

## Hezbollah and Lebanon's Fight for Survival

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Once again, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Lebanon's Hezbollah, wades into foreign affairs at the expense of his war-threatened country. In a speech on the occasion of Prophet Mohammad's birthday, Nasrallah criticized the Bahraini government for incarcerating `Ali Salman, Secretary General of the Bahraini `Wafaq' opposition party, and accused it of emulating Zionist policies by nationalizing Sunnis to change the country's demographics. He also alleged that Bahraini authorities are driving peaceful youth to violence in order to justify a new crackdown. Coming at a very delicate moment in Lebanon's political and communal history, Nasrallah's statements and accusations expose the country to unwarranted repercussions but also indicate that the party may have finally decided to vacate the Lebanese state of its rights and responsibilities.

### *Condemnations All Around*

Sayyid Nasrallah's accusations elicited sharp rebukes from officials in the Gulf Cooperation Council. According to news accounts, the Bahraini Foreign Ministry lodged a protest with the Lebanese *charges d'affaires* in Manama, Ibrahim `Assaf, accusing Nasrallah of fomenting violence. Bahraini Foreign Minister, Shaikh Khaled bin Ahmad bin Mohammad Aal Khalifa tweeted that Lebanon no longer stands in solidarity with its Arab brothers and is now controlled by a "terrorist agent," meaning Nasrallah. The Foreign Ministry of the United Arab Emirates and the Secretary

General of the GCC, `Abdel-Latif az-Zayyani, lodged similar protests with Lebanese ambassadors in Abu Dhabi, Hassan Yousef, and Riyadh, `Abdes-Sattar `Isa. A League of Arab States Foreign Ministers meeting on January 15 condemned what it called Nasrallah's hostile statements and blatant interference in Bahraini affairs, and called on the Lebanese government to assume its responsibility and take legal action to prevent any recurrence of such statements.



*Bahraini Foreign Minister Shaikh Khaled bin Ahmad bin Mohammad Aal Khalifa*

At the Foreign Ministers' meeting, Lebanon's Foreign Minister, Jubran Bassil, tried in vain to persuade his counterparts to postpone passing judgment until he consulted with his government. He also attempted to distance the Lebanese government from the pronouncements of one of the country's political actors, saying that any action by the League would jeopardize Lebanese national unity. The respected *an-Nahar* newspaper relates that Bassil was challenged by Shaikh Khaled bin Ahmad and Emirati Foreign Minister, Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed, who sharply criticized Lebanon's official policy of dissociation from events in Syria while Hezbollah, a party in the government, participates in the Syrian civil war alongside the regime. In the end, Bassil rejected the Arab League decision, asserting that Lebanese national unity was more important

than Arab solidarity. Interestingly, Iraq's Foreign Minister, Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, also tried to dissuade the Foreign Ministers from issuing the condemnation.



*Lebanese Foreign Minister Jubran Bassil at the Arab League January meeting*

In Lebanon, Nasrallah's pronouncements and the subsequent criticism were received with trepidation, not least because of the country's financial ties with the GCC where hundreds of thousands of Lebanese work and live. In his rejection of the Arab League decision, Bassil was only in line with his party's alliance with Hezbollah. He belongs to the Free Patriotic Current, led by General-turned-politician Michel Aoun, who long ago struck a political deal with the Party of God that provided the latter with inroads into the Christian community. But Prime Minister Tammam Salam distanced his government from Nasrallah's statements, affirming Lebanon's strong relations with Bahrain and the GCC. Interior Minister Nuhad al-Mashnouq, who belongs to the Future Movement of former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, demanded an apology from Nasrallah while Druze leader Walid Junblatt condemned comparing Bahrain to Zionist Israel.

### *Hezbollah the State*

Hassan Nasrallah's latest foray into external affairs highlights the weakness of the Lebanese state and indicates a Party of God strong proclivity to decide its foreign policy. With the absence of a unifying figure in the person of the President of the Republic –the country has been without one since June 2014- ministries and state institutions have become fiefdoms of those who head them. With vertical institutional stratification, political schisms, and sectarian divisions, the state as a unified entity faces serious threats of failure and decay. Only political parties with captive constituencies, and especially those with arms like Hezbollah, can maneuver and influence events. After seven decades as an independent state, Lebanon seems to have become entrenched in a moment of 'democratic political dysfunction and chaos.'

Domestically, Hezbollah has established its off-limits areas to which state's authorities may not enter. Areas south of the capital Beirut are cordoned off by Hezbollah roadblocks to, according to the party, prevent car bombs and suicide attacks. In the northeast close to the Syrian border, the party's fighters either stand vigil to protect Shiite villages or use these same villages to re-inforce their colleagues and positions in the ongoing Syrian civil war where the party has fielded its elite units in support of the regime. In the south, where only the Lebanese army and the United National Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) are permitted military deployment, the party maintains a strong hold and only allows sanctioned activities.

Politically, what passes for a government of national unity cannot function without

agreement from the party and its allies, together enjoying a veto on government decisions by holding one-third of the portfolios. Hezbollah has also prevented the election of a new President, demanding agreement on its candidate, Michel Aoun, despite the latter's unacceptability to the vast majority of Christians and Lebanese. So far, fifteen parliamentary meetings to elect a President have failed because Hezbollah and its allies refuse to attend the sessions and allow the legal and necessary quorum. In essence, Hezbollah holds the political system to a bare minimum of stability –such as agreeing to extend the term of Parliament until 2017- but prevents it from renewing its institutional structure or augmenting its democracy.

But what over the last three years has pointed



*Hezbollah rally in support of Bashar al-Asad*

to Hezbollah's political and strategic independence has been its heavy-handed military intervention in the Syrian quagmire alongside the Bashar al-Asad regime. The party's mission has expanded since 2012 from originally protecting some Shiite villages in Syria along the border with Lebanon, to providing security for Shiite shrines around Damascus, to participating full-fledgedly in battles against, first, the moderate Syrian opposition and, later,

jihadists. In this, Hezbollah has been true to its Iranian upbringing and to itself and its corporate interests.

The Party of God is an arm of Iranian foreign policy in the Arab East and the embodiment of its sectarian orientation. It is a ready strike force against Israel in a potential war and an instrument for intervention in the domestic affairs of Bahrain and Yemen. What Nasrallah voiced against Bahrain earlier this month were Iranian sentiments deemed better unsaid in Tehran because of regional sensitivities and international considerations. In Yemen, Hezbollah has been actively supporting and training the Zaidi-Shiite Houthi rebels who last summer seized the capital Sanaa, allowing Ali Reza Zakani, an Iranian parliamentarian and advisor to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to gloat that Iran now controls four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sanaa.

The Syrian Asad regime succeeded before it withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 in helping Hezbollah rise to prominence in Lebanese politics, establish itself as the only armed political party in the country, and monopolize the right to wage war on, and declare peace with, Israel. Syria remains the party's overland route for arms and trained fighters from Iran and has permitted the delivery of advanced weapons and rockets that have brought a semblance of balance of terror between the party and Israel. In essence, Hezbollah's alliance with Syria is that which aims to establish a long-term *entente* along the Eastern Mediterranean that assures a *pax Iranica* extending from Tehran to Beirut and Latakia and passing through Baghdad.

## *Conclusion*

The different aspects of Hezbollah's assets, ideology, behavior, and policies, make the party of God not only a state-within-a-state in Lebanon, but a state unto itself. In the same speech criticizing Bahrain, Hassan Nasrallah assured his audience that the Syrian crisis is almost over and the good guys, *his*, have won. He also was confident of his deterrence against Israel with even more lethal strategic weapons. He even waded into a critique of Palestinian HAMAS which abandoned the Syrian regime and its offices in Damascus in what he considered to be a strategic mistake for the movement. Indeed, Nasrallah's blitz of hubris and self-confidence may be a harbinger for more domestic obstructionism and external activism that will definitely spell the end of any hope for a diverse, liberal, and democratic Lebanon.

Images accessed January 18, 2015

Shaikh Khaled bin Ahmad Aal Khalifa image

[http://www.mofa.gov.bh/mofa/Portals/0/Images/Foreign\\_Minister.jpg](http://www.mofa.gov.bh/mofa/Portals/0/Images/Foreign_Minister.jpg)

Jubran Bassil image

[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/dailystar/Pictures/2015/01/17/382305\\_img650x420\\_img650x420\\_crop.jpg](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/dailystar/Pictures/2015/01/17/382305_img650x420_img650x420_crop.jpg)

Hezbollah rally image

<http://i.huffpost.com/gen/1179363/thumbs/o-HEZBOLLAH-WILL-TURN-SYRIA-CONFLICT-SECTARIAN-facebook.jpg>