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By Ben Smith



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Summary

Lebanon is at a crossroads in the Middle East, between Israel and Syria, Sunnis and Shias, close to Turkey and bordering the Mediterranean. The sudden resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in November 2017 and his subsequent [withdrawal of that resignation](#) drew attention to this small country, caught up in the increasingly sharp confrontation between Sunnis and Shias, led by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively, in the region.

The biggest reason for Lebanon's importance to that struggle is the existence of Hizballah, the Iran-backed Shiite militia that is more powerful than the Lebanese Army. Particularly since the 2006 conflict with Israel, Hizballah, the Party of God, has become Iran's most important partner in projecting power throughout the region. It decided in 2013 to throw its weight behind the Assad Government in Syria, along with Iran and Russia, ensuring its survival. A Sunni regime in Syria could have spelt the end for Hizballah, as it relies on Syria for support and as a conduit for [Iranian weapons and money](#). Participation in the Syrian conflict changed Hizballah's image from a champion of Arabs against Israel to a supporter of Iran against Sunnis, however. Hizballah has helped the Houthi rebellion against the internationally-recognised Government of Yemen, too.

Political violence has been widespread in Lebanon even after the fragile peace and [power-sharing arrangements](#) set up in 1989. Bombings and assassinations of public figures have been blamed on many different domestic groups, and Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Israel are all variously accused of being ultimately behind the violence. A United Nations [Special Tribunal](#), set up to investigate the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, a former Prime Minister and father of the present Prime Minister, has issued indictments against four supporters of Hizballah; they are being tried in their absence. Others accuse Syria, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia of being behind the murder, however.

Because of its location and its confessional mix, Lebanon is caught up in the Middle East's struggles. Recently, it has been the Sunni/Shia split that has come to the fore, and Lebanon has been destabilised by the Syrian civil war.

The Lebanese economy depends on services, particularly tourism and banking. It has been adversely affected by the long civil war in the 70s and 80s and the Syria conflict, and the Government is hamstrung by having to service its debt burden. There may be oil and gas under Lebanese territorial waters in the Mediterranean, but if there is, it will be a long time before the public feels the benefit.

Lebanon's delicate politics rest on a power sharing deal agreed in 1989. The presidency goes to a Christian, the position of Speaker in the Parliament goes to a Shiite, and that of Prime Minister goes to a Sunni.

The UK has [provided £466 million](#) to help Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the Lebanese host communities, and has [supported the Lebanese military](#) in the context of the Syria conflict.

Lebanese politics

Saad Hariri

In November 2017 Saad Hariri, Prime Minister of Lebanon and son of the assassinated Rafiq Hariri, announced his resignation from Saudi Arabia. Back home, many Lebanese thought he had been kidnapped and forced to resign by the Saudis, who were angry at the missile fired at Riyadh by the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Saudi Arabia blamed Hizbollah for that missile and the Shiite militia's backers, Iran. And the Saudis were angry at what they saw as collaboration between their protégé Hariri and Hizbollah. The move looked impulsive and ineffective, however, when Saad Hariri returned to Lebanon and withdrew his resignation. Lebanon's sectarian-based politics are intractable and are certainly not getting any easier; Saudi Arabia cannot take Hizbollah on without destroying Lebanon.

Power sharing

At the end of the Lebanese civil war, an agreement was negotiated at talks in Saudi Arabia that set up a system giving equal numbers of MPs to Christians and Muslims and sharing the three main posts – Speaker of the Parliament, Prime Minister and President – between the Shias, the Sunnis and the Christians respectively.¹ Syria continued to have a dominant military presence in Lebanon despite the agreement, something that continued until 2005.

While power in Lebanon is supposed to be shared more or less equally between Christians, the Shias and Sunnis, the fact that Hizbollah is easily more powerful than the Lebanese Army gives it the upper hand. The Christians, who hold the presidency, have increasingly sided with Hizbollah, while Saad Hariri's Sunni-centred Future Movement, despite some election success and the fact that Hariri is the Prime Minister, tends to be side-lined. Michel Aoun, a Maronite Christian, fought against Syrian domination in the 1980s as head of the Lebanese Army but, returning from exile on the Syrians' departure in 2005, formed an alliance with pro-Syrian forces to become President.

Hizbollah

Hizbollah – or the Party of God – is a powerful political and military organisation of Shia Muslims in Lebanon. The group was formed, with backing from Iran, in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The group calls for the destruction of the state of Israel, regarding the whole of Palestine as occupied Muslim land.

As well as by fighting against Israel, Hizbollah has built support by providing social services and health care, again largely funded by Iran. The group also has an influential television station, al-Manar, a radio station and is very active online. It also has 12 MPs in the Parliament.

The group is believed to have perhaps 30,000 full-time, highly trained and motivated fighters and a smaller number of reservists.² With

¹ [The Taif Agreement, September 1989](#)

² ['Iran Out to Remake Mideast With Arab Enforcer: Hezbollah'](#), *New York Times*, 27 August 2017

training and funding from Iran probably amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars per year,³ the military force has grown strongly since the 2006 conflict with Israel and is very closely linked with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC). When it comes to projecting power in the Arab world, Hizbollah has the advantage over the IRGC of being an Arab force.

During the 2006 war, Hizbollah fired rockets deep into northern Israel. Since then their rocket arsenal has grown to maybe as many as 150,000 rockets with ranges up to 200km. Hizbollah also has armoured vehicles and some warplanes, adding up to a military strength that is certainly greater than the Lebanese Army's and is comparable to many neighbouring Arab states'.

The group has participated decisively in the Syrian conflict on the side of the Syrian Government; it also supports the Houthi rebels in Yemen and has sent trainers to Iraq to work with Shiite militias there, and has recruited in Afghanistan to create a militia to fight in Syria.⁴

Hizbollah has carried out a number of terrorist attacks, both in Lebanon and elsewhere. Hizbollah has been linked with attacks in the UK and as far away as Argentina, where it was accused of involvement with two deadly attacks on Jewish targets but denied responsibility.

Proscription of Hizbollah

UN Security Council resolutions call for armed militia groups like Hizbollah to disarm, while the United States, [Canada](#) and Israel regard the whole of Hizbollah as a terrorist group, as do the [Netherlands](#). The [EU](#) and [Australia](#) have designated the military wing only.

The [UK proscribes](#) the military wing of Hizbollah under the [Terrorism Act 2000](#) as a terrorist group, but not the political side of the organisation. There is a [campaign in the UK](#) to ban the whole of Hizbollah.

In a House of Commons debate in December 2017, Ben Wallace, security minister at the Home Office, reiterated the reasoning behind proscribing only the military wings of Hizbollah and Hamas, the Palestinian group:

Those organisations are not proscribed in their entirety. Their military wings are proscribed, but as Hezbollah forms part of the Government in Lebanon and Hamas plays an active role in its part of the region as a member of a Government, the proscription applies only to the military wing. In some cases the flags [of their respective military and political wings] are identical, but that does not mean that if people participate in Hezbollah-supporting actions here that constitute terrorism or anything linked to it, our police and law enforcement agencies will not act. We have acted in respect of Hezbollah and Hamas in the past, either to disrupt activity or to bring prosecutions.⁵

³ *Ibid*

⁴ ['Iran Out to Remake Mideast With Arab Enforcer: Hezbollah'](#), *New York Times*, 27 August 2017

⁵ [HC Deb 19 December 2017, c1019-21](#)

Violence at home

Bombings and assassinations are relatively common in Lebanon; the [list of attacks](#) is long, the most recent being in January 2018, when a Hamas official was injured by a car bomb.

The number of those accused of committing the violence is also high, although many attacks are not claimed by a particular group. ISIS/Daesh is accused by the Government of several attacks. Iran claimed that Saudi Arabia ordered a bomb outside an Iranian cultural centre in southern Beirut. Hizbollah, or a related/precursor organisation called Islamic Jihad, has been associated with attacks on US targets in Lebanon.

In 2007, a UN Special Tribunal was set up to investigate the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri, a former Prime Minister of Lebanon and the present Prime Minister's father. In 2011 the Tribunal served indictments against four supporters of Hizbollah, whose trial *in absentia* is continuing. Other reports have blamed the assassination on the Syrian Government, while Hizbollah has said that the Israelis or the Saudis are responsible. Several other anti-Syria public figures have been assassinated in Lebanon.

The international dimension

With its complex confessional mix and shared borders with Israel and Syria, Lebanon is at the centre of both the Arab/Israeli conflict and the Sunni/Shia struggle and has been occupied by Syria and partially by Israel. Fearing an attempt to topple the Islamic Republic by Israel, which has the strongest military in the region, Iran funds Hizbollah as a proxy against Israel. At least until the Syrian conflict, Hizbollah's military successes against Israel (particularly in 2006) gained it respect in the Muslim world.

But Hizbollah depended on a friendly regime in neighbouring Syria for support and as a conduit for Iranian money and arms. The group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, announced his high-risk decision to enter the conflict in 2013. The group's firepower, discipline and experience made it effective in Syria, while its engagement strengthened links with Iran, making it Iran's foremost partner in the region, eclipsing the Assad Government in Syria.

Israel has tended to keep out of the Syrian conflict but has hit arms convoys heading from Iran to Lebanon and Hizbollah-run arms depots in Syria, according to reports.⁶

When the militia decided to enter the Syrian conflict, its image shifted among many in the region from champion of the Arabs against Israel to champion of Iran against the Sunnis. This move mirrored the relative decline in importance of the Arab/Israeli dispute and the rise of the Sunni/Shia (Saudi Arabia/Iran) dispute in the region, accompanied by a tacit warming of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel: "...some Israeli

⁶ ['Israel strikes Hezbollah-run arms supply hub to destroy weapons from Iran'](#), *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 April 2017

analysts even joke that Israel has unofficially become a moderate Sunni state.”⁷

Israel probably calculates that there is enough instability in the region without an Israeli strike on Hizbollah.

Refugees

There are about 1 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon and many more unregistered (as well as some 450,000 Palestinian refugees). This is the highest number per head in the world; the equivalent number relative to the UK population would be well over 10 million. In 2015, Lebanon tightened border controls for fear of the economic drain and political destabilisation that those numbers could mean.

The refugees and the response to them have become something of a political football between the various political factions in Lebanon, with those close to the Assad Government in Syria negative about them and those closer to the Syrian opposition (and to the Saudis) more welcoming.⁸ Even for groups initially more welcoming to Syrians, they present a tempting scapegoat for the country’s organisational shortcomings.

Economy

The economy had achieved some strong growth after the 2006 conflict with Israel, but disruption caused by the Syrian civil war, including the influx of refugees, slowed growth to around 1-2% in recent years.⁹ Income per head is about \$19,000 adjusted for purchasing power, making it a middle income country. Unemployment has risen. Much government spending is taken up by debt servicing (the Government borrowed heavily for reconstruction after the civil war, 1975-90) and public sector salaries, leaving a 10% budget deficit and little for investment in infrastructure and public services.

Services are important to the Lebanese economy, including banking, tourism, retail and the property market.

Lebanon announced its first licensing round for offshore oil and gas reserves in December 2017. The country’s parliament is scrutinising bills on a sovereign wealth fund and a national oil company, but though the process has officially begun, exploration will not start until 2019 and, if commercially-viable reserves are found, the people would not start to feel any benefit for several years after that.

Recent developments

Rebecca Dykes, a Briton who worked for DFID at the British Embassy in Beirut was sexually assaulted and killed in December 2017. An Uber driver was arrested in connection with the murder.

Also in December, tear gas was used to disperse demonstrators protesting at the decision by the Trump Administration to recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli capital.

⁷ [‘Israel Isn’t Going to Fight Saudi Arabia’s Wars’](#), *Foreign Policy*, 16 November 2017

⁸ [‘The fear and loathing of Syrian refugees in Lebanon’](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 28 October 2017

⁹ CIAA Word Fact Book, [Lebanon](#)

Political leadership

- Parliament Speaker: Nabih Berri. Leader of the Amal movement, Shia Muslim. In office since 1992.
- President Michel Aoun, Free Patriotic Movement, Maronite Christian. In office since 31 October 2016.
- Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Future Movement, Sunni Muslim. In office since 18 December 2016.
- Seats in parliament are equally divided between Muslims and Christians. The three main offices, above, must go to a Shia Muslim, a Christian and a Muslim, respectively.

UK relations

The UK has supported the Lebanese military in the context of the Syria conflict, as set out in answer to a Parliamentary Question in January 2016:

The UK is committed to the security of Lebanon, including helping the Lebanese state secure its borders. From 2012-2015 we used over £30 million to help the Lebanese army raise and equip three Land Border Regiments (LBRs) deployed along the border with Syria. The project provides the LBRs with border towers, non-lethal equipment, mentoring and training. This has had a direct effect in mitigating contagion from the war in Syria. The border regiments successfully repel frequent attacks by Daesh on Lebanese territory. 75% of the Syria-Lebanon border will be under state control by March 2016, and the rest will be further secured with the establishment of a fourth LBR in financial year 2016-17.¹⁰

The UK provides humanitarian aid to help Lebanon deal with refugees, as set out in a recent PQ answer:

Lord Hylton: To ask Her Majesty's Government, in the light of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees figures showing that Lebanon is the country with the highest per capita concentration of refugees worldwide, what priority they give to providing refugee aid to Lebanon.

Lord Bates: Lebanon has shown enormous generosity in hosting around 1.5 million Syrian refugees – the highest concentrations per capita anywhere in the world. Building the resilience of the regional countries affected by the Syrian crisis has been, and continues to be, a top priority for the UK. The UK has led the international community in mobilising support for Syrian refugees, including by co-hosting pledging conferences in London (2016) and Brussels (2017). The UK has provided £466 million to support Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the Lebanese host communities. We remain at the forefront of delivering on pledges, having already allocated 97% of money pledged for 2017.¹¹

Basics

History: Lebanon's location gives it a trading tradition, while its mountains sheltered a diversity of faiths. The area was part of the Ottoman Empire until the end of WW1, when it became a French protectorate. The area was demarcated as a small separate country

¹⁰ [HC Written question – 23071, 26 January 2016](#)

¹¹ [Written question - HL2686, 10 November 2017](#)

partly because of its Christians, who were then in a majority. A constitution was first drafted in 1926 and independence from France came in 1943.

Population: estimated to be some 6.2 million (no census has been conducted recently, largely because of the sensitivity of demographic information). The Lebanese diaspora is very large (partly as a consequence of the civil war) and spreads to Africa and South America.

Ethnicity: 95% Arab, 4% Armenian.¹²

Religious groups: Muslim 54% (27% Sunni, 27% Shia), Christian 40.5% (includes 21% Maronite Catholic, 8% Greek Orthodox, 5% Greek Catholic, 6.5% other Christian), Druze 5.6%.

¹² CIA World Fact Book, [Lebanon](#)

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