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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Hezbollah's New and Old Wars: From Ideological Struggle to Fight for Survival?

by *Filippo Dionigi*

Introduction

Hezbollah has seen the fronts of its struggle multiply over the last two years. It is both engaged militarily on the Syrian front and is dealing with a domestic situation in which it faces unprecedented attacks. Furthermore, its international reputation is increasingly challenged. The EU has recently added the military wing of Hezbollah to its terrorist blacklist, and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon has added a fifth Hezbollah member to its list of indicted persons. Whatever its outcome, the Syrian crisis will not leave Hezbollah unchanged.

The Domestic Front

Criticism of Hezbollah is not a new phenomenon in Lebanon. At least since the end of the Israeli occupation in 2000, several political groups have voiced discontent over its arsenal. The phenomenon has become acute over the past two years, as Salafi groups have begun to feel empowered by the sectarian discourse that is poisoning the entire region, and have bluntly attacked Hezbollah. The most obvious case is that of the Salafi preacher Ahmed al-Asir, who is now a fugitive following a Lebanese Armed Forces

(LAF) operation that disbanded his base in Sidon with the aid of Hezbollah.

But the operation was not sufficient to ease the increasing tension within Lebanon. A stream of attacks targeted Hezbollah-dominated areas in Beirut and culminated in August with a bomb that killed dozens in a majority Shi'a area. A few days later, car bombs exploded near two mosques in Tripoli killing dozens of Sunnis. Hezbollah has found itself entangled in a spiral of violence caused at least in part by its intervention in Syria, which has exposed Lebanon to the sectarian frenzy that has engulfed the whole region. It is also important to note that other Lebanese jihadi groups have also intervened in the Syrian crisis, although not as openly as Hezbollah.

Politics have been equally affected by the Syrian conflict. The government of Lebanon resigned in March, and negotiations to appoint a new cabinet have been underway under the guidance of Tamam Salam, a prominent Lebanese leader, since then. Hezbollah and its allies have strenuously opposed any governmental formula that is not based on the "blocking third"

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mechanism, which allows political factions a veto over the cabinet's decisions. This enables Hezbollah and its allies to prevent decisions that may conflict with their political and strategic interests, and also prevents any new government from tipping the balance of Lebanon's regional stance toward one side or another of the Syrian war.

The political equation is further complicated by the prospects of an emerging hydrocarbon economy in Lebanon, over which political factions have found new ground for confrontation. The fact that recent geological surveys have identified possible gas and oil reserves in the Lebanese maritime region has created expectations of significant economic revenues. Until an agreement over an equitable redistribution of this potential wealth is reached, this issue risks becoming yet another source of division for the country. Within this picture, the most positive note is that South Lebanon has remained relatively quiet. Even when there have been minor incidents, they have failed to provoke an escalation on either side. Neither Hezbollah nor Israel seems to have an incentive to engage in open conflict at the present time.

What Does Qusayr Mean for Hezbollah?

Although Hezbollah's leadership has repeatedly declared that the battle of Qusayr in May 2013 does not mark an historical turn for the movement, it is difficult to agree. Hezbollah was formed to fight against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and its intervention in Syria can hardly be justified on the same basis. To be sure, it is not the first time that Hezbollah's struggle has turned inward. In the early 1990s, it fought an internecine war with Amal's militia (paradoxically supported by Assad's regime), and in 2008, it resorted to force at the peak of an internal political crisis, participating in a few weeks of civil unrest in Beirut and elsewhere. Furthermore, Hezbollah has also played a role in the Iraq war, although the actual extent of its involvement is yet to be assessed.

But the scale of the confrontation in Syria is different. The intervention, motivated by the vital strategic value of the Syrian regime and pushed for by Iran, marks a publicly declared stance that widens the gap between Hezbollah and all those Arabs who believed in a freer world in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. From a revolutionary force, spearheading the discourse and practice of "resistance," Hezbollah has morphed in the eyes of its opponents and

at least some of its supporters into a force that defends the regional status quo and that justifies its military activities on the basis of self-interest. It will take some time before it will be able to requalify its public image, although history shows that it is resourceful in its public relations. The Syrian crisis is still an open-ended story.

A New Wave of International Condemnations

If Hezbollah's regional and domestic role has brought criticism from within, international actors have, unsurprisingly, adopted measures that have complicated the movement's position. In July 2013, the European Union added Hezbollah's military wing to its list of terrorist groups. As a recent GMF policy brief argues, this move was indicative of a degree of convergence among transatlantic allies after years of divergent policies towards Hezbollah.¹ The measure — praised by the United States and Israel and similar to decisions taken by the Gulf Cooperation Council — is linked to the role that Hezbollah is alleged to have played in a terrorist attack on an Israeli target in Bulgaria. Countries such as the U.K. and the Netherlands had been pushing for this decision for a long time, but other EU member states had contested the strategic value of the measure. Member states such as Italy and Spain have troops deployed in South Lebanon within the framework of the UNIFIL mission, and the adoption of measures that may heighten tensions with Hezbollah could jeopardise the safe continuation of a relatively functional mission.

The result was a compromise of dubious effectiveness. Only the so-called military wing of Hezbollah is subject to restrictions that forbid it from engaging in financial activities within the EU. Furthermore, the EU has declared that its relations with all Lebanese political actors will remain unchanged. Only a few days after the adoption of the decision, the EU's ambassador to Lebanon met publicly with a high-level Hezbollah official, confirming the limited impact of the decision. In fact, in the overall context, the EU's decision is only a minor hitch for Hezbollah; thus far there have been no reports of the effective application of the restrictions to any individual affiliated to Hezbollah. The main cost of blacklisting for Hezbollah is to its reputation but, on the other hand, the EU has eroded part of its political

¹ Hassan Mneimneh, "Transatlantic Divergence in the MENA Region? The Question of Hezbollah," *GMF Policy Brief*, October 2013, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/transatlantic-divergence-in-the-mena-region-the-question-of-hezbollah/>.

capital as a neutral actor, at least in the eyes of Hezbollah, its allies, and supporters. International pressure on Hezbollah has also come from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which has recently identified another suspect allegedly connected with the terrorist attack that killed Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. That person is the fifth indicted individual that has some form of affiliation with Hezbollah. No effective measures to carry out the arrest warrant issued by the Special Tribunal in Lebanon have yet been implemented in this respect, but the indictment of yet another Hezbollah-related person adds to the pressure that is being applied to it internationally.

Dealing with an Intractable Situation?

Two main lines of action have dominated the foreign policies of states when dealing with Hezbollah. The first has been the full rejection of relations with the group in order to isolate it and progressively undermine its cohesiveness. The second has been moderate and qualified engagement in an attempt to facilitate Hezbollah's normalization and integrate it in the Lebanese political process. Both approaches have delivered only partial results, but cautious engagement with the group has more often coincided with some strategic shifts. For instance, the establishment of a reinforced UNIFIL mission in South Lebanon has until now coincided with a phase of relative stability, which would not have been possible without a degree of commitment from Hezbollah.

The overall regional situation does not allow for a significant margin of action for Western states, and in particular for the United States and the EU. Their inability to act is not only symptomatic of inherent weaknesses and lack of cohesiveness in their foreign policies, but is also due to what seems to be an intractable situation in which only bad options are available.

Hezbollah's disarmament has never been as unrealistic as it is now, considering that its perceived insecurity is at a peak. Nonetheless, if negotiated as part of a comprehensive framework that addresses the overall crisis, Hezbollah may consider the possibility of withdrawal from Syria, which is an option that has been already mentioned in informal reports in the Lebanese media. After all, involvement in Syria is strategically necessary for Hezbollah, but also dissipates political capital and exposes Lebanon to regional tensions. Both these latter aspects may be strong incentives for a reduction of Hezbollah's role in Syria.

Another aspect that policymakers may be willing to explore is the fact that Hezbollah has recently accepted the deployment of the LAF in Dahie as well as the Bekaa in the wake of recent attacks. Hezbollah has never relied to such an extent on the LAF, especially in areas as critical as these. This could be an opportunity to encourage a process of confidence-building between the LAF and Hezbollah, which might be conducive to further cooperation. From a long-term perspective, confidence-building between the LAF and Hezbollah may lead to the institutionalization of the monopoly of force for the Lebanese state, a key achievement for the state-building process of the country.

The political context is stalling and, as long as the Syrian situation remains uncertain, Lebanese politics will not be able to bring about any change. It may sound unambitious, but the best contribution that the EU and the United States can provide, at this stage, is to facilitate processes that are already taking place or that are likely to succeed, without upsetting the fragile Lebanese balance.

In particular, the continuation of the UNIFIL mission in the south is essential, and this can hardly be decoupled from a degree of indirect and mediated engagement with Hezbollah in that region. As long as engagement does not come at the cost of the credibility of the international military force, and as long as it effectively delivers the core objectives of the mission, there can be no reason to alter this approach, especially considering the unstable regional framework. Furthermore, the refugee crisis is a crucial issue over which assistance from the EU and the United States can make a real difference. Such assistance can ease the tensions that this crisis could easily provoke. The history of Lebanon teaches us a painful lesson of how refugees can be a source of instability, and this situation therefore deserves the utmost attention.

Moreover, both the EU and the United States should keep their channels of cooperation with Lebanese civil society open. Finally, both the United States and the EU should ensure that the prospects of a hydrocarbon economy in Lebanon do not become a source of further instability, polarization and corruption for either the country or the region. The key tasks in this regard are ensuring the transparency of the companies and state institutions that will be operating in the sector, adopting strong measures to prevent any corruption fed by the potential revenues coming from

this emerging economy, and facilitating the reduction of any friction arising from the uncertain maritime borders between Israel and Lebanon by referring to international instruments for arbitration and negotiation.

About the Author

Filippo Dionigi is a teaching fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science and was awarded a Ph.D. in international relations by the same institution. He is an expert in Islamist politics and international norms and is presently working on a book titled *Hezbollah, Islamist Politics and International Society*. He has published in academic journals and international affairs magazines on international political theory, Islamist movements, and international relations.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About IAI

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economics, and international security. A non-profit organization, the IAI aims to disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences, and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities, and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are European institutions and policies, Italian foreign policy, trends in the global economy and internationalization processes in Italy, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, defense economy and policy, and transatlantic relations. The IAI puts out an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affari Internazionali*), a series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI*) and an Italian foreign policy yearbook (*La Politica Estera dell'Italia*).