

Hezbollah's Role in Lebanon and the Region. Is the US Losing its Hegemony in the Middle East?

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The policy of the US establishment towards Lebanon is evidently changing and unstable, with a President who lacks general knowledge about the Middle East and above all of Hezbollah's role in the region. It seems President Donald Trump is willing to reduce military support to the Lebanese Army and to impose further sanctions on Lebanon, unaware that he is thereby strengthening the Axis of Resistance and throwing the country of the Cedars into the arms of Russia and Iran. While the US is imposing further sanctions on Hezbollah, in the last few months its European partners have held secret meetings with that Organisation's leaders during the visits of their official delegations to Beirut.

The US is gradually losing its hegemony in the Middle East. In Iraq, the "Islamic State" (ISIS) grew under the watchful and complaisant eyes of the US establishment in the first months of its occupation of Mosul in June 2014. Washington considered ISIS a strategic asset, oblivious to how this unscrupulous policy would backfire against its interests in the Middle East. The policy alienated Europe but above all the people of the Middle East, especially those minorities who suffered grievously under ISIS tyranny. This ruthless US policy triggered the creation of Hashd al-Shaa'bi (the Popular Mobilisation Forces). This force has now become an essential member of the "Axis of the Resistance" which rejects US hegemony and espouses an ideology of independence with objectives similar to those of Iran and Hezbollah. These national forces are generally unfriendly towards Israel and the presence of US forces in Mesopotamia.

Furthermore, the new Iraqi leaders (Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi, Speaker Mohamad al-Halbusi and President Barham Salih) have been chosen in perfect harmony with the will of Iran. If it becomes necessary to choose between Tehran and Washington, Iraq will not stand for sanctions against the Iranian people, regardless of the consequences. And if the US forces Iraq's hand on Iran sanctions, it will lose Mesopotamia to the advantage of Iran and Russia. Indeed, Moscow is sitting today, along with high ranking Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian military advisors, *in one single operational room in Baghdad*, waiting to pick up the slack if the US moves away from or slows down military support to Iraq, but also to ensure that ISIS doesn't return to occupy any city in Mesopotamia.

In Syria, the US - and its European and Arab partners - aimed for regime change and became identified with a policy of deliberate destruction of the Levant, with the goal of removing President Bashar Assad from power. Qatar alone is said to have invested over 130 billion dollars for this failed objective. Today, the lowest estimate of reconstruction costs for Syria ranges between 250 and 350 billion dollars. The war imposed on Syria has resulted in the formation of many Syrian groups trained by Iran and Hezbollah who have naturally shared their warfare experience with their ally. These groups, if Assad so wills, will form a

strong alliance with the “Axis of Resistance” that has grown up in Iraq, and which has existed in Lebanon for decades.

In Palestine, Hamas joined the regime-change campaign against Syria at the beginning of the war in 2011. The political leadership declared its animosity to Assad and many of its fighters joined al-Qaeda and others joined ISIS, particularly in the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk, south of Damascus. These Palestinian fighters shared with Syrian and other foreign fighters their guerrilla experience learned from Iran and from Hezbollah training camps. A few of these carried out suicide attacks against Iraqi security forces and civilians in Mesopotamia and against the Syrian army and its allies, including Hezbollah, in the Levant.

But the US establishment decided to distance itself from the Palestinian cause and embraced unconditionally the Israeli apartheid policy towards Palestine: the US supports Israel blindly. It has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, suspended financial aid to UN institutions supporting Palestinian refugees (schools, medical care, homes), and rejected the right of return of Palestinians. All this has pushed various Palestinian groups, including the Palestinian Authority, to acknowledge that any negotiation with Israel is useless and that also the US can no longer be considered a reliable partner. Moreover, the failed regime-change in Syria and the humiliating conditions placed on Arab financial support were in a way the last straws that convinced Hamas to change its position, giving up on the Oslo agreement and joining the Axis of the Resistance.

The 48 hours battle in Gaza with Israel November 12-13 showed unprecedented unity between Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and many other Palestinian groups (13 groups in total have united in one single military operational room for the first time ever), and their closeness to Iran and Hezbollah, indicating, once again, the failure of US policy in the Middle East.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah has gathered unique and mind-boggling war experience during the last five years of war against the extremist groups of al-Qaeda and ISIS, fighting alongside two classical armies on multiple fronts: the Syrian Army and the Russian superpower Army. The US now seems willing to increase pressure on the Lebanon to further cripple its economy. These sanctions will likely affect Lebanon more than Hezbollah itself.

The US put on its “terrorist list” the owners of currency exchange offices in Lebanon known to have exchanged Euros received from Iran for dollars. It has arrested a well-known businessman who benefits from Hezbollah sympathy and who offers a discount to Hezbollah militants and their families when selling his flats.

Also, with the collaboration of the ex-prime minister Haidar Abadi, the US got Baghdad to freeze over 90 million dollars due to a Lebanese constructor who has fulfilled contracts in various Iraqi cities, but who is accused by the Americans of being close to Hezbollah.

Moreover, the US Treasury Department is forcing the Lebanese Central bank to provide an impressive amount of information and databases on civilians - under the heading of fighting terrorism - and managed to freeze the accounts of many Shia, including those who have nothing whatsoever to do with the organisation.

And finally, the US administration put on its list of terrorists the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, his deputy, and various top leaders. These men will thus never be able to visit Disneyland or enjoy the wildlife in Las Vegas!

The US seems unaware that both Iran and Russia are eager to see the US lift their conditional support to the Lebanese Army and government. In coordination with the Lebanese government, Iran can build many factories in Lebanon, benefitting from its experience in various fields, mainly in the pharmaceutical domain, car production, domestic utilities and military industry. In parallel, Russia is already actively establishing connections with Lebanese officials, inviting them to Moscow, which will increase its presence and foothold in the Lebanon.

There is nothing the US can do to reduce Hezbollah's military power today. Sayyed Nasrallah is said to be ready to unleash his precision missiles against Israel to show his strength and, above all, to prove how weak Israel will be in any future war. There is no doubt that Israel has an impressive military machine with a great capacity for destruction. Nevertheless, since 1949 Israel has never been subjected to precision missiles with hundreds of explosives on each of their warheads, capable of covering the entire Israeli territory and of reaching any target.

If Israel's Iron Dome can intercept 80% of Hezbollah's missiles, the consequences of 2000 missiles (out of 10,000, of which 8000 were intercepted) hitting their targets with 400-500 kg of explosives each are inconceivable for Israel. That means an equivalent of 1.000.000 kgs of explosive if Hezbollah were to limit its use to 10,000 missiles and no more than that (Israel claim Hezbollah has 150,000 rockets and missiles).

Hezbollah represents a sizeable chunk of the Lebanese population. It is not a conventional organisation, but one that has become part of the "hearts and minds" of the population—an old strategy that Hezbollah adopted so as to integrate with the population and the society it is living in.

Hezbollah did use force domestically on one occasion, in the May 7, 2008 episode when the group took the Lebanese capital by firing only a few bullets—much less time than it took Israel to occupy Beirut in 1982. Hezbollah doesn't need to use military power to control Lebanon. But the Lebanese Shia are no longer alone in the Axis of Resistance. This axis won't hesitate to turn tables on the US if pushed to take control of the country: which may happen if the US continues efforts to submit Lebanon to its hegemony.

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