

Lebanon and Iraq Protesters, the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia Are Fed Up with Iran

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The United States of America, Israel and Saudi Arabia are fed up with Iran and its allies in the Middle East. But despite waging war against Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, by inviting the Iraqi government to dilute al-Hashd al-Shaabi, by attempting to submit Gaza and to curb the Houthis in Yemen, it was not possible to break the strong alliances of Iran spread throughout the Middle East.

Moreover, through democratic elections, Iran's allies in Lebanon and Iraq managed to be part of the Parliament and have ministers in the cabinets of their respective countries. Also, in Syria, Iran's strong ally President Bashar al-Assad is still leading the country notwithstanding years of war, and the attempts, through foreign and domestic intervention, to remove him from power. But civilian protestors- with legitimate demands against corruption and wealth mismanagement of the elite in Iraq and Lebanon throughout the years - are causing havoc in these countries, shaking the stability and therefore putting Iran and its allies on alert. Meetings are continuously held by the "Axis of the Resistance" to evaluate the situation, the possible threats, and the degree of involvement of foreign powers in the streets in attempting to curb this Axis.

In Lebanon, following two weeks of protests covering the entire country, Lebanese **Prime Minister Saad Hariri** offered his resignation and became a caretaker, leading a cabinet which has also resigned. This move has calmed protestors for a few days but it is not certain that this will satisfy Lebanon's hungry, jobless youths and those contesting corruption. They are expecting their demands to be dealt with within the medium and long term as well. At the same time, the escalating national debt has to be reckoned with.

It is not clear that a new government will come into being this month, or even in the months to come. Hariri discussed his plans with main political parties stating his will to form a technocrat cabinet. His aim is to respond to some of the protestor's demands but also to remove the strong Christian member of the parliament (MP) and Minister of foreign affairs Gebran Bassil, who leads the largest group of MPs in the country. Hariri's demand was contested because "a political leader (he is leading a large political party) cannot lead a non-political cabinet unless it is mixed governance between politicians and qualified technocrats". Other options have been put on the table, for example, to ask Hariri to form a politico-technocrat government to bring the country out of the actual impasse.

Domestic and international complications are enormous, crucially affecting the success or failure of any future Lebanese government. The US administration in particular (as announced by the State Department) is waiting just around the corner to impose further

sanctions on Lebanon and in particular on the Hezbollah allies. Also, Bassil, the President's son-in-law and a strong ally of Hezbollah, is looked upon by the US State Department as a persona non grata due to his explicit support of Washington's declared enemy. Hezbollah, a Shia political group, struck an alliance with the strongest Christian political group in the country. This alliance is highly disturbing to all Hezbollah's enemies because it gives the Iranian ally a non-sectarian dimension and international support via the Christians of Lebanon. The US is left with a small Christian ally, Samir Geagea, who years ago was the closest Israeli ally and has become the dearest supporter of Saudi Arabia. Geagea's men are spread around the streets of Lebanon, preventing civilians from reaching their businesses and asking for Hezbollah to lay down its arms.

This is pushing Hezbollah to hold its allies close, sharing with them a common destiny, and consolidating its domestic hold over the political arena of the country. Thus, the question to clarify here is whether the future holds a successful government to come, or (which is most likely) a political vacuum.

Generally speaking, the harshest criticism towards Hezbollah, Iran's ally in Lebanon, and towards its most powerful armed corps, comes from the mainstream media, who find it appear attractive to associate Iran and its allies with every event. In reality, only a very few voices, in the streets of Lebanon, are heard against Hezbollah. These mainly come from areas under the "Lebanese Forces" leader's control, Samir Geagea, on the US and Saudi Arabia pay-roll with a clear objective to boost his image. Geagea's ministers offered their resignation from the first day of the protests to enable him to distance himself from the government that he was part of in the last years. He was left, alone, to depart from the cabinet. His men are closing the streets of important sections of the main roads in the Christian-dominated areas to improve his negotiating conditions in any future cabinet.

What is unusual is the role of the Lebanese Army and its commander in chief General Josef Aoun, a relative to the actual president Michel Aoun. In fact, the army is under the code of Emergency no.3, allowing it to intervene to protect the country from internal and external threats. Sources within the military command said: "General Aoun is under US pressure: they "invited" him not to use the army against protestors even if these close the main roads linking the entire country from the south to the north and the east. Delegations from the US embassy visited the General on a regular basis to make sure the country was "under the protestors' command" rather than that of the security forces. The behaviour of the Army chief is embarrassing the President, a Hezbollah ally. It aims to indicate that the President's mandate is unstable because of his political choices and his links to Hezbollah which would pave the way for the commander in chief of the army to become a president in the future".

Informed sources in Beirut believe the closures of the road links between the south of Lebanon and Beirut and the Bekaa Valley and Beirut (Shia strongholds) are not innocent moves. The aim is to bring Hezbollah onto the streets and trigger a new civil war in the country, destabilising it for years to come.

Hezbollah seems very much aware of this plan and its negative potential.

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