

How the US Can Save Lebanon's Christians From Hezbollah

Captain ® Mitchell Gray



Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورازم

The United States must support Lebanon's Christians while developing alternatives to Iran backed Hezbollah to accommodate Lebanon's large Shia population. If the United States neglects Lebanon it is likely that Hezbollah's political and social influence will continue to expand. Lebanon is neighbors with Israel, Syria and Jordan, where their strategic location has attracted the attention of big powers who have attempted to influence the major political events of the Middle East. Specifically, since the end of World War II, Lebanon has experienced two "states within a state": The Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hezbollah.

Political Development of the Lebanese entity

Lebanon's political development chiefly concerned the Christians, especially the Maronite Catholics, and the Sunnis. After World War I, Lebanon was administered by France, in accordance with the League of Nations mandate, until Lebanon attained their independence in 1943. In order to develop a modus operandi for governance, a handful of Maronite and Sunni elites concluded a gentleman's agreement on sharing power known as the National Pact. This arrangement guaranteed a Christian President and a Sunni Prime Minister while relegating the Shia to an institutionalized inferior political status.

The Shia were an impoverished minority who settled in south Lebanon and the Bekka Valley. Starting in the 1960s, led by Imam Musa al-Sadr, the Shia began the process of political mobilization. By the 1970s, the Shia based Amal organization took root in Lebanon. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran galvanized the Shia of Lebanon as the Ayatollah Khomeini introduced the "guardianship of the jurist consultant" (wilayat al-faqih) which inspired greater political involvement by the Shia. The Lebanese Shia Imams had close ties to their Iranian brethren.

The "Party of God" (Hezbollah) was formed to resist the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Israel had aligned its interests with the Phalange party leader Bashir Gemayel. The Phalange party was a Maronite faction with a well-formed militia. Though based in Lebanon, Hezbollah was rightly described as an Iranian proxy. The Phalange party resisted Syrian occupation in Lebanon. Syria had aligned with Iran because of their mutual hatred of the Iraqi Ba'ath party. These Byzantine alliances made Hezbollah an enemy of the Lebanese Christian forces.

Since the 1980s, Hezbollah has grown in prestige and entered Lebanese politics gaining seats in the Parliament. Hezbollah gained more support after 2006 when they successfully repelled Israeli military attacks in Lebanon. Hezbollah has emerged as the most powerful entity in Lebanon though the President continues to be a Christian.

From the end of the 1967 War, the Shia in Lebanon rapidly transformed from a benign minority with little political power into a major force in Lebanon's politics and society. Hezbollah has expanded into global operations and is still supported and backed by Iran.

The United States History in Lebanon

The United States first significant military intervention in the modern Arab world was in 1958 when President Eisenhower dispatched troops to Lebanon when Lebanon's President Camille Chamoun

invoked the Eisenhower Doctrine, which was a Cold War era policy to confront Soviet aggression in any country that requested American aid.

Chamoun convinced the United States that Soviet backed Syria had destabilized Syria and that a Syrian invasion was possible. Syria has never fully accepted the post-World War I divisions made by the British and French that included the creation of a Greater Lebanon that annexed Syrian territories for the new Lebanese entity. Lebanon, before that time, meant Mount Lebanon and this did not include Beirut, Tripoli and other areas that had been part of Ottoman Syria.

Operation Bluebat was launched in 1958 when U.S. Marines made an amphibious landing on Beirut's beaches where they encountered not Syrian forces but comely Lebanese beachgoers in western bikinis! The United States military should have learned a valuable lesson in Lebanon related to the nature of future Middle East wars.

This was not a "conventional" war but a domestic problem among sectarian groups. In such a war, the smart use of propaganda, intelligence and small unit action are required. The United States did not encounter much combat and they were badly prepared in terms of intelligence and local knowledge. The United States military was structured to fight nation states armies. For example, the United States did not have a map of Beirut more current than the 1930s.

The underlying cause of Lebanon's "events of 1958," that some dubbed as a civil war was domestic tensions exacerbated by the rise of Arab nationalism due to the rise of Egypt's Nasser. The 1958 crisis was settled when Lebanon enjoyed a peaceful transition of power when Army general Fuad Chehab assumed the presidency calming Sunni fears that President Chamoun would not leave office.

From the perspective of the United States, their interest in Lebanon was mainly related to the Cold War and countering Soviet influence. Lebanon was not an oil producing region but Beirut was a key financial center that was oriented towards the West and therefore Lebanon was considered worthy of support in the Cold War's zero-sum analysis.

The situation in Lebanon changed in 1982-3 when the United States deployed peacekeeping troops along with Italy, France and Britain in order to implement United Nations policies for the safe withdrawal of the PLO from Lebanon. The Christians, especially the Maronites, were concerned that the PLO had formed a "state within a state" in southern Lebanon. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli war had fled to Lebanon. After the 1967 defeat of Arab forces by Israel, the PLO assumed a greater role in the Middle East and they "militarized" the camps in Lebanon which threatened the sectarian balance of the National Pact.

The initial United States deployment of troops was successful as the PLO exited Lebanon. However, political events would soon change the landscape of Middle East politics. Shortly after being elected as President of Lebanon, Phalange leader Bashir Gemayel was assassinated, which sent shock waves through the region. Gemayel was reviled because he allied with Israel in the civil war. Syrian operatives were responsible for the murder. Gemayel had been a charismatic leader who promised a new Lebanon for all Lebanese and he rejected the "old ways" which he called unworkable for Lebanon.

The United States, via Phillip Habib their Middle East envoy, had guaranteed the safety of PLO families that remained in Lebanese camps. So, when Lebanese Forces, with the apparent consent of Israel, stormed two PLO camps and brutally slaughtered Palestinians it was widely condemned as a war crime. The Lebanese Forces were motivated by revenge for the killing of Gemayel and years of suffering PLO atrocities in their villages that often go unmentioned in the western media. Such were the raw and angry emotions that were unleashed in volatile Lebanon in 1975.

The United States forces became a target in Lebanon. The United States role as a neutral peacekeeper was challenged when the USS New Jersey lobbed shells into Druze areas. Many Muslims and Druze believed that the United States was now backing Israel and the Christians. In addition to that, the United States had failed to protect Palestinians as they had promised. The dye was now cast for the United States to suffer significant casualties in the Middle East.

With the PLO reeling, the void was filled by the emergence of Hezbollah, Amal and Islamic Jihad, which were Shia entities hostile to the United States presence which was seen as helping Israel. First, the United States embassy was bombed and this was followed by the tragic suicide bombing of the Marines barracks near the Beirut airport. These attacks introduced the concept of martyrdom operations where Shia clerics ruled that these tactics were not suicide—forbidden in Islam—but legitimate military acts of resistance. These attacks were met with anger by President Ronald Reagan, but at the end of the day he decided to withdraw American troops as opposed to expanding military operations.

Therefore, in the early 1980s we see that the United States role was part of a global peacekeeping effort to help stabilize Lebanon. The United States interest was in regional stability and to help Lebanon regain full control over its sovereignty. The United States was not seeking territory or resources such as oil. However, the United States considered Lebanon as a key location for regional issues and the United States had a vested interest in promoting a stable Arab world because of its oil producing status.

The United States Interest in Lebanon Today

As stated above, the United States has largely considered Lebanon within the framework of international affairs. While the United States has intervened twice in Lebanon, the motivation was not to help Lebanon as much as it was to preserve regional order. However, the United States should now consider supporting Lebanon for the purpose of assisting the Christian population and preventing Lebanon from becoming totally dominated by Lebanon, Syrian and Iran.

Christians are being slaughtered in Egypt, Iraq and other places at an alarming rate. But only in Lebanon are the Christians tethered to the government structure. For example, the Coptic Christians in Egypt make up to ten percent of the population but they have no political voice in the Egyptian government. Likewise, Christians in Iraq have no political voice.

Christians cannot change the fact that they are a minority in the Middle East. Nonetheless, there are millions of Christians in the region who deserve protection. If the United States abandons the

Christians, then there is the possibility they will be further marginalize if not all but eliminated from the very lands from which they originated—centuries before the Muslims, in fact.

Lebanese Christians are somewhat protected by their political status, though that position was weakened in the Taif Accords which ended the fighting in Lebanon in 1990. This agreement, heavily influenced by Iran's Syrian ally, disarmed and dismantled the Christian militias while leaving Hezbollah intact. While the presidency remains in the hands of the Christians, the president's powers were degraded.

Currently, the Lebanese president is Michel Aoun, a former army commander. General Aoun fled Lebanon to France in 1990 when the resistance collapsed. He returned after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2006 to seek political office. In the turbulent years that followed, Aoun was able to reach an agreement with Hezbollah that allowed him to become president.

Michel Aoun signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah that is very beneficial for Hezbollah and further erodes the political status of Christians in Lebanon. Meanwhile, Hezbollah engages in transnational criminal activities on four continents that includes trafficking in narcotics. Hezbollah has actively deployed assets to Syria and Yemen consistent with Iranian interests. Hezbollah's weapons arsenal and rhetoric risk another war with Israel in Lebanon, which would be a tragedy for this small country suffering an economic crisis while grappling with another refugee crisis brought about by the civil war in Syria.

The United States interests cannot be furthered with Hezbollah in control of Lebanon. This would be tantamount to Iran gaining influence and power at the expense of a nation that had been oriented towards the west and an intermediary between the West and the Middle East. Likewise, the Eastern Mediterranean is becoming a major source for hydrocarbons which only increases the prospects for volatility that could adversely impact the United States.

What Can the United States do to Support Lebanon?

The United States considers Hezbollah to be a terrorist entity. Until September 11, 2001, Hezbollah was responsible for more deaths of Americans than all other terror groups, including al-Qaeda. Hezbollah has engaged in suicide bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, hijacking, and piracy, drug trafficking, money laundering and espionage against the United States and its allies. Hezbollah also has significant conventional forces and munitions and is capable of engaging in all types of warfare. Hezbollah has an extensive network inside the United States that has threatened to become "operational" if Iran's interests are attacked.

On January 25, as an annex to Executive Order 12947, Hezbollah was listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist. In 1997, the U.S. Department of State designated Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. On October 31, 2001, Hezbollah was designated as a Specially Designated Global terrorist per Executive Order 13224. On March 23, 2006, the U.S. Department of Treasury designated pursuant to Executive Order 13224 al Manar, a satellite television operation owned or controlled by the Iran-funded Hezbollah terrorist network. Also designated were al Nour Radio and the Lebanese Media Group, the parent company of both al Manar and al Nour Radio.

Now, in October, 2018, the United States Congress has passed legislation to impose new sanctions on Hezbollah and nations that support its terror activities such as arms procurement, recruiting services, combat or financial services. This is a bipartisan bill titled The Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Amendment Acts. It is expected that President Donald Trump will sign the legislation.

The United States should loudly condemn Hezbollah for their role in the assassination of Rafik Hariri the former Prime Minister who was instrumental in rebuilding Beirut after the civil war. The United States could compare this atrocity to the likes of Kim Jong IL and other despots who resort to these methods. While Hezbollah might counter with accusations against the United States in its aggressive policies the United States can point to an equally impressive array of positive contributions—something Hezbollah can only manufacture for its supporter’s approval.

These actions aimed at Hezbollah along with severe economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran are among the best tools to help Lebanon escape Iranian bondage. However, Lebanon has a large Shia population that had been repressed for years and it is important that the Shia are not punished for the crimes of Hezbollah. The Amal organization has been criticized for severe corruption and probably is not effective for replacing Hezbollah. The United States must appeal to the Shia population as a positive force and not an enemy.

One step in the right direction is the active role the United States Aid in Development is taking in eastern Lebanon to improve agricultural protection. This non-military intervention can achieve through education, training and cooperation what cannot be achieved by bullets by building trust and friendship by improving Lebanon’s economy. Lebanese agriculture was poorly developed because of the French dominated silk industry and Beirut’s services economy that did little for small farmers and made credit all but impossible for most agricultural entities.

Therefore, by decreasing Iran and Hezbollah’s influence the United States can also increase its role in building up all sectors of Lebanon’s economy that will help all the sectarian groups. This method will address some of the structural problems that existed in Lebanon. Lebanon’s open economy that emphasized tourism, financial services and trade prospered but it tended to favor the established Christian and Sunni elites of the Beirut merchant class. By learning from history, Lebanon can do both and this will allow for a true national identity to eventually emerge. When prosperity favors narrow interests, it breeds widespread discontentment.

The speeches of Bashir Gemayel are worth revisiting. Gemayel is often described—not incorrectly—as a ruthless warlord. But we must remember that even our own civil war produced tremendous killing, destruction and mayhem—such is the tragedy of civil war. Nonetheless, there is an important theme in his public speeches that endures to this day. This theme regards the future of the Lebanese state. Despite his Christian background, Gemayel did not advocate for a “national homeland for Christians.” He demanded a new Lebanon for all Lebanese. In other words, he was a patriot who rejected foreign intervention.

He abhorred decisions being made for Lebanon by Syria, Israel, the United States or the PLO. Who can blame him? Did not America's founding fathers vilify decisions made by the British Parliament without their consent?

His critics point to his association with Israel and other outside forces. But one must not lose sight that the Christians had been besieged and history is filled with strange alliances. Did not both Nazi Germany and the United States at various times align interests with Soviet dictator Josef Stalin? Did not the United States actively support radical Sunni interests in order to blacken the Soviets eyes in Afghanistan in the 1980s? And did not these so-called allies later crash their planes into America's most scared monuments of government and commerce? It is worth mentioning that as early as 1979, in his public speeches, Gemayel warned the United States that their policies in the Middle East would come back to haunt them.

Lebanon is in danger of becoming fully snared in Hezbollah's web. Historically a Christian dominated Lebanon promoted Western values and an open economy. While the United States is a secular government its founding was influenced by Christian values. Culturally, the United States is a Christian stronghold. It is estimated that there are 45,000,000 Christians in the United States with over 100,000 congregations—by far the largest religious community in America.

The United States cannot help the Lebanese Christians with an armed intervention—save to prevent a genocide. But we can help strengthen the Christian position as a powerful and positive institution that deserves to maintain its position in this land where Jesus Christ himself preached. The best way to accomplish this is to continue putting economic, diplomatic and moral pressure on Iran and its Hezbollah proxy along with using its soft power to improve Lebanon economy and agricultural sector which will also lessen the motivation to grow cannabis and opium. The United States can work to develop and support Shia opposition to Hezbollah and to make sure this large and important segment of Lebanon is justly treated and properly represented.

The Memorandum of Understanding hammered out by Hezbollah and Michel Aoun states that Lebanon must close the file on their bloody civil war. If so, then Lebanese should consider the speeches of Bashir Gemayel free from the emotions of war. This "ruthless warlord" envisioned a new, prosperous and inclusive Lebanon, where Christians, Muslims and Druze all have a seat at the table. But until Hezbollah can be rolled back, the future of Lebanon will be bleak for the Christians. And this will be a sad day for the United States who should promote and protect those in the Middle East with shared values and ideas.