



INSS Insight No. 902, February 27, 2017

Hezbollah and Lebanon, in Aounian Terms: One and the Same?

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On February 12, 2017, in an interview to the Egyptian newspaper *al-Ahram* and other media during his visit to Cairo, Lebanese President Michel Aoun discussed Hezbollah's weapons and the organization's role in the state of Lebanon. Aoun declared: "Hezbollah is a significant part of the Lebanese people....As long as Israel occupies land and covets Lebanon's natural treasures, and as long as the Lebanese military lacks the power to stand up to Israel, [Hezbollah's] weapons are essential. They complement, rather than contradict, the army's activity....Hezbollah's weapons do not contradict the national project...and are, rather, a principal element of Lebanon's defense." Coming from a president who owes his appointment to Iran and Hezbollah, these remarks are hardly surprising. At the same time, they bring some key perspectives on the relationship between the Lebanese state and the Shiite organization into sharper relief, and have strategic significance for Israel's national security.

Security Council Resolution 1701, which was adopted at the end of the Second Lebanon War, defined the Lebanese government and its armed forces as responsible for implementing the resolution in Lebanon. It noted Hezbollah's attack on Israel on July 12, 2006 as the event that set off the hostilities, and called on the Lebanese government, with the aid of UNIFIL, to work towards "the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL" and towards "full implementation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords, and of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006), that require the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of 27 July 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State." The text distinguishes between the Lebanese state and government, recognized as legitimate bodies in the international community, from Hezbollah, deemed an armed sub-state organization whose weapons, which are not subordinate to governmental authority, violate UN decisions, political agreements, and Lebanese government decisions.

More than a decade later, it has become clear that the Shiite organization, with Iran's assistance, has grown larger and stronger than both the Lebanese state in which it grew and the state's armed forces: it has terrorized and coerced the Lebanese government, including through use of its military force against it (in May 2008); neutralized the monitoring regime of the Lebanese

army and UNIFIL in southern Lebanon; heavily weaponized southern Lebanon and rendered the calls for demilitarization there meaningless; constructed an extensive military infrastructure throughout Lebanon; designed an independent foreign and defense policy that originates in Tehran, including, for example, its participation in the war in Syria; become part of the government and deepened its influence over the army; and recently, after years of paralyzing the appointment process, helped complete the process of appointing the President. Aoun's statements in the interview are thus a formal confirmation by Lebanon's official government of Hezbollah's recognized status, and represent a public and political achievement for the organization, whose efforts in Syria have at this stage also been relatively successful.

Yet at the same time that they constitute an achievement for Hezbollah, these statements involve costs and negative consequences for the organization and for Lebanon as a state. For Israel, the declaration is the official unveiling of a known Lebanese reality that diplomatic conventions in the West have tended to blur. When the President of Lebanon openly declares that Hezbollah, which in many countries is recognized as a terrorist organization, is an official part of Lebanese defense, he nullifies the distinction, artificial and hard-pushed to begin with, between the ostensibly sovereign state and the Hezbollah military, which is Iran's arm in Lebanon. In so doing, the President takes full responsibility for all of Hezbollah's actions, including against Israel, and for the consequences to Lebanon and its entire population, even though the Lebanese government has little ability to actually control the organization's decisions or policy.

The past decade has seen much professional debate and even public discussion in and outside of Israel of the possibility of another confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah, including Israel's preferred response to the Lebanese government, army, and infrastructure in such a confrontation. Beyond the operational level, which pertains to military targets and options, the strategic discussion focuses on two areas: justification and utility. When it comes to legitimacy and justification, Aoun's statements validate the contention that Lebanon is responsible for Hezbollah's actions, and the government's sanctions of the organization's military capabilities hence justify extensive attacks on Lebanon by Israel. When it comes to utility and purpose, the picture is more complicated, and depends on considerations of military utility during the fighting and assessments of post-war consequences. Those who support wide scale and extensive attacks on the Lebanon believe that exacting a heavy price from the state as a whole would increase overall deterrence and the *motivation* of other power brokers in Lebanon to restrain Hezbollah from attacking Israel in the future, once they too will have been affected and have paid a heavy price for Hezbollah's policy. This lesson will also be observed by other power brokers in the region and contribute to regional deterrence and postponement of additional confrontations. Those who disagree place greater weight on the expected *capabilities* of post-war stabilizing elements, such as non-Shiite forces. By this reasoning, leaving them unharmed would enable them to restrain Hezbollah more effectively, and also take action against other radical terrorist groups. According to this perspective, it is also preferable to limit the harm to Lebanon's army,

which can serve an effective official enforcement body after the war, as long as it avoids hampering the IDF's efforts during the war. Another consideration is the impact of excessive destruction on Israel's relations with the pragmatic Sunni countries, which have many ties to the Sunni population of Lebanon, as Israel looks towards broad regional cooperation with them.

There is no substantive disagreement over the *justification* for attacking Lebanese state infrastructure to the extent that it serves and supports Hezbollah's war efforts. Beyond this, when it comes to utility, opinions are divided between those who support attacking Lebanese state infrastructure in order to exact a heavy price, to enhance deterrence and to speed up international intervention to terminate the fighting, and those who claim that sufficient damage will in any case be done to Lebanon in the course of attacking Hezbollah targets, and that it is preferable to refrain from increasing the destruction, which would serve in Lebanon – as in Syria – as fertile ground for a lack of governance, violence, and extremism. Between these two sides, there are still those who support attacking Lebanese infrastructure only as deterrent retribution for attempts to damage Israeli infrastructure. But in light of the mutual declarations made over the years, national infrastructure will most likely be attacked when the time comes, much like a Chekhovian gun hanging on the wall in the first act. Indeed, On February 16, 2017 in his recorded speech in commemoration of the remembrance day for the “fallen commanders” (Sheikh Ragheb Harb, Abbas al-Mussawi, and Imad Mughniyeh), Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah threatened that his organization is capable of hitting the ammonia tank wherever its new location, as well as the nuclear reactor in Dimona, thus (in his words) turning Israel's nuclear arsenal from a threat to the region into a threat to Israel itself.

The analysis above, along with Aoun's testimony to Hezbollah's political achievement, indicates that the organization's rise to dominance in Lebanon thus entails a paradoxical dimension. The organization's initial successes were based on small-scale guerrilla warfare and blending in with the population, which made it difficult to locate and to attack its operatives and operations distinctively without harming the surrounding population, and that due to their relatively small scope, received only a limited response. Later, and with extensive Iranian assistance, Hezbollah deepened its military deployment within the Shiite villages, which are its social and political power base, and home to its activists and fighters. When it grew to be a large scale military force with permanent infrastructure and an organized command and control structure, it became Israel's most significant military threat in the area, thus leading to the paradoxical strategic inflection point: it became the top priority for IDF preparedness for war. This includes allocation of major resources toward intelligence collection and force buildup focused; mitigating the dilemma faced by Israeli decision makers between the need for wide scale extensive attacks against Hezbollah military targets before Israel suffers severe damage and the preference to limit collateral damage and environmental harm to the populated areas where Hezbollah chooses to embed these targets; and, at the end of the day, the understanding that although Hezbollah can hurt Israel and hit it harder than in the past, it would have difficulty translating this into genuine

political achievements, when the Shiite areas of residence, which it has turned into military areas, would become ruins and debris. In light of the statements by President Aoun who even threatened Israel (February 18) with "an appropriate response to any attempt to harm Lebanon and its sovereignty," such unnecessary destruction might now hit larger areas of Lebanon, whose government – against the population's best interests – has given its official seal of approval to the terrorist organization that sprouted in Lebanon, outgrew Lebanon, and expanded beyond its borders.

Thus, while increasing its military and organizational strength, Hezbollah has gradually overextended its strategic concept, and successively lost its previous assets: the advantages of the smallness, secrecy, and agility of a guerrilla organization; its status as Lebanon's shield at the forefront of "resistance" to Israel, which it replaced with the battlefields of Syria; its freedom of operation against Israel, which it enjoyed until 2006; the human shield provided to it by the Shiite population over its military assets; the deceptive facade of Lebanon's legitimate government as cover for its violations and for its independent status in Lebanon; and finally, the useful partition between the reality on the ground, which is familiar to those who live in the fact-based world, and the imaginary world at the base of most of the international diplomatic discourse regarding Lebanon. However, reality has a habitual tendency to breach the artificial partition and shatter the worlds of imagination and fabrication. The Lebanese's President's statements are only a first crack.

