

## The Difficulties of Iran's Foreign Policy in Lebanon

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Much has been said about Lebanon being a forward position for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps with its Hezbollah army of Shiite militiamen and 'resistance fighters.' Alarm bells rang in the Arab world, the United States, Israel, and western capitals when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the country mid-October. Anti-Iranian personalities and parties in Beirut feared that Hezbollah's bluster has finally succeeded in driving Lebanon willy nilly into the camp of resisters led by Iran. But from all indications, and despite Hezbollah's ability to disrupt normal life in the country, it appears that Iran's foreign policy in Lebanon has failed to produce an activist pro-Iranian foreign policy order. While Lebanon's pro-Iranian opposition (despite its participation in government) has been able to slow the reform of state institutions and criticizes friendly Arab moderates and the West, it cannot decisively force the government to change its long-standing pro-western position.

President Ahmadinejad's visit was actually given more importance than it deserved. Everyone in Lebanon knows that Iran has friends in the country and that a sizeable part of the Shia community looks to Tehran as its Mecca should trouble arise with other

communities. After all, Hezbollah was originally established in the early 1980s as an outpost of a young revolutionary regime that needed Arab and Islamic depth but also as an extension of Shiite Iran's umbrella over an orphan community thousands of miles away. Hezbollah's allies sing Iran's praises on every occasion and credit it for helping Lebanon's reconstruction after the party's war with Israel in 2006 and for continued military support. (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and others provided much more reconstruction funds but get no mention.) The praise for Iran is usually accompanied by extolling the virtues of the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad who also has mastered the art of manipulating his allies in the country to disrupt the normal work of Lebanon's institutions.

Iran's failure to count Lebanon in its camp and count on it to support its policies vis-à-vis the Arab world and the West has many reasons. Domestically, Lebanon's religious and sectarian makeup is not easy to manipulate, despite Hezbollah's ability to strike working relationships with elements of the various communities. Opposition to the current Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri and objections to his government's performance (10 of 30 cabinet portfolios are held by the opposition) does not automatically translate into love for Iran because it remains a Shiite-inspired state. Importantly, there is a sizeable minority of Shiites in Lebanon who have decided that multi-cultural and peaceful Lebanon is their final home and foreign alignments with Iran

and Syria only endanger their political, economic, and social status in the country. Furthermore, the majority of the Lebanese firmly believe that Lebanon's place in the Middle East should remain closely aligned with moderate Arab politics because of cultural and economic ties that would be severely damaged if the country were to take a more Persian direction.

Regionally, and no matter the military relationship between Hezbollah and Iran with Syria acting as a conduit for military hardware, Lebanon is not easily surrendered by the status quo Arab regimes, especially the Gulf Arab states and Egypt. Much has been said of the weakness of the Arab political order, a condition that allowed Iran to make inroads in some places including Lebanon. But this weakness will unlikely lead to an acquiescence to a dominant Iranian role in the country that abuts Israel and forms a potentially open front on its northern border, thus engulfing them in constant conflict in which they have no say. Arab countries are deeply concerned of the turn of events in Beirut and regularly consult with Iran's friend in Damascus. But they do their best to rally support for Lebanon and may be ready to fund a much stronger resistance to Hezbollah than is currently the case if it became apparent that Iran will be the ultimate winner of the Lebanese game of chess.

Internationally, Lebanon's fall into Iranian arms will be unfathomable in the least. From Turkey to Europe to the United States, a decision has long ago been made not to

allow the religious regime in Tehran to thwart secular states in its environs. Furthermore, Shiite Iran cannot be allowed to succeed against Sunni regimes in the area or those supported by them. When Hezbollah and its allies illegally camped in downtown Beirut between 2006 and 2008, the Party of God could have easily overrun the Prime Minister's office. But warnings were delivered by Ankara (acting on behalf of the international community) to Iran and the party that touching the hallowed Lebanese *Sunni* Prime Ministership was a red line not to be crossed. Moreover, Iran's arrival by proxy to the Mediterranean Sea would amount to a stupendous geo-political grab that sweeps Iraq, Syria, and Jordan in its way, a situation that not only re-creates the old Persian Empire, but also could lead to the immediate start of a nuclear holocaust initiated by Israel.

What Iran can achieve in Lebanon is specifically what it already has: an armed political party that can cynically disrupt the normal conduct of a country's business. The presence of the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) will continue to provide a buffer between Hezbollah and Israel in accordance with the stipulations of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 of 2006. If Iran decides to activate its reserve force in the country, it will be merely accentuating Hezbollah's troubles with no clear positive return. Instead, it is likely to prefer to use Hezbollah to intimidate the Arab world, Israel, and the United States or to use it to retaliate if either of the latter two were rash enough to give it an excuse.

It thus appears safe to assume that President Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon was to check up on his 'frozen' assets in the hope that he can maintain the vigilance and enthusiasm of Hezbollah's supporters. In the meantime, Hezbollah can shout and intimidate about all matters big and small while its weapons rust in the shining Lebanese sun.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*



Ahmadinejad in Lebanon image:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/13/mahmoud-ahmadinejad-visit-lebanon-hezbollah>

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