Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/exports/iran>. "Lebanon Imports from Iran", Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/imports/iran>
16. See "Lebanon Imports from Iran of Edible fruits, nuts, peel of citrus fruit, melons", Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/imports/iran/edible-fruits-nuts-peel-citrus-fruit-melons>
17. See "Lebanon Exports of oil seed, oleagic fruits, grain, seed, fruits to Iran", Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/exports/iran/oil-seed-oleagic-fruits-grain-seed-fruit>
18. See T. Badran, E. Ottolenghi, "Hezbollah's al-Qard al-Hasan and Lebanon's Banking Sector", The Foundation for Defense of Democracies, May 11, 2021.



establishment of Hezbollah in the eighties, Iran began to grant over 100 scholarships. Ten of these scholarships were given to the Amal Movement, while the remaining 90 go almost exclusively to Hezbollah members, as the organization is organically and ideologically tied to Iran. This cultural exchange which predominantly flows into Lebanon is supervised by the Iranian Cultural Center and the Cultural Counselor at the Iranian embassy in Lebanon, thus adding it an official touch to it.

Religiously, however, the bond between Lebanon and Iran is relatively more solid than the previous aspect, as this long-established religious link, which also included Iraq, and the two-way movement of clerics from Jabal `Amil to Iran ties back several hundred years. Religious ties are kept alive through a number of measures ranging from religious studies to pilgrimage, which many Lebanese undertake to Qom and Mashhad. According to Mona Harb and Lara Deeb, in their work on the youth pious generation within the Lebanese Shiites “to many in the vanguard generation, Tehran represents a desirable model of contemporary urbanity, and Iran is a common destination for organized pilgrimage-tourism trips that combine visits to shrines with shopping and sightseeing.”¹⁹ The pilgrims industry between both countries has grown by importance as Shiites across the line go back and forth between Iran and Lebanon. The former would use Lebanon as a tourist destination as well as a recovery spa for some of its militia members who were injured in fighting across the region.

Equally, the religious influence was further augmented with the rise of Hezbollah, as Iran opened many schools that propagate its culture and its own vision of Shiite Islam, in addition to the establishment of media institutions such as Al-Manar and Radio Al-Nour, two media outlets which contributed to the transmission of Iranian Shiite culture to Lebanon. Following the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, Iran invested heavily in the rebuilding and restoration of Shiite places of worship, and also went out of its way to take custody of religious shrines such as the Sayyida Khawla shrine located in Baalbak.

“WE HAVE A BASIC PROBLEM WITH THE CURRENT REGIME. THIS IS WHY WE REFUSE TO TAKE PART IN A GOVERNMENT THAT WANTS TO IMPLEMENT THE TAEF AGREEMENT.”

The Iranian attempt to hegemonize the Lebanese Shiite religious sphere is challenged by the influence of local Lebanese Shiite clerics such as Ayatollah Mohamad Hussein Fadlallah as well as the influential Iraqi Shiite leader, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani, who is himself of Iranian origins, and who commands a larger following within the Lebanese Shiite community than Iran’s supreme leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei.²⁰

It is noticeable that despite the strong connection between Iran and Lebanon, the number of Iranians residing in Lebanon is less than 5000, most of which hold dual Iranian-Lebanese citizenship.

IRAN AND POST-TAEF LEBANON

While Iran and the Syrian regime have a fairly solid relationship these days, this was not always the case at least during the early years of the establishment of Hezbollah which refused to abide by the rules that the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad wanted to impose on Lebanon. This consequently led to a military standoff between Hezbollah and Syria’s allies in Lebanon including the Amal Movement, which took the shape of a Lebanese Shiite civil war, and also extended to the city of Tripoli in the North of Lebanon where the pro-Iranian Islamic Tawhid and pro-Syrian militias fought proxy battles.²¹ The Assad-Iran standoff ended with an arrangement that gave the Syrian regime an upper hand over Lebanese affairs where Iran and Hezbollah would play a minimal role, especially after 1990.

RESISTANCE UNDER A SYRIAN UMBRELLA

Consequently, the post-civil war settlement, known as the Taef Accord, facilitated by Syria, ended the fifteen years of conflict (1975-1990). The agreement was not supported by Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, yet, while the Taef Accord decommissioned all Lebanese militias it allowed Hezbollah to keep its arms as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation in the South of Lebanon, an occupation which would last until the Israeli withdrawal in May of 2000.²² Despite the Iranian-Syrian accord over Lebanon, Hezbollah tried to challenge the Syrian hegemony by calling for a demonstration in September 1993, in protest against the ongoing peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians in Oslo. This joint Hezbollah/Iran show of force was suppressed violently by the Lebanese Army acting under orders by the Assad regime which left 10 protesters killed and 40 injured, all supporters of Hezbollah.²³ In general, the relationship between Iran and Lebanon from 1990 till 2005 – the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon – was regulated by Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar, with Hezbollah playing a minor role in the affairs of the Lebanese state, something which they left to Nabih Berri – the Speaker of Parliament and the leader of the Amal Movement.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s third Secretary General, who replaced Abbas al-Moussawi after his assassination in February 1992, was clear in his party’s refusal of the Taef Accord. Speaking to Al-Safir daily newspaper on 27 February 1992, Nasrallah dismissed the post war compromise:

*We have a basic problem with the current regime, for we do not approve of its current formation. We rejected the Taef Agreement, and in a statement released by our political Bureau we said why this is the case. We want a formula for governing Lebanon that reflects the will of the Lebanese people, and like any self-respecting country we do not want a formula imposed on the people. The people are well able to elect their own representative, who will then meet and work on a formula for a new state structure... This is precisely why we refuse to take part in a government that has for [its] objective the implementation of the Taef Agreement, which we rejected.*²⁴

Yet the decision to boycott Lebanese political life was not Nasrallah’s nor the political bureau’s to take, as Iran ultimately decided to coexist under the Syrian-dominated system. In 1992, according to Sheikh Naim Qassem, the Deputy Secretary General of Hezbollah, the party was very hesitant to partake in the first parliamentary elections after the war, and their final decision to run in the election was sanctioned by Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamenei “who was supportive and granted his permission.” Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s first parliamentary participation was somewhat shy as it was only able to win eight seats, and while many look at this decision as a key ingredient in the supposed Lebanization of Hezbollah, it in fact remained outside the real scope of the Lebanese political system, as the party preferred to project itself as a pure resistance movement. Further, it allowed the Syrian regime through its many patrons to indulge in the mundane affairs of the Lebanese confessional system.

Scholars and analysts were very keen to declare the Lebanization of Hezbollah which “reformulated itself from a clandestine movement to a democratic political party that retained arms in the name of ‘resistance’.”²⁵ In reality, however, Hezbollah nev-

er went through this supposed Lebanization process as they never fully endorsed the Taef Accord nor were they fully supportive of the post-war Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri who, with the help of Saudi Arabia, is credited to have led Lebanon’s post-war reconstruction. Yet, Hezbollah and Hariri never had to confront each other as the entire political landscape was moderated, not to say dominated, by Syria and its quasi-high commissioner Brigadier General Ghazi Kanaan, who opposed Iranian expansion in Lebanon in the 1980s, going as far as to use brute force to bring them in line with Syrian designs.²⁶

IRAN AND THE LEBANESE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT

With the emergence of the reformists in Iran, led by Mohamad Khatami and his election to the Presidency in May 1997, the Iranian-Lebanese relationship gradually improved, at least the wider Lebanese public no longer looked at Iran exclusively through the lens of its proxy militia Hezbollah. Khatami’s reformist and liberal outlook reflected on his approach to Lebanon, which in fact had an influence on how he wanted his own country to become, a diverse open society like Lebanon.²⁷ Khatami’s personal association with Lebanon was not really defined by Hezbollah nor the Iranian political structure, but was a personal intimate link, as Khatami was married to Zohreh Sadeghi, the niece of Musa al-Sadr.



19. L. Deeb, M. Harb, “Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi’ite South Beirut”, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 62.
20. See W. Kuthrani, “Lebanese Shia between two religious authorities” (Arabic) (شيعة-لبنان بين مرجعيتين), Almodon, November 28, 2019. <https://www.almodon.com/opinion/شيعة-لبنان-بين-مرجعيتين>
21. See E. O’Ballance, “Civil War in Lebanon, 1975-92”, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998, pp. 146–7.
22. See J. Bahout, “The Unraveling of Lebanon’s Taif Agreement: Limits of Sect-Based Power Sharing”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 16, 2016. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/05/16/unraveling-of-lebanon-s-taif-agreement-limits-of-sect-based-power-sharing-pub-63571>
23. See “From the Airport Bridge to Ouza’i-Bridge – Ten Years of Volatile Relations between Hariri and Hezbollah”, Asharq Al-Awsat, July 1, 2002. <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=8435&article=110957#.YO1cSegza1s>
24. N. Allah, “Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah”, Verso, 2007, p. 74.
25. See S. May, “The Rise of the ‘Resistance Axis’: Hezbollah and the Legacy of the Taif Agreement”, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 25, no. 1, 2019, p. 116.
26. See M. Salam, “Amal Says It Thwarted Arms-For-Hostage Deal”, AP News, May 20, 1988. <https://apnews.com/article/1d7b6483379a5b-dec838cd294d3c6cff>
27. H. E. Chalabi, “Iran and Lebanon after Khomeini” in H. E. Chehabi, in “Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years”, H. E. Chehabi (Ed.), I.B. Tauris, 2006.



“THE SHIITE CRESCENT SHOULD STRETCH FROM IRAN ALL THE WAY THROUGH IRAQ TO SYRIA AND LEBANON.”

Moreover, two of Khatami's closest associates were his deputy Sayyid Mohammad Ali Abtahi, and Mashaollah Shamsolvacezin, a reformist journalist who worked under Khatami in the early 1980s when he was editor of the daily newspaper Keyhan. Mohammad Ali Abtahi was sent to Beirut in 1994 to head the office of Seda va Sima, the Iranian state radio and television station. His stay in Lebanon gave him great appreciation from the intellectual and media scene, something which he expressed later in many of his writings and interviews.²⁸ It was in fact Abthai who handled Khatami's 1996 visit to Lebanon a year before his election as president, and introduced him to different Lebanese political figures and intellectuals.²⁹ Consequently, when Khatami was elected, he was a familiar and liberal figure who had become familiar with many of Hezbollah's ideological foes.

Mashaollah Shamsolvacezin was the second person in Khatami's circle who played a crucial role in the latter's outlook towards Lebanon. Shamsolvacezin, who had received part of his graduate education in Lebanon in the early 1990s, provided his patron with an extensive depth of understanding of the complex Lebanese political landscape.

The term of Khatami can be safely dubbed the golden age of Iranian-Lebanese relations, as the Iranian leader with the help of his reformist faction made sure to invest in the state-to state relationship, and at the same time, kept good relations with Hezbollah while establishing a solid connection with the Amal Movement and its leader Nabih Berri. In May 2003, almost a month after the US invasion of Iraq, Khatami paid an official visit to Lebanon, and was received by his counterpart Emile Lahoud, who organized a royal reception by thousands of Lebanese. On the second day of his visit, Khatami addressed a rally held at the Beirut Sport City attended by Fifty-thousand spectators stressing Iran's and his appreciation of the Lebanese model underscoring the unique way of coexistence:

*Lebanon is the nation of love and justice and consciousness. It is here that the earth takes on a celestial form as the love of Jesus melds with the wisdom of Muhammad and the justice of Ali so that the Lebanese human being – both male and female – may be a model for the victim of injustice who nonetheless carries his head high. Lebanon represents a wonderful, exquisite artistic portrait, one that forms a resplendent image of religion, literature, culture, art and politics. Lebanon stands for a gem whose radiating light illuminates the pitch darkness of night.*³⁰

Inversely, the Lebanese political establishment reciprocated by visiting Iran as both Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri visited Iran, the later on three separate occasions, the first time directly after the election of Khatami and twice in 2003 – the visits mainly focused on enhancing Lebanese-Iranian bilateral ties including trade. During Hariri's last trip to Tehran in May of 2001, a year after the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, Khatami declared Iran's commitment to supporting the reconstruction, stressing that

“the Arab and Muslim countries have a national, revolutionary and Islamic obligation to help rebuild Lebanon.”³¹ Rafik Hariri's visits were at the time perceived as part of a wider Saudi policy to empower the moderate Khatami, a policy which was soon abandoned with the election of the more hawkish Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the subsequent Iranian expansion in the region following the US invasion of Iraq.

IRAN, LEBANON AND THE INVASION OF IRAQ

The main watershed moment in the Lebanese-Iranian relationship took place 900 km away from Beirut, when on April 9, 2003, the invading US troops pulled down the statue of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussain in the Fardous Square in Baghdad. This signaled the end of the Ba'ath tyranny which ruled over Iraq for 35 years. The fall of Saddam Hussain was long-awaited by the Iranian regime and their Revolutionary Guards which used the collapse of the Iraqi state and the US dismantling of the Iraqi army to infiltrate the country and establish militias similar to Hezbollah. Iraq under Saddam Hussain, with encouragement and help by the West and Arab Gulf states, was able to contain Iran and weaken its ability to expand, this was no longer the case after 2003. Iran had already exploited the US invasion of Afghanistan, as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Forces under the infamous commander Qassim Suleimani had established a strong foothold for Iran, and now Suleimani looked towards the Levant as open land for Iran's expansion.³²

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former Mayor of Tehran, in 2005 to replace the reformist president Mohammad Khatami had direct repercussions on the normalization process that had started vis-à-vis Lebanon. The more hawkish Ahmadinejad was less interested in Lebanon's intellectual circles and more interested in strengthening Iran's political sway and military footprint, the Shiite crescent should “stretch from Iran all the way through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon”, as the Jordanian King Abdallah II later said. Iran would henceforth exert an even stronger influence over Iraq's majority Shia population as well as Shiites living in other Arab countries.³³

UNSCR 1559

This Shiite crescent was no mirage but it was rather slowly unfolding throughout the region and would use Lebanon, with its clear Shiite majority as a beachhead. This was clearly noticed by the Western powers, mainly the United States and France, who tried to challenge Iranian hegemony in Lebanon by issuing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for “free and fair presidential elections in Lebanon conducted according to Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence and, in that connection, called upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon.”³⁴ Furthermore the UN Security Council would clearly single out Iran's Lebanese militia calling for “the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias.”³⁵ While UNSCR 1559 was a clear challenge to both the Assad regime as well as to Iran's weapons in Lebanon, Hezbollah was able to fall back on its Lebanese credentials and confirm that its weapons were protected under the Taef Accord, something which many of Lebanon's political elite consented too, including Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. In reality, Hariri was accused by both Syria and Iran of pushing through UNSCR 1559 with his personal friend, the French President Jacques Chirac.³⁶ Despite France's refusal of supporting the

US invasion of Iraq, Chirac fully cooperated with US President George W. Bush, thus yielding the UNSCR 1559 which ended the Syrian concession once awarded to Hafez al-Assad over Lebanon for Syria's participation in the alliance to liberate Kuwait in 1991.³⁷ The young Syrian dictator did not heed the warnings of the Western world but rather forced the amendment of the Lebanese constitution to allow for the renewal of the term of Emile Lahoud, as Syria regarded him a key to their control over Lebanon. In addition, the Syrian regime forced Rafik Hariri and most of his parliamentary bloc to vote this amendment through, leaving a small group of parliamentarians to oppose it.

THE KILLING OF RAFIK AL-HARIRI

Almost five months after stepping down, on 14 February 2005, Rafik Hariri's motorcade was destroyed by an 1800kg explosion which killed him and 23 other people. Political assassination is not uncommon in Lebanon history, yet the killing of Rafik al-Hariri, whom veteran British journalist Nicholas Blandford named Mr. Lebanon³⁸ was not merely a brutal murder of Lebanon's postwar rebuilders but rather an open challenge to Hariri's Arab Gulf patrons, Saudi Arabia and the Western world. Consequently, the Lebanese people, those who opposed Syrian occupation, went to the streets demanding the withdrawal of the Syrian army and an international investigation into Hariri's murder. On 30 April 2005, under both



28. Ibid.

29. Ibid, p. 303.

30. H. E. Chalabi, “Iran and Lebanon after Khomeini” in H. E. Chehabi, in “Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years”, H. E. Chehabi (Ed.), I.B. Tauris, 2006, p. 306.

31. See “Khatami promises to contribute to the Rebuilding of Lebanon”, Al Jazeera, January 1, 2001. <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2001/1/15> خاتمي يتعهد بالمساهمة في إعمار لبنان

32. See V. Kaura, “Iran's influence in Afghanistan”, Middle East Institute, June 23, 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-influence-afghanistan>

33. As quoted in M. Zweiri, “Arab-Iranian relations: new realities?”, in “Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad”, A. Ehteshami (Ed.), M. Zweiri (Ed.), Garnet Publishing Ltd, 2012, p. 120.

34. See UN Security Council, “Security Council declares support for free, fair presidential election in Lebanon; calls for withdrawal of foreign forces there”, September 9, 2004. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2004/sc8181.doc.htm>

35. Ibid.

36. See H. Côte-Petit-François, “The 2005 Syrian Disengagement from Lebanon”, Sciences Po, 2017.

37. See A. M. Lesch, “Contrasting Reactions to the Persian Gulf Crisis: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians”, Middle East Journal 45, no. 1, 1991, pp. 30-50.

38. See N. Blandford, “Killing Mr. Lebanon, The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and Its Impact on the Middle East”, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006, p. 238.

local and international pressure, the last Syrian soldiers exited Lebanon ending 28 years of Syrian military presence and leaving Iran and Hezbollah fully exposed.

Initially, the Syrian regime was the main suspect in Harari's assassination and thus, Hezbollah and Iran were outside the circle of accusation. Prior to the official withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon, Hezbollah called for a huge demonstration in downtown Beirut on March 8, 2005, later to be named "Thank you Syria" in which Hassan Nasrallah tried to save face for Bashar al-Assad:

*Brothers and sisters, we are gathered here today to endorse the goals we made public at the press conference, chief among them the need to offer our thanks to Assad's Syria: the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, the Syria of Bashar al-Assad, and to the honorable and steadfast Syrian people. We would also like to offer our thanks to the resisting Syrian army, which stood at our side during all the years of defense and resistance.*³⁹

“LEBANON IS THE SCHOOL OF RESISTANCE AND PERSEVERANCE AGAINST THE BULLYING FORCES OF THE WORLD, AND IS LIKE A UNIVERSITY FOR JIHAD.”

THE LEBANIZATION OF HEZBOLLAH

Syria's farewell party was way more than this, it was a handing over ceremony between the Assad regime which ran Lebanon's political affairs for the last two decades to Iran. Until 2005 Iran did not need to worry or interfere too much in Lebanese governance affairs. Prior to the killing of Rafik Hariri, the so-called axis of resistance – Syria and Iran – divided the work amongst each other, but with Syria out of Lebanon, Hezbollah had to step forward and by doing so, propelled Iran further into the Lebanese scene. After the 2005 parliamentary elections, which saw Hezbollah join a quartet alliance, the Lebanese political elite tried to renegotiate power, and to agree on a new power sharing formula.⁴⁰

This new power sharing arrangement saw Hezbollah join the Lebanese cabinet formed by Prime Minister Fouad al-Siniora, former minister of finance and one of Rafik al-Hariri's closest associates.⁴¹ Hezbollah's 2005 entry into the cabinet fully transitioned Iran's Lebanese militia into a new era, and since then Hezbollah has participated in all cabinets and has become more vocal, and taken a bigger share of Lebanon's corrupt clientelistic system. The understanding at the time was that Hezbollah's admission to the Lebanese political structure will be a step in the direction of discussing its arms, and ultimately to decommission its militia, and incorporate it into the Lebanese armed forces, this was at least Hezbollah's rivals wishful thinking.

THE 2006 HEZBOLLAH-ISRAEL WAR

Iran did not stick to its Lebanese political course as on July 12, 2006, Hezbollah launched a cross border raid into Israeli territories and abducted three Israeli soldiers, who were killed in the process.

The Israeli government, under the leadership of Ehud Olmert, was already facing the internal threat of another Iranian-sponsored militia – Hamas. A month earlier, the Palestinian terror organization had abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit on the border with the Gaza strip. Faced with this challenge, the Olmert government retaliated to Hezbollah's blatant breach of international law with a full-scale military operation which lasted for 34 days, and ended with a ceasefire and the adoption of UNSCR 1701. Israel's war was not enough to destroy the military infrastructure of Hezbollah, whose Iranian missile arsenal proved to be an annoyance to Israel, but the Israeli campaign was more successful in punishing Lebanon for harboring Hezbollah by destroying key civilian infrastructure, from roads to bridges to whole residential areas.⁴²

The 2006 War revealed the organic connection between Hezbollah and the IRGC, which had provided its Lebanese outlet with weapons, but more importantly, Iran provided key training which "resulted in the employment of asymmetric tactics within a surprisingly conventional framework."⁴³ The head of IRGC's Quds Forces Qassim Suleimani later confirmed that he was present in Lebanon throughout the 34 days of fighting alongside Hezbollah's top military commander Imad Mughniyeh, who was later assassinated in the suburb of Damascus in February 2008.⁴⁴

Despite Hezbollah's recklessness, the government of Fouad Siniora provided the necessary political support and played an important role in the postwar reconstruction process with the money it was able to acquire from Arab Gulf states and the international community which was estimated at around \$7 billion.⁴⁵

No sooner Lebanon started to stabilize, the issue of the international tribunal for the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri caused the ministers of Hezbollah and the Amal movement to resign from the Siniora government.⁴⁶ The assassination of the anti-Syrian Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel, caused the anti-Syrian factions to demand international intervention, something which triggered a political crisis that lasted for 18 months and ended with Hezbollah's failed attempt to topple the government by force in December 2006.⁴⁷

IRAN AND THE LEBANESE CRISIS
THE DOHA ACCORD

The 'May 7, 2008 event' as it became known, saw Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian militias extended their occupation of West Beirut to other parts of the country where they were met with fierce resistance mainly by the Druze in Mount Lebanon.⁴⁸ Hezbollah launched a full-scale military operation in Beirut and its suburbs and was successful in occupying nearly all the offices and locations of its political adversaries mainly the Sunni Future Movement, led by Saad al-Hariri. Hezbollah would eventually realize the limitation of its military might and decided to seek a political exit, something which Qatar would provide by summoning the Lebanese political faction to Doha and hammering out a new power-sharing formula which rewarded the Iranian-Syrian axis for its use of violence. The Doha Accord, as it became known, gave Iran and Hezbollah an official status in the Lebanese political system and granted the Shiites a quasi-veto, and paved the way to the gradual integration of the power-sharing formula instituted in the Taef Accord.



In October 2010, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took an official state visit to Lebanon, but contrary to the visit of his predecessor Mohammad Khatami, Ahmadinejad was less interested in the intellectual spheres nor was he careful as not to transgress on Lebanon's sovereignty. On the one hand, Khatami's foreign policy was anchored around improving Iran's image and trying to whitewash the Iranian Revolution's terrorist heritage, and to improve its standing vis-a-vis the Arab world, including Lebanon "through the policy of détente and mutual respect."⁴⁹ Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, came to be regarded as the anti-western face of Iran and its expansionist project and perhaps mostly its dangerous nuclear program. Ahmadinejad's anti-American stance and holocaust denial made him unpopular in the West. He wore his hardliner conservative image with pride.

During his visit to Lebanon, Ahmadinejad had no reservations in branding his hosts as a member of the axis of resistance. Speaking at an event organized by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement in the Southern town of Bint Jbeil a few kilometers from the Lebanese-Israeli border, he said:

Lebanon is the school of resistance and perseverance against the bullying forces of the world, and is like a university for jihad, for adventure in the way of the noble, human causes. While calling for a united Islamic world, he said.

*We [Iran] fully support the resistance of the Lebanese people against the Zionist regime and we want full liberation of occupied territory in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine [...]. As long as [Israeli] aggression exists in the region, we will not see stability.*⁵⁰

39. N. Allah, "Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah", Verso, 2007, p. 319.
40. See I. Diwan, Y. Chaitani, "Lebanon in the Syrian Quagmire: Fault-Lines, Resilience and Possible Futures", 2015.
41. See "Hezbollah joins Lebanon Cabinet for first time", ABC News, July 20, 2005. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2005-07-20/hezbollah-joins-lebanon-cabinet-for-first-time/2062306>
42. See "Background: Facts and figures about 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war", ReliefWeb, July 12, 2007. <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/background-facts-and-figures-about-2006-israel-hezbollah-war>
43. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/militaryreview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20100630_art015.pdf, p 108.
44. See A. al-Salmi, "Solimani Reveals Details of Role He Played in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War", Asharq Al-Wasat, October 3, 2019. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/1929396/soleimani-reveals-details-role-he-played-2006-israel-hezbollah-war>
45. See B. Whitaker, "Reconstruction alone estimated at \$7bn in Lebanon", The Guardian, August 16, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/aug/16/syria.lebanon>
46. Faouzi Salloukh was Minister Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Fneish was in charge of Power and Water, Trad Hamadeh was Minister of Labor, Mohammad Jawad Khalefeh was Minister of Health, Talal al-Sahali was Minister of Agriculture.
47. See "Huge Beirut rally demands prime minister quit", CNN, December 1, 2006. <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/12/01/lebanon.protest/>
48. See N. Blanford/Omatiyeh, "Hizballah's Toughest Foe in Lebanon", Time, May 13, 2008. <https://web.archive.org/web/20121026070641/http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1756914,00.html?xid=feed-yahoo-full-world>
49. A. Ehteshami, M. Zweiri, "Arab-Iranian relations: new realities?", in "Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad", A. Ehteshami (Ed.), M. Zweiri (Ed.), Garnet Publishing Ltd, 2012, p. 121.
50. "Ahmadinejad visits south Lebanon", Al Jazeera, October 14, 2010. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/10/14/ahmadinejad-visits-south-lebanon> See W. Davis, "Ahmadinejad makes controversial Lebanon visit", October 14, 2010. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-mid-east-11546719>



THE SYRIAN CRISIS

To many Western observers, the Iranian president's visit to Lebanon was much of a visit to one of his colonies than a visit of friendship, something which would be reinforced by the actions of Hezbollah which soon found itself implicated in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the uprising against the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

The Arab Spring, which blew through the Middle East, toppled a number of archaic regimes many of which had passed their retirement age, with Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria experiencing vast protest movements demanding reform, freedom and democracy. In Syria, Iran's decision to come to the aid of their ally Bashar al-Assad was more based on protecting their own interests rather than helping out a friend. Syria, under Bashar al-Assad, had become more of a vessel than a partner as the young Syrian dictator contrary to his more vigilant father Hafez al-Assad, gave Iran and Hezbollah more operational leeway, and allowed them to acquire and deploy advanced arms and missiles, which posed a lethal threat to Israel. Further, when the Syrian rebels tried to topple Assad, Iran came to his aid lest they sever the vital Tehran-Beirut route, an important corridor that allowed the IRGC to supply its various militias.⁵¹

Early on in the Syrian crisis, Iran had only a limited military posture and sent military advisors who trained Assad's army and provided strategical assistance. However, the IRGC involvement expanded gradually and would soon include Iranian troops as well as a number of transnational militia, usually

commanded by Hezbollah.⁵² The Quds Force, led by a hodge-podge of pro-Iran militias, deployed "nearly 80,000 Shia militiamen into Syria to fight the opposition, including fighters from Hezbollah, major Iraqi Shia militant groups, and Afghan and Pakistani Shia militias, commanded by nearly 2,000 IRGC and Quds Force officers."⁵³ At the onset of the war, Hassan Nasrallah denied that his militia was deployed in Syria, but the returning corpses of Hezbollah fighters to their villages and towns soon exposed the truth. Nasrallah initially justified their presence as limited to the protection of Shiite religious sanctuaries which were under attack by Sunni fundamentalist groups.⁵⁴

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria provoked many Sunni Lebanese groups to join the Syrian opposition and later the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), many of which returned to Lebanon and formed terrorist cells which targeted Shiite areas, supposedly to seek vengeance for Iran's crimes in Syria.⁵⁵

Iran's blatant involvement in Syria and Iraq, and its instrumentalization of sectarianism to mobilize their power base led to further schisms with the Lebanese Sunni and other communities. By fighting in Syria, Hezbollah had in fact unleashed the wrath of many Sunni jihadi groups which now wanted to strike back against Shiites and pro-Hezbollah elements in particular. On November 19, 2013, two suicide bombers targeted the Iranian embassy in Beirut killing 23 people including the Iranian cultural attaché to Lebanon. The attack which was claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, an Al Qaeda-linked Lebanese group, was an attempt to force Iran to withdraw its troops from Syria.⁵⁶ While many other similar attacks ensued mainly against Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shiite community, this did not discourage the organization from continuing its support of Iran's regional designs, Hezbollah even went as far as to jeopardize Lebanon's ties with the Arab Gulf states – especially with Saudi Arabia – by its full-fledged support for the pro-Iranian Houthi rebels in Yemen, who fought a proxy war against Saudi Arabia.

US President Barack Obama's terms (2009-2017) gave Iran room to breathe as Obama, supported by the more dovish democratic administration, allowed to improve Iran's standing in the region, for instance, by signing the JCPOA agreement. The US-Iranian détente came at the expense of the Sunni Arab Gulf states; they saw in Obama's Middle Eastern policy an attempt to strengthen political Islam be it the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia, or the Iranian theocratic regime. The less doctrinal Obama wished to repair the damages done by the former Republican administration under George W. Bush, and thus, he simply allowed Iran to continue its expansionist program in the region and in Lebanon in particular.⁵⁷ The Obama Doctrine, as it became known, saw the United States' traditional allies sidelined and disenfranchised in exchange for the empowerment of the more radical elements including the IRGC, which ironically became a partner of the US in the war against ISIL in Syria and Iraq.⁵⁸ Obama's biggest debacle was perhaps his hesitance to take military action against the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against opposition-held areas. Assad's trespassing of Obama's previously indicated red line, that is the use of chemical agents, necessitated a military response which the US president was unwilling to undertake. Had he acted on his promise Iran's hold over Syria, and perhaps Lebanon, had certainly been weakened.⁵⁹ Due to

his inaction, the pro-western elements in Lebanon soon found themselves in the backseat, and were forced to give in to the demands of the pro-Iranian Lebanese factions, mainly Hezbollah and their Lebanese Maronite ally Michael Aoun.

THE RISE OF MICHEL AOUN AND INCREASING SAUDI-IRANIAN TENSIONS

Perhaps one of the immediate repercussions of the Iran nuclear deal was the election of Michael Aoun as president. Since the end of the term of former Lebanese President Michael Suliman in May 2014, the Lebanese presidency was left vacant as the pro-Iranian factions and their speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri refused to convene the parliament to elect a new president, something which would have allowed the pro-western bloc that enjoyed a simple majority to clinch the seat.

Aoun, a former commander of the Lebanese Army and interim Prime Minister in 1988, mutinied and refused to abdicate the premiership and was forced into exile by the Syrians to France in 1990. He remained in France for the next fifteen years until his return in 2005 following the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri. Although Aoun had made a career of endorsing Lebanese state sovereignty and asking for the removal of Syrian tutelage over Lebanon, he and Hezbollah, both shared a common refusal for the Taef Agreement, and more importantly, they both were opponents of the so-called Sunni majority in the region. In February 2006, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah, represented by its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), later known as the Mar Mikhael Understanding, which gave Hezbollah and Iran the much-needed Christian cover to slowly and steadily replace the Assad regime which had withdrawn from Lebanon the previous year.

"IRAN'S INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA AND IRAQ, AND ITS INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF SECTARIANISM LED TO FURTHER SCHISMS WITH THE LEBANESE SUNNI AND OTHER COMMUNITIES."

While the MoU did not make any direct reference to Iran, its entire spirit was to give credence to the existence of a militia that challenges the sovereignty of the Lebanese state. By keeping many of its provisions vague and open-ended the MoU was perfect to keep the issue of Iran's Lebanese militia up in limbo:

The protection of Lebanon and the preservation of its independence and sovereignty are a national public responsibility and duty, guaranteed by international treaties and the Human Rights Charter, particularly in confronting any threats or dangers from any source that could harm them.

Therefore, carrying arms is not an objective in itself. Rather it is an honorable and sacred means that is exercised by any group whose land is occupied, in a manner identical to the methods of political resistance. In this context, Hezbollah's weapons

should be addressed as part of a global approach that falls within two bounds:

The first bound is the reliance on justifications that meet a national consensus for keeping the weapons, which would constitute a source of strength for Lebanon and the Lebanese people, and the other bound is the definition of objective conditions that would lead to a cessation of the reasons and justifications for keeping those weapons. Since Israel occupies the Shebaa Farms, imprisons Lebanese resistance members and threatens Lebanon, the Lebanese people should assume their responsibilities and share the burden of protecting Lebanon, safeguarding its existence and security and protecting its independence and sovereignty by:

- Liberating the Shebaa Farms from the Israeli occupation.
- Liberating the Lebanese prisoners from Israeli prisons.
- Protecting Lebanon from Israeli threats through a national dialogue leading to the formulation of a national defense strategy over which the Lebanese agree to and subscribe to by assuming its burdens and benefiting from its outcomes.⁶⁰

The Mar Mikhael Understanding was no simple political transaction but rather an open alliance of minorities, one which gave Aoun a much-needed staple and powerful ally in the form of Iran and the Assad regime, one which according to the logic of Aoun and his fellows provided protection from the so-called hegemony of Sunni Islam which was bent on subjugating the Christians of the East, as Aoun claimed.⁶¹

Eventually, Aoun was elected to the presidency on October 31, 2016, ending a 29-month vacuum at the head of the state. The election of Aoun was brought about by the refusal of his allies mainly Iran and Syria to allow normal elections to take place with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri refusing to convene the parliament and by Hezbollah and its allies boycotting the parliament sessions. But ultimately, what allowed his

51. See H. R. McMaster, D. Adesnik, B. B. Taleblu, "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean", Foundation for the Defense of Democracy, June 18, 2019. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>

52. See N. Saban, "Factbox: Iranian presence in Syria's Deir ez-Zor province", MENASource, May 18, 2021.

53. N. Uskowi, "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: The Looming Conflict with Israel", The Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, September 2018. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The_Evolving_Iranian_Strategy_in_Syria.pdf

54. See J. Daher, "The Consequences of Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria on the Lebanese Shia population and Relations with Israel", Observatoire of Arab-Muslim World and Sahel, September 26, 2017.

55. See R. Lefèvre, "The Roots of Crisis In Northern Lebanon", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2014.

56. See L. Bassam, E. Solomon, "Suicide bombings kill 23 near Iran embassy in Beirut", Reuters, November 19, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-blast-idUSBRE9AI08G20131119>

57. See F. A. Gerges, "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?", International Affairs 89, no. 2, 2013, pp. 299-323.

58. See Tisdall, "Lebanon feels the Obama effect", The Guardian, June 8, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jun/08/lebanon-elections-obama-effect>

59. See D. Chollet, "Obama's Red Line, Revisited", Politico Magazin, July 19, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059/>

60. M. Aoun, H. Nasrallah, "Memorandum of understanding by Hezbollah and Free patriotic movement", Voltaire Network, February 6, 2006. <https://www.voltairenet.org/article163916.html>

61. See "Aoun Lays Responsibility for Protection of Christians on Arab Regimes", Naharnet, November 3, 2013. <https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/104192>

election was a major settlement which saw Aoun's traditional Christian opponents, the Lebanese Forces as well as Saad Hariri's Future Movement, endorse him as a consensus president, in return for a power-sharing arrangement, which saw Saad Hariri appointed as Prime Minister.

The fact that Lebanon's entire political elite endorsed Aoun had significant repercussions on Lebanon's standing vis-à-vis the Arab Gulf States. The latter saw in his election a final affirmation of Iran's hegemony over Lebanon, a position which was shared by the new US President Donald Trump, who assumed office in January 2017. The new US administration was bent on revoking Obama's Middle East policy. However, Lebanon rather played a minor role on Trump's foreign policy agenda, and thus, Iran could gradually increase its sway over the country.

“HEZBOLLAH IS A MENACE TO THE LEBANESE STATE, THE LEBANESE PEOPLE, AND THE ENTIRE REGION.”

The Gulf States, headed by Saudi Arabia, have always invested in Lebanon's economy and stability. The career and meteoric rise of Rafik Hariri and his post-war reconstruction is a case in point. The Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry was to a certain extent regulated in Lebanon until the assassination of Rafik Hariri. His assassination not only fueled the conflict between these two regional powers, but also polarized the local Lebanese scene; Lebanon witnessed large scale demonstrations and people either clustered around the pro-Western “March 14 Coalition”, or the pro-Iranian “March 8 Coalition” led by Hezbollah.⁶² However, the apex of the Saudi-Iranian stand-off in Lebanon took place only one year later: after the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel when Saudi Arabia tried to outshine Iran's reconstruction efforts. The Gulf monarchy held Iran responsible for instigating the 2006 war, and causing the destruction of Lebanon's already dilapidated civilian infrastructure. Consequently, Saudi Arabia pledged \$1.5 billion in aid for reconstruction.⁶³ As a response to Saudi Arabia's efforts, Iran used its Lebanese allies, such as Aoun, who openly attacked the Arab Gulf States for their interference, something which ultimately alienated Lebanon after Aoun's election in 2016. However, the schism between the Gulf countries and Iran became more apparent in 2011 already, with the beginning of the Syrian uprising against Bashar al Assad, since both countries, took on a more active and visible role, not only in Syria, but as well in Lebanon, where they either directly or via their proxies, be it the Future movement or Hezbollah, exerted greater influence.

The rise of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, in 2017, and the intensification of the conflict with Iran would not spare Lebanon, as the young Saudi Prince saw in his Lebanese allies a proxy vis-a-vis Hezbollah. As a result, after Saad Hariri was invited to Riyadh in the fall of 2017, Bin Salman tried to change the Lebanese status quo by forcing him to resign, and to issue a declaration of war against Iran and their local allies.⁶⁴ The intervention by the French President Emmanuel Macron ended Hariri's brief crisis, but it also pushed Lebanon further into the Iranian sphere of influence with many of the Arab Gulf states taking on a passive-aggressive attitude which included stopping aid to Lebanon and passing stricter visa regulations; this would be a main factor to unleashing a



chain of events which would lead to Lebanon's political and financial collapse in the summer of 2019. In October of 2021, this tension became palpable again after the Lebanese Minister of Information George Kordahi gave an interview praising the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, which led Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates to withdraw their diplomats from Lebanon.⁶⁵

THE US SANCTION IRAN'S LEBANESE ALLIES

The Trump administration exerted increasing pressure on Lebanon due to the country's complicity in Iranian activities. While the US government, under Trump, kept its program to support the Lebanese Armed Forces which amounted in 2020 to \$216 million in combined Department of State and Department of Defense (DoD) military grant assistance, it was yet equally vocal against the continued Iranian infringement on Lebanese sovereignty.⁶⁶

BANNER SHOWING QASSEM SOLEIMANI OVERSEING HEZBOLLAH'S ATTACK ON ISRAEL IN JULY 2006. BEIRUT 2021. COURTESY OF ELIANE ELIAS

On July 25, 2017, PM Saad Hariri was on a state visit to Washington, and listened to Trump, who reminded the Lebanese that the Obama years are over:

*America's assistance can help ensure that the Lebanese army is the only defender Lebanon needs. It's a very effective fighting force. Threats to the Lebanese people come from inside, as well. Hezbollah is a menace to the Lebanese state, the Lebanese people, and the entire region. The group continues to increase its military arsenal, which threatens to start yet another conflict with Israel, constantly fighting them back. With the support of Iran, the organization is also fueling the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. Hezbollah likes to portray itself as a defender of Lebanese interests, but it's very clear that its true interests are those of itself and its sponsor – Iran.*⁶⁷

Trump's words would be translated into action gradually, the US government mainly placed Lebanese politicians, allied with

Hezbollah on the sanctions list both for corruption and aiding terrorism. On September 8, 2020 almost a month after the

⁶² See F. Wehrelly et al., "Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam, Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy", Rand Corporation, 2009 pp. 79-92.

⁶³ Ibid. 81-82.

⁶⁴ See S. Nakhoul, L. Bassam, T. Perry, "Exclusive: How Saudi Arabia turned on Lebanon's Hariri", Reuters, November 11, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-politics-hariri-exclusive-idUSKBN1DB0QL>

⁶⁵ See "Four Gulf states including UAE pull diplomats from Beirut", France 24, October 23, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20211030-kuwait-expels-lebanese-envoy-as-saudi-spat-over-yemen-war-deepens>

⁶⁶ See "U.S. Security Cooperation With Lebanon", Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, May 21, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-lebanon/>

⁶⁷ The White House Office of the Press Secretary For Immediate Release, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Hariri of Lebanon in Joint Press Conference", U.S. Embassy in Syria, July 25, 2017. <https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-hariri-lebanon-joint-press-conference/>

the Beirut Port explosion which caused serious damage to the eastern part of the capital, the US treasury sanctioned former Lebanese government ministers Yusuf Finyanus (Public Works) and Ali Hassan Khalil (Finance), for providing material support to Hezbollah and engaging in corruption.⁶⁸ Finyanus belongs to the Christian Marada party and Khalil to the Shiite Amal Movement. Both are allies of Syria and Iran, and their corruption was not really hidden, but the decision of the US to sanction them marked a clear departure from previous norms which focused exclusively on members of Hezbollah. Taking this further, the Trump administration placed Gebran Bassil, the head of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) political party, Member of Parliament and President Michael Aoun's son-in-law and political heir, on the sanctions list because "the systemic corruption in Lebanon's political system exemplified by Bassil has helped to erode the foundation of an effective government that serves the Lebanese people, as the US treasury claims."⁶⁹ Bassil's designation was carried out under the provisions of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which now equated corruption and terrorism to Hezbollah and its extended circle.



IRAN'S MONEY NETWORKS AND RELIGIOUS HUBS

Iran and Hezbollah's global money networks have grown over the years, as Hezbollah was no longer serving as just an ideological outlet for Iran in Lebanon, but it soon transformed into a strategic consultant for Iran's military and financial hub. Hezbollah's achievements on these fronts have propelled the or-

ganization as well as the country it occupies to the fore of the world's attention.

According to a recent report published by the Middle East Institute entitled "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks" underscores the evaluation of both Iran and Hezbollah:

Today, Hezbollah's regional adventurism is most pronounced in its expeditionary forces deployed in Syria and elsewhere in the region, but no less important are the group's advanced training regimen for other Shi'a militias aligned with Iran, its expansive illicit financing activities across the region, and its procurement, intelligence, cyber, and disinformation activities. Together, these underscore the scale and scope of the group's all-in approach to transforming from one of several Lebanese militias into a regional player acting at Iran's behest.⁷⁰

The widening gap between the Trump administration and Tehran, and the withdrawal of the US from the nuclear deal, which led to the reintroduction of sanctions, was clearly felt in Lebanon as Iran and Hezbollah needed to look for alternative sources of funding – especially after their non-Shiite allies were placed on the sanctions list, and their activities were under more scrutiny. This paved the way for Lebanon's economic collapse which started in the summer of 2019 and was exasperated through a number of factors and ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the October 17 popular uprising against the government of former PM Saad Hariri.⁷¹

Beyond the financial and corruption scandals which surround the Lebanese-Iranian relationship, Iran has been actively promoting its own brand of Shiite Islam commonly referred to as Wilayat al-Faqih, which contrary to public opinion, is not the dominate school of Shiite Islam in Lebanon as the mainstream Shiites tend to imitate the Persian-born Marja` Ali Hussein al-Sistani, followed by the late Lebanese Marja` Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah.⁷² Yet, this has not stopped Iran from trying to pass its state-sanctioned Shiism as mainstream by taking over religious places, especially shrines, and incorporating what many might call pre-Muslim Persian practices. This Iranian religious expansion, on the one hand, links the Lebanese Shiites with both Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian Shiite Shrines. However, the established pilgrimage trail serves Iran, on the other hand, to spread its ideology, and to funnel funds to Hezbollah bypassing Western sanctions. Following the start of the Syrian crisis, Iranian religious expansion became even easier as Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies justified their deployment in Syria with the need to protect the Shiite holy sites, such as the Sayyida Zeinab shrine, which holds the remains of Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter.⁷³ Consequently, this Iranian religious fervor widened the already existing gap with the Lebanese Sunni community which Iran's expansion was targeting, worsening an already tensed situation.

CONCLUSION

The Lebanese-Iranian relationship when placed under scrutiny fails to qualify as traditional or bilateral, especially after 1990 and the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The Syrian custodianship over Lebanon after the Taef Agreement prevented the development of Lebanese-Iranian ties. What was left was a feeble bond that went through Hezbollah which was viewed as Iran's resident party, whose sole aim was to fight the Israeli



occupation in southern Lebanon. After the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in May of 2000, and the expulsion of the Syrian army in 2005 following the assassination of PM Rafik Hariri, the dynamics of the relationship between Lebanon and Iran changed completely, and not necessarily for the better. The role which Iran assumed following the US invasion of Iraq, saw the rise of the radical hawkish element led by the head of the IRGC Quds force led by Qassem Soleimani who used Hezbollah and consequently Lebanon to establish his malignant networks of corruption to fund his troops' transnational activity, including the war in Yemen which saw the Iranian-funded Houthis launch attacks deep into Saudi territory.⁷⁴ Consequently, the Arab Gulf states put more pressure on Lebanon and stopped subsidizing Lebanon's economy, before cutting-off ties almost completely, which eventually proved to be counterproductive as this allowed Iran to increase its dominance in Lebanon.

As of today, Lebanon has very few options moving forward especially since its ability to access the much-needed funds must go through the international community. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has clearly mandated an overhaul of the Lebanese archaic political and banking system, which implicitly also includes the request of its western donors of the importance of addressing Hezbollah's arms. The alliance of Hezbollah with the Lebanese political elite has made Lebanon an outcast and thus made the latter's political and economic recovery very unlikely.

For proper and normal diplomatic ties to exist between these two countries, Hezbollah's and the IRGC's hegemony over the relationship should be challenged. Initially by reminding every-

one, chiefly both the Lebanese and the Iranian people, that the semblance of diplomatic ties is mired by the fact that both the IRGC and Hezbollah are trying to enforce their own ideology on both countries and that the common national interests lay elsewhere.

"HEZBOLLAH'S REGIONAL ADVENTURISM IS MOST PRONOUNCED IN ITS EXPEDITIONARY FORCES DEPLOYED IN SYRIA AND ELSEWHERE IN THE REGION."

68. See "Treasury Targets Hizballah's Enablers in Lebanon", U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 8, 2020.

<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1116>

69. See "Treasury Targets Corruption in Lebanon", U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 6, 2020. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1177>

70. See M. Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks", Middle East Institute, 26 July 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>

71. See H. Sullivan, "The Making of Lebanon's October Revolution", The New Yorker, October 29, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-making-of-lebanons-october-revolution>

72. See M. Khalaji, "Iran's Shadow Government in Lebanon", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 19, 2006. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-shadow-government-lebanon>

73. See M. Sullivan, "HEZBOLLAH IN SYRIA", Institute for the Study of War, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07896>

74. See D. Filkins, "The Shadow Commander", The New Yorker, September 23, 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>

While it is extremely difficult to stand up to Iran's and Hezbollah's military and political dominance, a long-term investment in the intellectual circles in both Iran and Lebanon similar to the one that developed under former President Mohamad Khatami might transform the animosity harbored by some elements across the lines into a proper cultural, political and economic exchange which would benefit all sides involved.

Policy Recommendations

- In real terms, the relationship of the West with Iran and their ongoing tug of war over Iran's nuclear program should not be allowed to empower Iran's Lebanese proxy Hezbollah which stands as an obstacle towards normalization of ties between Lebanon and Iran. Thus, regardless of how the ongoing stand-off between Iran and the West transpires, the international community as well as the Arab Gulf states should invest heavily in a long-term series of cultural projects which bring together Arabs and Iranians outside the realms of the official political structure.
- In practical terms the international community, the US and the EU, should establish programs that highlight the common cultural heritage and the shared history of Lebanon and Iran without allowing the ruling establishment to dictate the narrative. Yet, such soft power policies need to be cemented in a long-term sustainable model which offers both institutional funding as well as bipartisan political support which does not peter out with any change in administrations.
- Pursuing support to local forces of change within the Lebanese political systems to reclaim rule of law and break the bond and alliance between the corrupt political elite and Iran's armed proxy militia which in turn protects and shields the ruling establishment from the public accountability.
- Empowering the Iranian and Lebanese Shiite intellectual circles who do not belong to the Iranian hegemonic model through providing them with institutional and legal support which will allow them to continue their grassroots activism towards building modern political systems in their respective countries.

The recent diplomatic crisis which broke out, in the fall of 2021 during the writing of this study, between Lebanon and the Gulf states ended with the latter recalling their ambassadors and rupturing diplomatic ties. This was mainly brought about by Iran's and Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen as well as the hegemony of Hezbollah over the Lebanese political system. Hence, the Lebanese dilemma is partly caused by external developments and forces. Regardless of the future of Iranian-Lebanese relations, the liaison is in serious need of reexamination, to ensure that the two countries regain some sort of diplomatic semblance, one which will stand the test of time.

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