

Safe Borders or an Unsafe Future?

Revisiting the Purported Antagonism between Hezbollah and the Lebanese State

⁽¹⁾ Of note, May 17 appears in the Lebanese annals as the date on which the U.S.-brokered Lebanese/Israeli peace agreement of 1983 was signed. It was repealed shortly thereafter under Syrian/Iranian pressure.

⁽²⁾ General Joseph Aoun, a confidante (but not a relative) of General President Michel Aoun, was appointed commander in chief of the LAF on February 8, 2017. He succeeds General Jean Kahwaji, whose mandate was renewed three times owing to the lack of political agreement on who would succeed him in that Maronite office.

⁽³⁾ The official statement about the visit is available on the Lebanese Army website at www.lebarmy.gov.lb.

In an unusual gesture for a Lebanese president, 83-year-old President Michel Aoun, who commanded the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from 1984 to 1989, took it upon himself to drop by the Ministry of Defense (MoD) on May 17, 2017. That evening, the president joined the Minister of Defense and the newly appointed LAF commander to watch streaming video of “a special operation undertaken by military helicopters against targets associated with terrorist organizations on the outskirts of Orsal and Ras Baalbeck” (east of Lebanon).^{1,2,3} Although the military operation that appeared on screens throughout the MoD’s situation room was probably not significant enough to have warranted the president’s physical presence, the fact that Aoun attended is especially interesting.

Just days before the president decided to highlight the threat represented by “terrorist organizations” and the LAF’s role in countering that threat, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah announced (on May 11) that his militia’s fighters had “accomplished their mission” along Lebanon’s eastern borders and were preparing to turn over their positions to

the LAF. Notably, Nasrallah stressed that Hezbollah's fighters would remain on the Syrian side of those borders....⁴ Of course, the act was far from complete at that point. A few weeks before Aoun huddled at the MoD to personally supervise the May 17 LAF operation, Lebanon's other, more critical southern borders (adjacent to Israel) had again captured the attention of observers and rejuvenated speculative efforts.

On April 20, 2017, "[the] Hezbollah Media Relations Department organized [...] a tour for journalists from Lebanese, Arab and international media outlets to overlook the Israeli defensive measures along the Palestinian-Lebanese border."⁵ In an effort to mitigate the provocative nature of that tour, Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the defense minister and the LAF's commander in chief rushed south the next day in a helicopter. This quick trip, which was Hariri's first-ever visit to the area, offers some evidence about the reasoning behind it. After touring the LAF positions, Hariri visited the UNIFIL headquarters, where he explained that his visit was intended to assert that "the Lebanese Armed Forces [are the] only legitimate force in charge of defending our borders."⁶

The most interesting aspect of the two presidential initiatives—the visit to the MoD and the other to the south—is that they were responses to earlier moves by Hezbollah. In both instances, the message being conveyed was that regardless of its condition, the "state" of Lebanon persists *despite* the multifaceted will being exerted by Hezbollah and its regional patron, Iran.

⁽⁴⁾ "Mission along Lebanon's eastern border accomplished: Nasrallah," *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2017. <https://dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/May-11/405437-israel-is-weak-for-erecting-fence-along-lebanon-border-nasrallah.ashx>

⁽⁵⁾ C.f.: "Hezbollah Organizes Media Tour on Lebanon-Palestine Border, Highlights Zionist Panic." <https://english.almanar.com.lb/244099>

⁽⁶⁾ "Hariri asserts state's role as sole border defense with visit to south." *The Daily Star*, April 22, 2017. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/Apr-22/402896-hariri-asserts-states-role-as-sole-border-defense-with-visit-to-south.ashx>

Unfortunately, Aoun and Hariri occasionally need to prove that the Lebanese state continues to exist, *despite its many failings*, if for no other reason than to justify their respective official responsibilities. Yet the attempts they made to articulate the LAF's role in protecting the borders and to assert that the state still holds some sway where those borders are concerned appear to have missed the mark.

Even though Aoun's "review" of the LAF's operation failed to attract much attention and thus cannot be seen as a successful public relations event, media reports and other firsthand information indicate that while Hezbollah certainly did give the LAF some of its more trivial positions along the eastern borders, Nasrallah's organization had already established at least one path through the Anti-Lebanon mountains to connect Lebanon and Syria. Those corridors circumvent the official border crossings and facilitate logistics, communications and other needs. Therefore, *in exchange for handing over certain positions to the LAF, Hezbollah now has its own border crossing with Syria!*⁷ By extension, UNIFIL itself refuted Saad Hariri's statement that "the Lebanese Armed Forces [are the] only legitimate force in charge of defending our borders." According to a UNIFIL spokesman, "Slightly before the media delegation [of Hezbollah] arrived...the Lebanese Army informed UNIFIL that there was a media tour along the Blue Line!"⁸

Obviously, neither General Aoun nor Saad Hariri, both of whom owe their positions to the support Hezbollah provided, will be particularly happy that their individual attempts to confirm the existence of the "State of Lebanon" have been scorned.

⁽⁷⁾ C.f. among others, reports in *an-Nahar* and *Asharq al-Awsat* dated May 18, 2017.

⁽⁸⁾ See: Badran, Tony. "Hezbollah's Farical Media Tour at the Israel-Lebanon Border." <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/230941/hezbollahs-farcical-media-tour-at-israel-lebanon-border>.

But at the end of the day, who really cares about their “happiness?”

•

When reviewing the Lebanese experience from the April 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops to the present (while ignoring the many developments and so-called political crises that paralyzed the country during that time, including the events that occurred since the Syrian conflict began), it is becoming increasingly apparent that Hezbollah’s strategy for Lebanon has never included something as naïve as a putsch-like coup. Rather, it consists of slowly taming its major opponents and conducting a strictly businesslike appropriation of the state’s mechanisms. That way, Hezbollah always has what it needs since those

resources essentially become unavailable to the state itself.⁹

Lebanon has abdicated almost all of its political and social components to Hezbollah, and based on Hezbollah’s (armed) strength, the state no longer has any real say in matters related to state management. Quite condescendingly, Hezbollah still gives—

at its discretion, of course—front row seats to the State and its representatives in all manner of functions. More specifically, conversations about Hezbollah’s *nature* demand that an almost theological perspective be taken. Specifically, that very nature granted Hezbollah co-equal

⁽⁹⁾ Of note, the first official participation in a Lebanese government function occurred following the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

When reviewing the Lebanese experience from the April 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops to the present, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Hezbollah’s strategy for Lebanon has never included something as naïve as a putsch-like coup. Rather, it consists of slowly taming its major opponents and conducting a strictly businesslike appropriation of the state’s mechanisms.

status with the state in all matters, and the reality of this “revised” relationship can no longer be questioned. Similarly, the time has long since passed when the Lebanese would criticize Hezbollah’s decisions, such as rejecting the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, expanding its wired communication network or becoming involved in the Syrian conflict.

Considering this new landscape, the time has come to revise dramatically the purported antagonism between Hezbollah and the Lebanese State...and vice versa. All of that drivel can and should be forgotten at this point! If such nostalgia still convinces some people to maintain that viewpoint, then that condition is simply indicative of the persistent corrosion originally responsible for having created that antagonism in the first place. By extension, everyone who

recognizes that situation must also admit that it encompasses the country’s borders and myriad other features. Where border security is concerned, Hezbollah has demonstrably given front row seats to the LAF, and when those have been filled, to the state’s other security agencies.

Those who are enthusiastic about this nouveau partnership between Saudi Arabia and the United States are keen to see it spawn tangible actions regionally, including in Lebanon. However, there is no reason to believe that Lebanon will emerge as the epicenter for confronting Iran’s expansionism in the Arab world.

Questions may be asked legitimately regarding the scope of the rejuvenated and aggressive strategic partnership between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Notably, that intensification of relations produced harsh accusations directed toward Iran, including its meddling in the affairs of the Arab world and the support

it provides Hezbollah and other regional militias. To paraphrase Balthazar Gerbier, however, *every cook praises his own broth*. Accordingly, those who are enthusiastic about this nouveau alliance for whatever reason are evidently keen to see it spawn tangible actions regionally, including in Lebanon. While remaining objective about the partnership and its future prospects, there is no reason to believe that Lebanon will emerge as the epicenter for confronting Iran's expansionism in the Arab world. After all, as President Trump equated the terroristic actions of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, he also praised the LAF for "hunting [down] ISIS operatives, who are trying to infiltrate their territory."¹⁰

⁽¹⁰⁾ "Trump praises Lebanese Army, says Hezbollah a 'terror' group." *The Daily Star*. May 21, 2017.

⁽¹¹⁾ An American-Lebanese counselor to Trump, Walid Fares, tried to explain this inconsistency by saying that Trump's message was double: one to the LAF that it should stand firm against terrorism and another to the Lebanese people, who often respond to accusations that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization by noting that such characterization will hinder Lebanon from recovering its freedom, security and peace. Interview with W. Fares on (Lebanese) MTV on May 24, 2017.

The issue at hand certainly extends beyond inconsistencies in speech or attempts to understand the "profound" logic that, on the one hand, extols the LAF for "hunting down" ISIS, and on the other, sustains its honeymoon with the home-cooked, Iranian-fed "terrorist" organization known as Hezbollah.¹¹ Instead, it highlights the scope of the Lebanese imbroglio within which Hezbollah exists and will likely remain. Moreover, it will become ever more difficult to identify who is really who, who is really what, and who is friends with or the enemy of whom!

So, what does all this mean for Lebanon? Well, since all of the key regional and international actors have already (tacitly or otherwise) acknowledged and accepted that imbroglio, the answer is...*absolutely nothing!* In a speech Nasrallah delivered May 25 to commemorate the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon, he referenced Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia and the combative statements directed toward Iran and Hezbollah. Nasrallah sought



The Twitter page of the British Ambassador to Beirut featured for several days a picture of an LAF soldier looking into the Bekaa valley (accessed May 21, 2017). The UK and the U.S. are among the LAF's most generous benefactors.

On May 13, 2017, *The Daily Star* published a story titled "Border security developments, but questions remain." The following excerpt describes some of the support being provided to the LAF:

So far the United Kingdom and the United States have pumped over an estimated \$100 million in support for the Army. A spokesperson at the British Embassy said much of the funds have specifically gone toward equipping the LBRs [Land Border Regiments]. By 2019, we will have trained over 11,000 soldiers for frontline operations, [built] over 30 watchtowers, 20 forward operations bases, delivered 320 Land Rovers and 3,300 sets of body armor along with a secure radio communication network.

to comfort the Lebanese, particularly Hezbollah's constituents, by assuring them that nothing serious was afoot and that everything Trump said was essentially meaningless and empty.¹²

While Nasrallah could not have said anything else, the propagandist reassurances he gave were, unfortunately, not far from reality.¹³ An excellent argument for the likelihood that conditions in Lebanon—despite "accidents"—will persist again comes in the form of the Lebanese border situation. The current *modus vivendi* holds roughly that Lebanon's southern region will continue to be ruled according to UNSCR 1701, which positions some "10,769 [UNIFIL] peacekeepers from 40 troop-contributing countries" in the area, as well as elements from the LAF and Hezbollah (in addition

⁽¹²⁾ Known officially as "Resistance and Liberation Day."

⁽¹³⁾ In his speech, Nasrallah minimized the possible impacts of new and tighter sanctions against Hezbollah, its cadre, institutions and allies. The propagandist message regarding this issue requires a different handling.

to some Palestinian militias located within several refugee camps).^{14,15} Along Lebanon's eastern border with Syria, LAF troops are chaperoned by Western military advisers and instructors from countries that traditionally assist the LAF, other Lebanese security agencies...and Hezbollah's formal and informal militias.

The persistent imbroglio is certainly not cast in stone. Rather, it resulted from a complex chain of events that began in 2000. The sequence commenced with the Israeli Army's (quasi unilateral) withdrawal from southern regions still being occupied and the first significant confrontation between the LAF and a group of Sunni terrorists—some of whom were Afghanistan veterans—in the north.¹⁶ Since then, and without becoming mired in the countless details, the developments that occurred along the Lebanese/Israeli border or its Lebanese/Syrian counterparts since then have conspired to instantiate an “internationalization” (to varying political, security and legal degrees) of Lebanon's three land borders in the north, east and south, and their maritime equivalent in the west. Irrespective of the legal aspects of that internationalization “process,” its political and security aspects shielded those regions from almost all risk of incidental destabilization, whether visited by rogue “terrorist” actors (north and east) or through “spoilers.”

From a practical perspective, and aside from several small pockets outside Orsal that no longer present an immediate threat, the military situation along Lebanon's eastern and northern borders with Syria now rests firmly in the joint hands of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. These conditions not

⁽¹⁴⁾ <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-troop-contributing-countries>

⁽¹⁵⁾ The Daily Star interview with Steven Heydemann, nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution Center for Middle East Policy. “[Donors] remaining mum over Hezbollah's presence was ‘intentional myopia’ aimed at maintaining consistency in the donors’ foreign policy, as the principal funders define Hezbollah's armed wing as a terrorist organization. ‘You’ll never get a public acknowledgment or recognition of the inherent contradictions in their programs, they just won’t do it,’ Heydemann added. ‘But, it’s clear that an open border poses the threat of destabilizing Lebanon...the balance of their interests pushes them to make these kinds of programming commitments even if they come with all these other caveats.’” See: “Border security developments, but questions remain.” *The Daily Star*, May 13, 2017.

⁽¹⁶⁾ This confrontation, referred to as the “Denniyeh incidents,” pitted several thousand members of the LAF against several hundred Islamists between December 30, 1999 and January 6, 2000 in Denniyeh, located east of the northern Lebanese port of Tripoli. The confrontation opened the eyes of the Lebanese to the threat posed by homegrown Islamists.

only enabled Hezbollah to exclaim “Mission Accomplished!” and hand over some of its positions to the LAF, but also to wade into the infighting affecting the various groups of (former) rebels. It also began planning the establishment of a safety belt along the Syrian side of the border to be manned by “repentant” Syrians.

Notably, not a single serious threat to the status quo along Lebanon’s southern border with Israel has occurred since 2006. Even when an embarrassed Hezbollah launched a retaliatory operation in response to Israel’s purported assassination of a senior Hezbollah cadre member, it did so in the “orphaned” Shebaa Farms area of the Lebanese/Syrian/Israeli tri-border region, the legal status of which remains murky at best. Similarly, each time Israel chose to take a retaliatory action within Lebanese territory, it did so in the same general area and with considerable restraint. The primary actors in this *theater of the absurd* (i.e., Israel and Iran) know indubitably that (a) this border region is the only area that allows each to exchange messages of deterrence with the other and (b) that any full-scale confrontation between the two would open a Pandora’s box, the effects of which would be incalculable for both. The most apt description of this affected entente can be found in an article published after the April border sightseeing tour by a writer who does not attempt to hide his sympathy for Hezbollah:

[This] tour is a chapter of the ongoing war between the two belligerents. By dint of all the frictions and clashes which pit them against each other, and by dint of the mutual understanding they have of the military logic of each

other, the confrontation between them has transformed into something akin to telepathy or to a silent dialogue that only mystics know how to practice!¹⁷

Understandably, however, there is no guarantee that such logical considerations will continue to convince either actor to avoid crossing the Rubicon. Moreover, although southern Lebanon and parts of southern Syria seem to have become an integrated confrontation line, the involvement of Iran and Israel (to varying degrees) in the Syrian conflict remains a factor that helps alleviate confrontation along the Lebanese border.

•

From a border security perspective, all of this is actually good news for Lebanon. After all, what could be better than to have the (quasi) assurance that Lebanon's "enforced quarantine" will help prevent spillover from the east while greatly reducing the possibility of war in the south? Cynically, that situation approaches nirvana.

Of course, this "quarantine" cannot eliminate Lebanon's economic problems, its endemic and widespread corruption, its political crises, its accelerating social, confessional and sectarian animosity, etc. But compared to such problems, what will be the result of witnessing the collapse of yet another country in the region—one that no fewer than 1.5 million refugees hope to exchange for more favorable destinations—and the accompanying international diffusion of Lebanon's myriad ills?

⁽¹⁷⁾ Bayram, Ibrahim. "What are Hezbollah's hidden Goals from its Last Performance in South Lebanon?" *An-Nahar*. April 22, 2017.

Pessimistically, some would argue that to the extent such problems can be contained or the entire process postponed, the better things will be. Yet, while that may be valid according to short-term realpolitik, a prerequisite to its validity is unconditional acceptance of the superior position Hezbollah holds vis-à-vis the fate of Lebanon.

In Lebanon, some form of supremacy has always supplanted the antagonism that originally drove the state and its adversary to confrontation. In the 1970s, that supremacy was typically referred to as “Political Maronitism.” Nowadays, a more accurate label is “Political Shiism....”

Nevertheless, proponents of that supremacy, including those who accept it as a “lesser evil,” must remember a primary feature of Lebanon’s unique conflict dynamic, which has persisted since the earliest years of its Civil War—including

“conflicts” that occurred well before or took place only recently in the politically correct guise of “civil unrest.” In short, some form of supremacy has always supplanted the antagonism that originally drove the state and its adversary to confrontation. Then, when the threat presented by that “other party” receded and at least some elements of its agenda had been incorporated into the state’s own, Lebanon emerged from the fray as a docile apparatus devoted to serving partisan interests.... In the 1970s, the party du jour was typically referred to as “Political Maronitism.” Nowadays, a more accurate label is “Political Shiism....”