



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 4, Issue 12, October 2020

ISSUED BY



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

IRAN AND THE LEBANON CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent of Iran's influence on Lebanon by highlighting Iran's presence in the country, particularly at the political, economic, security and military levels, and the degree of its soft power presence at the cultural and sectarian levels. The study also details the extent of this influence and its contribution to aggravating Lebanon's political, economic and security crisis. This level of Iranian influence has placed Lebanon in an exceptional situation at a time when its internal crisis is escalating. The cultivation of Iran's influence in Lebanon gives it a chance to survive. But at the same time, there are many challenges that may lead to this influence regressing. This study seeks to cover the mentioned aspects, taking into consideration the recent developments in Lebanon.

Introduction

Iran is the regional state that interferes the most in the affairs of other states in the region. It has made good use of the turbulent situation that some regional countries are experiencing to extend its political, economic, and cultural influence and to interfere militarily, if there is an opportunity to do so. Lebanon is one of the Arab countries in which Iran still has a multidimensional and disciplinary role. This role has developed over several decades, with Iran taking advantage of all the internal crises and turmoil that Lebanon has faced. Iran intensified its interference in Lebanese affairs and established pro-internal support groups to penetrate and control the Lebanese state and its national decision making to serve Tehran's interests.

Lebanon is no different from the other countries that Iran has interfered in. They all suffer from economic decline, and face political, security and social crises. Lebanon has turned into a quasi-failed state, suffering from political instability. It has been unable to form a viable national government. Politics in Lebanon is subject to sectarian deal-making and Hezbollah is the most significant actor in these dealings. The economic deterioration has meant that the government is unable to pay its external debts that amount to 155 percent of its national income. Due to Iran's interference, Lebanon lacks security, as highlighted by the Beirut port explosion, revealing the extent to which Lebanon is besieged by Hezbollah, Iran's ally, and how Iran exploits Lebanon as a battlefield for initiating a large-scale conflict with its regional rivals. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria is nothing but an indication of the complex crisis that Lebanon faces.

The Lebanese movement that calls for the ruling class to be overthrown, because of excessive corruption, and its controlling majority: Hezbollah and its allies, represents a great challenge to Iran's role in Lebanon. The cross-sectarian movement has challenged the Lebanese ruling class because of the crises facing the country and the growing role of Hezbollah and Iran. The internal pressures coupled with external pressures increased in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion. The public demanded the root of Lebanon's crisis to be addressed. Undoubtedly, this unfolding reality and current developments impose increasing pressures on Iran's role in Lebanon. These pressures are inseparable from the international and regional efforts to modify Iran's behavior and to limit its interventions and the chaos it has caused in the region.

This paper attempts to answer several questions related to Iran's involvement in Lebanon's worsening crisis. The most important of these questions are: what are the areas in which Iran has interfered in Lebanon? How has the Iranian role negatively impacted Lebanon and contributed to its ongoing crisis? What are the opportunities and challenges Iran faces in this arena?

I. The Nature and Dimensions of the Iranian Role in Lebanon

Iran has an important role in the Lebanese arena. The most important aspects of this role are the following:

1. Iran's Infiltration Into the Government and Its Influence Over Internal Political Interactions

Lebanon is strategically important to Iran and its significance extends beyond mere commonalities with Lebanese Shiites. Iran is looking for an active and flexible role in Lebanon to enable it to access the Arab Mashreq, and to use Lebanon as a bargaining chip in its regional and international conflicts.⁽¹⁾ Lebanon was one of the first countries that fell into the remit of Iran's foreign policy goals, including the goal of "exporting the revolution." By establishing Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran succeeded in creating a political and military agent. In its founding statement issued in 1985, the movement admitted that it was committed to the orders of Iran's Vali-e-Faqih. Iran's leaders consider "supporting and backing the movement politically a sectarian and revolutionary duty," according to the statements of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁽²⁾

Iran has been attentive to Hezbollah's participation in Lebanese politics and civil society as part of its attempts to convert the movement from an armed militia into a political actor representing its interests in Lebanon.⁽³⁾ The movement has participated in all Lebanese elections since 1990, until the parliamentary elections on May 7, 2018, which had been postponed since 2009, in which Hezbollah and its allies won 67 seats, more than half of the 128 parliamentary seats. The leader of the Quds Force at the time, Qassem Soleimani, anticipated the results of the election by announcing the victory of Hezbollah and its allies. Fars News Agency quoted him saying, "Hezbollah won a decisive victory with 74 seats out of 128."⁽⁴⁾ However, Hezbollah did not even announce this number at that time. This confirms the extent of Iran's influence over the course of the Lebanese political arena. Due to the outcome of these elections, Iran achieved "victory" for its allies at a critical and sensitive time, during which Tehran and its axis of resistance were exposed to harsh regional and international pressures.⁽⁵⁾

Iran is contending with various events in the Lebanese arena. Once the popular protests broke out in Lebanon on October 17, 2019, Iran described them as a conspiracy against Lebanon hatched by the American and Israeli colonial powers. After Hassan Diab's government was formed in February 2020 and in response to growing pressures and demands from the Lebanese street, Iran's former Parliament speaker Ali Larijani visited Beirut. This was the first visit by a foreign delegation to Lebanon within a week after the government was formed. Larijani said that there is a need for "dialogue and consultation on various issues," and that "Syria and Lebanon are two important countries in the axis of resistance." This confirmed that Iran is directly present in Lebanon's various political developments

⁽⁶⁾ and that it keeps Lebanon away from its Arab surroundings as much as possible.

Even before Iran's reaction, the Lebanese government commented on Germany's decision to ban Hezbollah's activities and designate it as a terrorist organization. It declared that the German decision was "taken with a lack of respect and wisdom for the Lebanese government and people." Most importantly, Iran considered the decision "an external threat to Iran's positions and national interests."⁽⁷⁾ This indicates the extent of Iran's interference in the internal and external policies of Lebanon.

Iran is working to strengthen its political role in Lebanon by keeping its allies, especially Hezbollah, in the government and Parliament. It supports them to form governments and at the same time thwart the work or the formation of these government when it is necessary.⁽⁸⁾ This is in addition to use them to influence Lebanon's foreign policy and shape it in the interest of Iran's regional files. Iran has pushed Hezbollah to carry out strategic missions beyond Lebanon's borders to achieve Iran's ambitions and serve its strategic interests.

It can be said that Iran has benefited greatly from the growing influence of Hezbollah inside Lebanon, especially after it became a significant party in national decision-making, if not the most important one. Its influence has also increased externally, as it became a state within a state with its own weapons and infrastructure and takes its own decisions to wage wars without considering the Lebanese state's decision. Therefore, the movement became one of the most important Iranian tools to implement Tehran's policies in Lebanon and beyond.⁽⁹⁾

2. Infiltration and Supporting Economic Ties

Although Iran supported its allies in the Lebanese arena over the decades, the repercussions of the 2006 war caused great losses to Lebanon, which provided an opportunity for Iran to penetrate Lebanon further. Iran aided Lebanon and strengthened its economic relationship with the country in the spheres of foreign trade and investment. As result, several economic agreements and protocols were signed. Many investment opportunities arose, and several commercial and economic agreements were concluded in the agricultural, industrial, environmental, and military fields⁽¹⁰⁾.

Iran is taking advantage of the current Lebanon crisis, and attempts to benefit from it. It announced its willingness to adopt the Lebanese pound in trade exchange between the two countries, particularly in the trade of oil derivatives. This is part of Iran's efforts to alleviate the repercussions of the economic sanctions imposed on it. At the same time, Lebanon needs aid. Hezbollah in Lebanon became the "economic agent" of Iran along with establishing shell companies and directing businessmen within Iran's complex networks to help Tehran evade US sanctions. These economic deals benefited the Iranian economy. As reports indicate, Hezbollah was able to provide Iran via Lebanon with huge sums of foreign currencies withdrawn from Lebanese financial markets and banks. This

was done via merchants and owners of exchange companies that have Lebanese and Arab names.⁽¹¹⁾

Hezbollah plays a marketing role, because it promotes Iran's economic support to Lebanon and positions Iran as a reliable economic alternative to other foreign investors. The movement's secretary, cabinet ministers and deputies in Parliament play an important role in this. They promote "Iranian readiness" in all economic files, while facilitating trade exchange in the Lebanese pound. The movement also promotes the importance of economic openness so that Iranian support and proposals are accepted. Iranian medicines and food items have entered Lebanese markets in abundance, especially in Hezbollah's areas of influence.⁽¹²⁾

A report published by RAND titled "Film Piracy and Its Connection to Organized Crime and Terrorism" indicates that the criminal organizations operating in the border triangle area between Brazil-Argentina-Paraguay are financing Hezbollah's operations and activities. It confirmed that this triangle area has turned into a financial center for financing Hezbollah's activities outside the Middle East, and that huge sums of money are transferred from this region to Hezbollah annually, estimated at \$20 million.

The report mentioned that thanks to the close relationship between Hezbollah and Iran, the movement has succeeded in strengthening its relations and activities in South America's border triangle area, which is the back door to the United States of America. It also indicated that about \$3.5 million of Hezbollah's total sum came from "Asad Ahmad Barakat" who is known for his dealings in narcotics and pirated videos. In return, he received a letter of thanks from the movement's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah for his generous donation to the Lebanese Martyrs Fund which finances Hezbollah's activities in Lebanon's south.⁽¹³⁾

3. Security and Military Recruitment

Iran's interest in Lebanon's security and military sectors emerged after 1979 when it started to think of Lebanon as an advanced arena for its Velayat-e Faqih project and for the defense of the revolution and the new Iranian order. In the 1980s and specifically in 1982, the IRGC established in Bekaa its first military bases abroad after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Then, it established Hezbollah and ensured that its members were trained, armed, and prepared. In addition, it established a military security apparatus. Hezbollah was officially declared as a potent military force on the ground in February 1985, and the movement succeeded in becoming a military wing linked to Iran.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Iranian support for the movement was demonstrated in the 2006 war when Tehran provided material and military support, including approximately 1,200 to 1,300 missiles of various models. It is believed that this war was an Iranian tactic to divert international attention from its nuclear program.⁽¹⁵⁾ Iran also pushed Hezbollah to intervene in Syria to save the Syrian regime after the outbreak of the revolution in 2011. One of Iran's goals in keeping the Assad regime in power is its

ambition to maintain the line of communication with Hezbollah through Iraq and Syria to preserve the flow of weapons and send aid to the movement as well as to implement its agenda via the land corridor connecting it to Lebanon.

Iran believes that Hezbollah is part of the IRGC and spearheads its struggle against Israel. It also aims to preserve Hezbollah as a state within a state. Lieutenant Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, when he was a top military adviser to the supreme leader in 2014, said, "Iran's real borders extend to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and southern Lebanon."⁽¹⁶⁾ This indicates that Iran, with its support to Hezbollah, has succeeded in transforming it into a military force with great fighting capabilities and influence in the Lebanese arena. Given its support to Hezbollah, Iran has successfully developed an influential security role in Lebanon. From the Iranian point of view, Hezbollah provides a great opportunity to impact regional security and cause instability without direct Iranian military interference.⁽¹⁷⁾ Iran considers Lebanon as the IRGC's outpost as well as a platform to launch its security role in regional and international arenas, irrespective of what Lebanon may be exposed to as a result of Iranian transgressions targeting Israel.⁽¹⁸⁾

4. Cultural and Sectarian Influence

Iran is interested in Lebanon because it is one of the countries in the Arab region that has a large Shiite minority. Therefore, it is an environment that is helpful to promote Iran's political model and Velayat-e Faqih. Iran has been keen to strengthen its role in Lebanon's cultural and educational spheres through several tracks including participation in joint events, such as International Jerusalem day, and other Shiite events, with Lebanese Shiites under the auspices of the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Beirut. Iran has also established many cultural centers in Lebanon, such as the Association of Imam Khomeini Cultural Center, which has 15 branches in Lebanon. In the educational sphere, Iran has established many educational institutions, such as the Islamic Azad University, the Holy Prophet Institute, the Lady Zahra Foundation, the Iranian School for Girls, the Iranian School for Boys, the Islamic Institution for Education and other cultural and research centers supervised by Hezbollah⁽¹⁹⁾ as well as the movement's Al-Manar television channel.

The cultural and educational activities of Iran target all segments of Lebanese society and are not limited to Shiites to promote Iran's culture and model. The Iranian Cultural Center has several public libraries, with publications written in several languages, and issues literary magazines. In addition, it organizes courses to teach the Persian language. The Persian Language Department was opened at the Lebanese University (LU) in 2012. Iranian educational activities in Lebanon also involve the provision of educational scholarships for Lebanese students to study at Iranian universities.⁽²⁰⁾

Hezbollah's media organs are active in promoting, directly and indirectly,

Iranian interventions. This is demonstrated through Al-Manar's justifications for Iranian interference in Lebanon and the region. In addition, Hezbollah has a significant number of cyber armies, which operate thousands of platforms, serving Iran and its strategy in Lebanon and abroad.

II. The Impact of Iran's Growing Influence on the Lebanese Arena

Iranian interference in Lebanon has had negative ramifications on the country's internal and external situation. The most important ramifications of Iran's role are evident at several levels:

1. Political Stalemate and Exacerbation of Internal Divisions

Iran's interference in Lebanese affairs undermined the country's political life and is the source of several crises. One of these crises is the prevalence of political instability. On three occasions, Iran, through Hezbollah's influence in Lebanese political institutions, hindered holding presidential elections. Hezbollah had prevented its representatives from attending the sessions of the Representative Council of Lebanon, particularly the sessions on presidential elections, so that it could choose its own candidate.⁽²¹⁾ Consequently, the presidential elections were suspended for two terms, and they have not been held since 2009. The post of the president also remained vacant for two and a half years when Michel Suleiman's term ended in May 2014. The post remained suspended until Hezbollah and its allies ensured that Michel Aoun, an ally of Hezbollah, was elected as president, and Samir Frangieh, an ally of the Future Movement was excluded from the presidential post. This marked an important milestone in Iran's expansion⁽²²⁾ and led to the emergence of political-sectarian alliances that deepened political differences on internal and external issues, especially between the March 8 and March 14 alliances. This in turn cast a shadow of doubt over Lebanon's political future, with the country suffering without a strong and sustainable government. This crisis has continued to date which is reflected in the recent resignation of Hassan Diab's government.

Iran was able to politicize the Shiite community in Lebanon and incite sectarianism by supporting movements, forces, and organizations that have sectarian dimensions. This was a reason for sectarian tensions rising across Lebanese society, and agitated hostility between the components of Lebanese society. Hezbollah was able to utilize the state's resources to tighten its political, economic and security grip over the country and implement Iran's agenda. As a result, Hezbollah controlled the Lebanese state to implement Iran's agenda.⁽²³⁾

In addition, Iran worked to ensure that its allies and their followers in Lebanon were loyal to its sectarian ideology by activating the ideological dimension. At the core of this dimension is total loyalty to Iran. This explains the fact that Velayat-e Faqih did not focus on building administrative, political, and economic structures in Lebanon and did not promote the concept of developing or strengthening

Lebanese national identity. Instead, the Velayat-e Faqih strategy focused on supporting certain actors who are loyal to Iran at the expense of Lebanon. Velayat-e Faqih seeks to keep the state incomplete or suspended to some extent. This situation would allow Iran to strengthen its influence and keep Lebanon under the control of its allies.⁽²⁴⁾ The Lebanese national identity is threatened in light of Iranian attempts to strengthen the sectarian identity at the expense of Lebanon's inclusive national identity and to give an Iranian character to Lebanese landmarks, such as naming a road near Beirut airport after Khomeini, erecting a statue of Qassem Soleimani in the Maroun al-Ras area in the south of the country and pictures of Iranian symbols on the streets of many towns and cities.⁽²⁵⁾ All Lebanese sects are inclined to search for allies abroad to strengthen their positions and ensure their survival. Lebanon became hostage to the dictates, balances and interests of foreign powers, in spite of the interests of the Lebanese national state.

Iran has attempted to reduce Arab influence in Lebanon, especially after Hezbollah controlled the foreign agenda of the Lebanese government. It also succumbed to Iran at the expense of Arab interests, particularly in relation to its position on the Arab League, and the League's decisions that impact Iran and its allies in the region. For example, Lebanon abstained from voting on several resolutions that condemned Iran's provocative actions against Arab countries. This had a negative impact on Lebanese-Arab relations, particularly with the Gulf states which have supported Lebanon for many years.⁽²⁶⁾

Lebanon has not merely been isolated from its Arab environment due to Iran's interference but has also been subjected to international isolation. In line with many changes in the Arab and American arenas, along with Washington's policy of maximum pressure against Iran's infiltration in the region, Lebanon has been isolated politically and economically since 2015. This was heightened by Hezbollah's interference in regional files such as Syria and Yemen and its continuous attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As a result, Lebanon was exposed to international sanctions because of Iran's interference and for the government succumbing to Iran's policies that were denounced by the region and the world.⁽²⁷⁾ Not to mention, there is the possibility that Lebanon will lose its relationships with many countries that have started to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization such as the Netherlands, Britain, and most recently Germany which took this step in May 2020.⁽²⁸⁾

The wars and ongoing conflicts waged by Hezbollah on behalf of Iran have mired the Lebanese state in a series of crises, the latest of which is the economic crisis that it experiences. As a result of Hezbollah's wars, Lebanon's infrastructure has been destroyed and the country suffers from the ramifications of the Caesar Act that targets the Syrian regime. Under this act, any foreign party dealing with the Syrian regime will face severe sanctions from the US administration. It is well known that Hezbollah has close economic relations with the Syrian regime, and they are managed via official channels (i.e., party ministers/representatives), thus making

the Lebanese state vulnerable to US sanctions, if Washington was convinced in this regard.

2. Weakening Economic Performance

Economically, Iran played a role in sliding the Lebanese economy into a recession because of Lebanon's involvement in regional conflicts such as the Syrian conflict, and Hezbollah's control of many ministries, as well as economic and financial institutions. Hezbollah harnessed these institutions for its own benefit. Iran and Hezbollah have created many problems for Lebanon with the Gulf states. All these issues led to the Lebanese economy being severely harmed, such as the tourism sector being disrupted and an interruption in shipping and transportation routes across Syrian territories as well as the weakening of the banking sector. Consequently, economic growth started to decline in 2012 and has continued to deteriorate.⁽²⁹⁾ Lebanon has also become one of the most indebted countries in the world with its debts reaching approximately \$86 billion in 2019. In addition, nearly 28 percent of Lebanese people live below the poverty line and the unemployment rate exceeds 36 percent.⁽³⁰⁾

Foreign investment has also declined. It is difficult for investors, companies, and countries, particularly for Gulf and Arab states, to invest in Lebanon and to liaise with ministries and financial institutions due to Hezbollah's control over the Lebanese government. In addition, there are difficulties because of international sanctions on Lebanon, the accusations of terrorism against Hezbollah and the ban imposed by many Western countries on doing business with Lebanon. In particular, the mentioned investors are mostly from countries which are perceived by Hezbollah as its enemies.⁽³¹⁾

The dominance of Hezbollah extends into the economic sphere. Hezbollah in Lebanon is a parallel entity to the Lebanese state. Accordingly, it has a parallel or an alternate economy to that of the Lebanese economy. This has negative repercussions and a direct impact on aggravating the current economic crisis. According to the former Lebanese Minister for Administrative Development May Chidiac, "The main crisis for the Lebanese economy is the parallel economy of Hezbollah and the smuggling that it carries out [...] Hezbollah can bring in materials through informal channels and even the port without paying fees based on the fact that what it imports is under the framework of the resistance, so all commercial materials are brought in without paying taxes."⁽³²⁾ Hezbollah is also taking advantage of the economic crisis to increase the import of Iranian weapons and products, which are tax-free, inexpensive and promoted by the movement and its followers. To avoid international sanctions due to commercial trade with Iran, and to maintain the flow of Iranian goods, the movement has increased the smuggling of these goods.⁽³³⁾ Thus, it is free from Lebanon's import regulations and evades the payment of customs duties that could help to alleviate the economic crisis facing the country.

The nature of the movement's role in the Lebanese arena, its relationship with Iran, and the pressures and sanctions the two sides are facing led to a drain on foreign currencies. Hezbollah smuggled foreign currency, especially the US dollar, from the Lebanese market to neighboring countries and then to Iran. Businessmen close to Hezbollah withdrew their money from Lebanese banks and deposited it in Iraqi banks operating closely with Iran. These deposits were estimated at nearly \$1 billion. Hezbollah carried out dozens of foreign currency smuggling operations from Lebanon to further Iran's interests, which caused the crisis of the dollar in the local market.⁽³⁴⁾

Therefore, the management of the economy in this manner limited the amount of economic aid that Lebanon received. Despite the economic deterioration, Lebanon did not receive regional and international support, nor did the International Monetary Fund respond to the Lebanese government's request for financial help. This is because previous financial help has contributed in strengthening Hezbollah's dominance over all parts of the country.⁽³⁵⁾

Lebanon's economic losses caused by the explosion at Beirut port and the Caesar Act were very severe. According to the World Bank's announcement in relation to the explosion at Beirut port on August 4, 2020, the financial losses ranged between \$3.8 billion and \$4.6 billion. Infrastructure, homes, hospitals, schools, and streets were damaged. The explosion caused many companies to close which contributed to the loss of economic activity ranging between \$2.9 billion and \$3.5 billion, according to the World Bank's estimates.⁽³⁶⁾ The storage of ammonium nitrate caused this explosion, which was estimated at 2,750 kilograms. The finger of blame for the reckless storage of this explosive material was directed at Hezbollah.

The US administration has imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime through the activation of the Caesar Act. According to this Act, the regime and all the parties that deal with it will be subject to prosecution and sanctions, including individuals, companies, groups, and countries, meaning all those who support the regime and deal with it militarily and economically. This in turn makes Lebanon an easy target for sanctions since it is the closest to the Syrian regime and has extensive dealings with it on the one hand, and Hezbollah has intervened in the Syrian conflict on the other hand. The sanctions will impact any Lebanese company that invests in Syria, especially since Hezbollah is one of the main targets of the sanctions. Therefore, these companies will not be able to work within Syria without facing a raft of sanctions, meaning that Lebanon's participation in challenging US policy will cause the Lebanese economy to suffer significant financial losses that will exceed expected profits.⁽³⁷⁾

Several economic sectors were impacted by Iran's interference in Lebanese affairs. The pharmaceutical sector was subjected to multiple impacts because it was undermined by smuggling operations, especially of imported medicines,

through illegal crossings. Lebanese medicines were replaced by Iranian medicines which Hezbollah has brought into the Lebanese market. The head of the Health Committee in Parliament, Assem Araj, warned about the possibility of the market being flooded with Iranian medicine by saying, "The borders are open, and it is possible that Iranian medicine will enter the country illegally." The Secretary of the Strong Republic bloc, Fadi Karam, mentioned in relation to the Iranian medicines that come into Lebanon, "Iran is working to use Lebanon's economy to its benefit because there is profit from drug smuggling operations amounting to \$150 million annually."⁽³⁸⁾

3. The Worsening of External Threats and Security Challenges

Given the nature of its interventions, Iranian interference extended to undermine the security and stability of Lebanon. Although Hezbollah participates in political life, its weapons are still outside state control and is one of the factors that have weakened Lebanese national security and is a major concern for society and the state. These weapons had another destination other than Israel: the Lebanese interior. This was demonstrated in the events of May 7, 2008, which took place in Beirut and several areas of Mount Lebanon between the so-called opposition and loyalists. Hezbollah controls Beirut using force.⁽³⁹⁾ Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres called for the movement to be disarmed and to end its military capabilities because it inflames tensions in Lebanon. He also asked the Lebanese government to take a position in relation to Hezbollah's disarmament and the negative impact of its interference in Syria.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In spite of the Lebanese, regional and international rejection of Hezbollah's possession and deployment of weapons, Iran continues to strengthen and arm the movement to serve its internal and external objectives.

Hezbollah's policy has weakened the Lebanese National Army. Iran operates in line with its regional objectives. It wants Hezbollah's "forces" to become an alternative to the Lebanese army. Iran and Hezbollah do not even think of submitting to the Lebanese army and limiting arms to it like any other army.⁽⁴¹⁾ This undermines any steps to build Lebanon's security apparatus and impedes the ability of the country to uphold its security and stability.

Tehran considers Lebanon to be a pressure card in the face of Israel and regional powers, and as a pivot to serve Iran's influence in the Arab Mashreq region. As a result, Lebanon has become an arms depot where Hezbollah stores weapons, military arsenal, and missiles in populated areas. Several reports indicate that there are at least 28 locations used by Hezbollah as depots to store missiles located in Beirut, residential areas, and places with vital infrastructure.⁽⁴²⁾ This poses a great danger to the population if they are targeted and exposed to the dangers of explosions, particularly after the Beirut port explosion, which raised alarm bells about weapons and missile stockpiles. The explosion of the stored weapons would likely cause a colossal loss of lives and widespread destruction.

Nathan Sales, who is the coordinator for counterterrorism at the US State Department, revealed sensitive information obtained by the United States about Hezbollah's storage of ammonium nitrate in several European countries, including Belgium, Spain, Italy and France, and the organization's suspicious financial transactions in a number of European countries.⁽⁴³⁾

The Iranian strategy has exposed Lebanon's security to external threats. This was demonstrated through Hezbollah's active participation in the Syrian conflict to support the Assad regime, until it became one of the pillars of this conflict and its most important actor. However, the price of this participation was very high for Lebanon in terms of the economic and social losses it faced and the significant security implications.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The most prominent implications were exposing Lebanese security to continuous Israeli violations, and making Lebanon's security vulnerable to Israeli attacks.

Lebanese society has not been spared the ramifications of Iran's interference and its role in Lebanon. The deterioration of the internal situation has impacted the lives and livelihoods of the Lebanese people. The waste crisis in 2015 revealed the failure of the Lebanese government to address the crisis due to Iranian interference in the politics and economy of the country. The impact on society was also highlighted. The global coronavirus pandemic revealed the impact of Lebanon's relationship with Iran, because the first coronavirus case was recorded in Lebanon on February 20, 2020: a woman who arrived from the Iranian city of Qom. Two people on the same flight tested positive later. This incident led to calls to suspend flights between the two countries.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Although the Lebanese government suspended flights between the two countries at the end of February 2020, informal contact with Iran, especially with members of Hezbollah, continued as the government cannot stop communication and the continuation of visits between the two countries.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In addition, Hezbollah is managing the health crisis in parallel with the Lebanese state and the country's health care system. In the same context, Al-Rassoul al-Azam Hospital owned by Hezbollah is not registered under the national emergency plan to fight the coronavirus pandemic; therefore, it kept the number of coronavirus cases in Lebanon secret and did not reveal if Iran was the source of any case.⁽⁴⁷⁾

III. The Opportunities and Challenges in Relation to Iran's Presence in Lebanon

On the one hand, Lebanon can provide opportunities for Iran to strengthen its role in the country, whereas, on the other hand, it can expose Iran to challenges that may hinder or limit its role in the future. Regarding the prospect of maintaining or increasing Iran's influence in Lebanon, there are several factors that support this trend, most notably the sectarian nature of Lebanon which provides an appropriate environment for Iran's interference in Lebanon and for the continuation of its role. Iran was able to infiltrate Lebanon based on a shared ideology. This commonality

made the view of the majority in Bekaa and southern Beirut, support and promote Iranian interests. "Iran or Hezbollah became central to the collective thinking of the sect's position in the context of the sectarian struggle in the region."⁽⁴⁸⁾ Iran's role in Lebanon was different from its other regional and international roles due to its organic link to the Shiite social component which strengthens its role. Undoubtedly, Iran is exploiting the crisis in Lebanon to present itself as a supporter and protector of Lebanese Shiites. Iran spearheads the role of the religious marjaya situated in Qom and the policy of Vali-e-Faqih.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Sectarianism is a real problem and impediment to saving Lebanon from foreign interventions, particularly those of Iran. It has become an impediment to the efficiency of the political system, because sectarian democracy prevents the establishment of a true nation-state which values citizenship and coexistence instead of polarization, dependency and promotion of foreign agendas.

In addition to sectarianism, Hezbollah's status and capabilities provide an opportunity to maintain Iran's role in Lebanon. This movement is loyal to the Vali-e-Faqih. The leader is the Vali-e-Faqih and the leader of the movement. The movement's followers obey the orders of the Vali-e-Faqih, and the movement's leaders are appointed by him. The religious, ideological, and political connection with the Iranian political marjaya (Velayat-e Faqih) has made the movement an Iranian proxy or part of Iran's strategy in Lebanon and the region.⁽⁵⁰⁾ This association boosts Iran's role, especially considering the movement's capabilities and the expansion of its role internally and externally. This contributes to the strengthening, continuity, and distinctiveness of Iran's role in the face of the influence of other countries in Lebanon.

Not only that, Iran has other alliances in Lebanon; therefore, Iran's power and role in Lebanon, politically and economically, are not dependent solely on its relationship with Hezbollah, but also on its alliances with several other Lebanese forces and parties,⁽⁵¹⁾ in light of the absence of competing Lebanese forces that are equivalent in power to Hezbollah and have relations with countries competing with it.

Iran benefits from the economic crisis and the absence of external support for Lebanon. Iran exploits international pressures and economic sanctions impacting Lebanon and the country's economic need by providing commercial offers and economic support to the Lebanese government. Given the positions of regional and international powers that refuse to offer economic alternatives to Lebanon, Iran will be the available alternative,⁽⁵²⁾ which gives the Iranian role in Lebanon additional strength compared to other Gulf and Western countries.

There are many challenges that may limit Iran's influence in Lebanon, most notably the growing popular anger among the Lebanese Shiites against Iran. The popular protests that broke out on October 17, 2019 were a pressure card and a challenge to the role of Iran and its proxies in Lebanon on more than one level. For

the first time, these protests were also held in the areas of Hezbollah's influence, even if the numbers of protesters were modest in some of these areas, including the city of Sidon, al-Arqoub, Nabatiyeh, Kafman, and Tyre.⁽⁵³⁾ The challenge for Iran is the growing Shiite voice demanding the departure of Lebanon's political class dominated by Hezbollah, which has the greatest influence in Lebanese political life.⁽⁵⁴⁾

In addition to this internal rejection of the role of Iran and its allies, the intensity of American pressure on Iran and Hezbollah will impact the future course of Iranian influence. US sanctions have caused a stifling financial crisis for Iran and Hezbollah. This crisis poses a great challenge to Iran's goals and agenda in Lebanon. In addition, Hezbollah's allies and organizations can no longer draw financial support from Iranian-funded organizations.⁽⁵⁵⁾

International pressure and sanctions on Iran and its allies in the region and Lebanon have cut off financing channels, blocked support and arms supplies, and sanctioned individuals and institutions that Iran and Hezbollah rely on to finance their needs and requirements.

US sanctions have affected many individuals, leaders, companies and entities linked to Hezbollah in Lebanon, including its deputies in the Lebanese Parliament.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The Caesar Act for the Protection of Civilians in Syria will not be the last and it aims to punish the Syrian regime and the parties cooperating with it, the most important of which is Hezbollah.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Not to mention, there are other international steps taken by Germany, Netherlands, Kosovo, Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League, namely the designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.⁽⁵⁸⁾ This may lead to steps that negatively impact Hezbollah's activities inside and outside Lebanon which therefore undermines Iran's role in Lebanon.

Iran itself is going through an unprecedented economic crisis. This restrains Iran and makes it difficult for Tehran to fulfil its promises to its allies and other governments. It is no longer possible for Iran to present itself as a supporter of Lebanon because Iran suffers from domestic political, economic and health crises and from international isolation. If it cannot address its own crises, how will it deal with Lebanon's crises? The Lebanese government cannot realistically accept Iranian economic cooperation, since it will expose it to international sanctions and isolation,⁽⁵⁹⁾ and it is not able to withstand this. The Caesar Act is an opportunity and a challenge for Lebanon at the same time. If the popular movement in Lebanon succeeds in choosing a government that is not close to Hezbollah, then this may be an opportunity to put pressure on Hezbollah, by reconsidering all the economic agreements that the previous Lebanese government made with the Syrian regime with the support and influence of Hezbollah, which have harmed the Lebanese economy.

Iran's role in Lebanon is rejected by the Lebanese people as well as by the

Iranian people. The cost of the Iranian role in Lebanon and the region and the increasing emergence of the IRGC as a regional representative of Iran's policy have contributed to the frustration felt by large segments of the Iranian people because the political system is no longer able to achieve the country's economic objectives.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Popular frustration has been turning into a popular movement that resents the Iranian government and its costly regional role.

Thus, the Iranian role in Lebanon is facing challenges rather than opportunities, indicating possible changes to Iran's role in the future, and these changes will most likely not be in its favor.

Conclusion

Iran's role in Lebanon dating back to the beginning of the eighties has gone beyond the security and cultural spheres to include the political and economic spheres. Iran has expanded its role by continuously exploiting the situations and crises in Lebanon to strengthen its role. It has strengthened its allies militarily, economically, politically, ideologically, and culturally and linked them to Iran in an organic manner.

Despite the political and media strategy to market Iran as the main supporter of Lebanon and its people, Iran suffers from ongoing crises, and its support is limited to Hezbollah and not to other Lebanese components, including some Shiites, who do not pledge allegiance to Iran. However, after every war waged against Lebanon, it receives support from the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, which is the largest contributor to the country's reconstruction, and from international powers including the United States of America, France, and the European Union.

What distinguishes Iran's role in Lebanon is its penetration and the fact that it is based on sectarian dimensions and raising emotive political slogans such as "resistance" and "anti-Israel." When we look at other influential countries in Lebanon, these countries have not exploited the sectarian dimension to the extent that Iran has in its relationship and role in Lebanon.

When tracking the opportunities that Iran has exploited and comparing them with the challenges it faces in Lebanon, it is expected that its role will decline in the future after its reality has been exposed and its negative impact on Lebanese society highlighted, in addition to, the international pressures and sanctions led by the United States of America, recently supported by Germany and France. These sanctions aim to besiege Iran's regional role. These countries have taken many serious steps to achieve this.

It can be said that the crisis Hezbollah is facing today is a result of sequenced internal and external factors. Some stem from the movement's internal practices, and others from the nature of the movement's affiliation with the Iranian strategy. Therefore, the challenges Iran faces today will have implications for the future position of Hezbollah in Lebanon, which in turn will make the movement encounter challenges that are no less dangerous than those facing Iran.

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