

Countering Hezbollah: The New U.S. policy for Lebanon

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

The United States, in an effort to contain the growth of radical political Islam, should consider policies that would strengthen the Lebanese state which is being encroached upon by Hezbollah. Hezbollah is an Iranian backed entity that was created in Lebanon in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution that transformed Iran from a pro-western regime into an anti-west and anti-Israel entity who desired to export their revolution to the Arab-Islamic world. Lebanon was a recipient of the Iranian Shia revolution which immediately filled the void in Lebanon after the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was forcefully evicted from Lebanon by Israel in 1982-1983. Hezbollah's ultimate goal is the creation of an Islamic state. Hezbollah can conduct terror operations, gather intelligence, fight conventional wars, practice parliamentary politics and engage in transnational criminal operations.

Hezbollah was organized in Lebanon where the Shia had been historically overlooked in Lebanon's confessional system that favored Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. In the late 1960s the Lebanese Shia were galvanized by the leadership of Imam Musa al-Sadr who formed the *Amal* group to improve Shia deprivations in the political system as well as improve their socio-economic condition. When the Ayatollah Khomeini assumed power in Iran, he ushered in his *Wilayat al-Fakih*, or Guardianship of the Jurisconsultant, which enabled a qualified Shia cleric to govern nations and his decisions would be final in most cases. These developments empowered the historically ignored Shia of Lebanon who suffered uneven social development and limited political representation.

Lebanon erupted in civil war on April 13, 1975 when various provocations led to tit-for tat attacks chiefly between Palestinian guerillas and Maronite Christians. Arab historian Farid el Khazen wrote *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon 1967-1976*, which described how the presence of an armed and radicalized PLO had become a state within a state, especially after the six-day war in 1967 when Nasserism's pan-Arab ideology began to decline. The crushing Arab defeat by Israel greatly enhanced the standing of the PLO as the flag bearer of Arab causes. The PLO fled to Lebanon after they were driven out of Jordan in 1970.

Because Lebanon, unlike most of its Arab neighbors, had a relatively open society with political pluralism and democratic institutions it was at a disadvantage with the authoritarian Arab regimes that emerged in the 1960s especially during crises that affected the Arab world. Those Arab regimes expelled the PLO who took advantage of Lebanon's openness in a country where several hundred thousand Palestinians lived in various refugee camps

Lebanon's 1943 National Pact established their post-independence political system which was based on compromise between Muslims and Christians and proportional representation based on religious sect. This system was able to survive crises before 1967 in a time when the Palestinian issue was minimal. But after 1967 the Palestinian cause became radicalized and replaced the pan-Arab ideology of Nasser. The PLO was backed by the Soviet Union and other "revolutionary" regimes and also funded by Gulf petrodollars. The role of the PLO in Lebanon badly divided the country along confessional lines.

Because Lebanon had a large Muslim population the attitude after 1967 among many Muslim's was that Lebanon should accommodate the PLO armed presence and should allow the PLO space to launch attacks on Israel from Lebanese territory. For most Christians, this was a breach of Lebanese sovereignty and exceeded their compromises in the National Pact that to them meant Arab nationalism would be "moderate" and not radical or overly Islamic.

By the late 1960s the Lebanese state was in gridlock and no consensus could be achieved over the PLO role in Lebanon. In fact, the PLO began to have open confrontations with the Lebanese state and were guilty of crimes and harassment in some predominantly Christian areas—actions that had nothing to do with “resistance” against Israel. Desperate for stability, the Lebanese Army entered into the secret Cairo Agreement in 1969 that was intended to regulate PLO guerilla activity in designated zones in concert with the Lebanese army. The reality was that the PLO regularly violated the Cairo Agreement which showed state weakness. This weakness—evident to all Lebanese society—hastened the growth of private militias among the Christians and Druze. The conditions for a civil rupture were gaining strength.

The growth and power of the PLO in Lebanon challenged state authority. The state was unable to control the PLO because the National Pact required a Christian-Muslim consensus. No consensus could be reached which facilitated tensions and hostilities inside Lebanon. The PLO could act with impunity and their attacks on Israel led to severe and often heavy-handed reprisals that often affected the Shia of southern Lebanon. Thousands of Shia were displaced by the PLO-Israeli conflict and fled to south Beirut suburbs to live in slums. Later, these slums would be a breeding ground for Hezbollah recruitment.

The United States during the late 1960s and through 1975 was preoccupied with its stagnant war in Vietnam and its Cold War with the Soviet Union. The American interest in the Middle East was primarily related to oil security and minimizing Soviet influence. Lebanon was not an oil producer although a great deal of Gulf oil wealth flowed through Lebanese banks. The United States relied on Saudi Arabia and Iran for Gulf security and—most people do not know this—the major western oil companies were pro-Arab and against the creation of the Israeli state because it upset their Arab clients.

Diplomatic and CIA cables from the late 1960s and early 1970s reveal the US was mainly interested in keeping Lebanon stable and trying to limit Israeli reprisals in an effort not to escalate a regional conflict that might trigger Soviet involvement and ignite a major war among the superpowers. The US was concerned about Fedayin groups, such as Fateh, but they seemed willing to accept their presence as long as the conflict was contained in a narrow space.

There is no evidence to show the US was concerned that Lebanon’s Christian community was being assaulted and threatened by the guerilla activities or that the US should defend and support an ideological ally in a volatile region. Beirut had emerged as the leading Mediterranean port and Lebanon’s economy was oriented to the West. Lebanon, especially Beirut, functioned as an intermediary between the Arab East and the West. Beirut’s financial services sector and service economy were friendly to American and Western interests. It seems the US did not foresee any long-term threats to their regional position—such as the possibility of an Islamic takeover of the region that would nationalize assets or dominate the geostrategic areas near Lebanon.

Left on its own, the Lebanese state fractured when it was unable to cope with a combination of internal and external stresses that included inter-Arab issues related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Lebanon had become a confrontational state when other Arab regimes banned the PLO but simultaneously encouraged guerilla attacks from Lebanon. It was just fine with Lebanon’s Arab neighbors for Lebanon to suffer the burden of PLO guerilla attacks and Israeli reprisals.

Because the Lebanese state was paralyzed and unable to exert authority to stop guerilla attacks the Christians bolstered their own militias to protect themselves. Despite the fact that a considerable amount of western media ignores these attacks the historical record reveals hundreds of such attacks by the PLO guerillas and their supporters on Christian areas.¹ While it is true the Christians also committed attacks, one must remember that these Christian communities had existed in Lebanon for many centuries whereas the guerillas were not Lebanese citizens nor part of Lebanon's armed forces. The guerillas were a foreign funded and heavily armed revolutionary group operating under their own command and control structure. With no overt US support or any other help the Lebanese Christians resorted to self-help.

Professor Khazen's book, documented with information from Lebanese military intelligence reports, sets forth how prevalent the PLO had become in Lebanon by the mid-1970s. He noted, "In Beirut there were 100 offices with about half of them used for military and security purposes." Likewise, he noted, The PLO military capabilities on the eve of the war surpassed those of all armed Lebanese groups combined."

I have reviewed a now declassified CIA memo from 1983 which outlines how the Christian militia known as Kataeb (Phalange) was the major impediment to stability in Lebanon and that the group was harassing the Palestinians and the Druze. Such a misguided view by the top intelligence agency likely reflects the influence of notable Arabophiles who occupied high places in the CIA such as the late Robert Ames who was ironically killed in the 1983 bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut by Hezbollah affiliates. Robert Ames was considered the top Arab expert in the CIA and he spoke Arabic fluently. He had befriended none other than Ali Hasan Salameh, aka The Red Price, who was a terrorist mastermind for Fateh and associated with their operational group called Black September. In no way do I question the patriotism of Robert Ames but I do believe there was a considerable "pro-Arab" viewpoint prevalent in the US intelligence and diplomatic communities during this time period.

As noted, the Christians lived in a state which was unable to control, let alone stop, guerilla activity. The fact that Christians—like the guerillas and the Druze—committed atrocities after fighting started in 1975 does not negate their inherent right to defend themselves against an armed revolutionary group that pursued its own foreign policy. As for the Druze, the CIA report did not mention the wholesale bloody slaughters by the Druze of Maronite men, women and children during the 1860 civil war on Mount Lebanon and how the Druze engaged in brutal attacks again in the early 1980s during the "war on the mountain." Again, this does not alleviate Christian responsibility for their attacks but to report that the Christian militia was the main problem in Lebanon was one-sided and misleading.

A further irony about the CIA report is that it was compiled in July, 1983, just a few months after Shia militants blew up the US Embassy in Beirut. And while the analysts were compiling their report about the Christian militia Shia militants were busy planning the deadly bombing of the US and French military barracks where 241 US marines were killed on October 23, 1983. Perhaps the CIA should have been more focused on the rising threat of Hezbollah and less on the actions of Lebanese Christians.

After the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990 the big loser was the Christians. Syrian intervention was supported by Iran and the 1989 Taif Accords that settled the conflict were written under heavy Syrian influence. The Taif Accords stated that there shall be, "Disbanding of all Lebanese and non-

Lebanese militias...the militia's weapons shall be delivered to the State of Lebanon within a period of six months..."

Unfortunately, Hezbollah has not disbanded or disarmed per the agreement and no one has forced them to do so. Hezbollah remains a competitor of the Lebanese state with its own army, intelligence service and weapons procurement system facilitated by Iran, Syria and others. The presence of Hezbollah destabilizes Lebanon. Hezbollah is also accused of playing a leading role in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, a blow from which Lebanon has not fully recovered. The US and other countries accuse Hezbollah of being involved in global narcotics smuggling and money laundering on four continents.

Like the PLO, who was ousted in 1983, Hezbollah has become a "state within a state." Hezbollah is more of a threat to Lebanon and US interests than even the PLO. Hezbollah has expanded into a political organization that is a major actor in Lebanon's political system. Hezbollah, and its political allies, are considered by some analysts as the most powerful block in Lebanon today. In the field of foreign affairs, Hezbollah has threatened Israel with military action over disputed maritime boundaries in the East Mediterranean gas field despite the fact that Hezbollah is not the government of Lebanon. Hezbollah's military operatives are active in Syria and Yemen which are far removed from Israel which calls into question the legitimacy of Hezbollah's arms in Lebanon which are ostensibly there to "protect" Lebanon from an Israeli invasion. However, the most likely cause of an Israeli invasion will be the actions of Hezbollah and not Israeli policy to acquire any Lebanese territory.

Because Iran, backed at times by China and Russia, seeks to expand its influence in the Arab world and the Mediterranean for its natural gas exports to Europe the US must regard Lebanon as a strategic imperative outside of the Cold War or Arab-Israeli conflicts. The US has twice deployed military troops to Lebanon. The first deployment was in 1958 when Lebanese President Camille Chamoun invoked the Eisenhower Doctrine, a Cold War anti-communist policy, and in 1982-1983 when the US joined a multinational peacekeeping force with France, Italy and Britain to facilitate a peaceful withdrawal by the PLO.

Currently the main focus of US support to Lebanon is modest monetary appropriations to the Lebanese military and agricultural assistance by the US State Department. The US also imposes sanctions on Hezbollah members from Iran and Lebanon to confront Iran's role in subverting the US globally. While these are admirable contributions the US should be willing to take a more substantive role in preventing the expansion of Iranian influence via Hezbollah and to take into account the fact that Lebanon may be the only safe haven for Christians in the Middle East given the horrible slaughters in Egypt and Iraq of various Christian groups. Lebanon's Christians were instrumental in making Beirut a valuable intermediary, financial center and a moderating influence on extreme Arabism and Islamism in a region frequently hostile to Christians and the US.

The US should view the Levant region as a key geostrategic zone. This would include Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestinian areas and Israel. Historically, this area was aligned until the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the post-World War One peace settlements that restructured the Middle East to satisfy French and British interests with no resort to local opinion.

In the last several years there have been major discoveries of large hydrocarbon fields in the East Mediterranean. The main beneficiaries are Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and possibly Lebanon. These large fields can have a positive impact on the local economies as gas independence can be attained and the possibility of exports can increase revenue. The US will certainly want to be a significant partner in this area and it is an American company that was largely responsible for the discoveries. The US has the skill, capital and technology to help these countries in their hydrocarbons sector which would be much better than having Iran and or Russia dominate this area.

Though Lebanon is a small country with no oil it has been a key area for global trade, commerce, finance, tourism and intellectual development for ideas circulating in the Arab world. Lebanon's unique development as an open economy with Christian interests institutionalized offered a fantastic ally for the US in one of the most important and volatile areas in the world. The US should learn, nourish and promote these common interests both on moral and geopolitical grounds. Lebanon can no longer be viewed only through the prism of other conflicts or interests. America should look forward to a day when the entire Levant can achieve peace and prosperity which will then spread to other parts of the Arab world and provide a far better alternative than Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, Hama, ISIS or Christian militias.

Photo: US Embassy Lebanon