

Lebanon, Hezbollah, and the “International Community” **MILKING THE HE-GOAT!**

It doesn't take more than a metaphorical, even vulgar, Lebanese saying to illustrate a situation of unreasonable obstinacy to accomplish something unrealistic:

“- It's a he-goat!”

“- Never mind. Milk it.”

Extending the metaphor further and assuming that “official Lebanon,” epitomized by its four poles of power, namely the (Maronite) President of the Republic, the (Shia) Speaker of Parliament, the (Sunni) Prime Minister, and the Army, is the he-goat and the “international community” is the protagonist sworn to milk it, such a spectacle is indeed unfolding before our eyes. Moreover, it is being boosted by the promises exchanged between the he-goat and the eventual milker!

The international community, based on the conclusions of the CEDRE conference, promises substantial aid to help official Lebanon sustain itself, and in return, it asks Lebanon to uphold its “disassociation policy” from regional conflicts, to espouse a reasonable position regarding the Syrian refugee issue, to fight corruption, and to bring reforms. Official Lebanon promises to do its best in order to meet these conditions.⁽¹⁾

So far, there is nothing outstanding in this

⁽¹⁾ According to the French official narrative “On April 6, France hosted in Paris the international conference in support of Lebanon development and reforms, CEDRE (Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises) [...] The objective of the CEDRE conference for the international community was to support the development and the strengthening of the Lebanese economy as part of a comprehensive plan for reform and for infrastructure investments as prepared by the Lebanese authorities and presented during the conference.”
<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/events/article/lebanon-cedre-conference-06-04-18>

exchange between the international community and a third-world country suffering from the typical ills that such countries endure. The case of Lebanon, however, is somewhat trickier: besides the he-goat and the international community, there is an “elephant in the room.” It is well-known that the elephant in question is a real behemoth with hooks and fangs: Hezbollah and what it represents and advocates as Iranian agenda.

To add complications to this issue, let's remember that the elephant in question is not perceived in the same way by all the actors who roughly fall under the category of international community; in the context of a quasi-theological debate, Paris and Berlin hold to the theory of a *double nature* (i.e., they “believe” Hezbollah has two wings: political and military/terrorist—the first is respectable while the latter is bad and evil), whereas Washington and London, for a couple weeks now, espouse a *monophysite* approach (i.e., Hezbollah, as a whole, is a terrorist organization). This divergence of perception and approach, mainly driven by extra-Lebanese considerations (i.e., the way to deal with Tehran at large), *is not* a mere byzantine debate. It demands the definition of Hezbollah's nature, but beyond that, it commands the terms upon which the relationship between official Lebanon and Hezbollah is conceived and perceived.

Since the formation of the new Lebanese government on January 31, 2019, (a process that offered an irrecusable demonstration of Hezbollah's control of the Lebanese political mechanisms), and since the UK deemed in late February the entire Hezbollah to be a terrorist organization, it became common place, in the wake of American and British

⁽²⁾ An illustrative sample of this type of “concern literature” can be found in this report about a visit that the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon paid to Prime Minister Hariri a couple days after his cabinet received the confidence of the parliament:

“U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon warned of Hezbollah’s presence in the Cabinet during a meeting with Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Ambassador Elizabeth Richard labeled Hezbollah’s presence as a detriment to Lebanon’s stability yet expressed ‘delight’ at a new government finally being formed. The U.S. is concerned with Hezbollah’s growing role in the cabinet while also operating as ‘a militia’ out of the control of the government,” she said. “[Hezbollah] continues to make its own national security decisions – decisions that endanger the rest of the country. And that continues to violate the government’s disassociation policy by participating in armed conflict in at least three other countries,” Richard said.”

“US ambassador labels Hezbollah’s role in Cabinet as threat,” *An-Nahar*, February 19, 2019.

<https://en.annahar.com/article/938841-us-ambassador-labels-hezbollahs-role-in-cabinet-as-threat>

statements, to hear about Hezbollah’s growing role in Lebanon and their increasing influence over Lebanon’s institutions.⁽²⁾

While this role and the organization’s influence are simply a truism, the theoretical framework it refers to is open to dispute. The fact is that describing the situation prevailing in Lebanon according to a pattern of competition between a central government and a non-state actor that is trying to make further inroads within this central government, and that is struggling to gain an upper hand in allocation of resources in addition to influencing policies is simply outdated. Official Lebanon, the so-called “State,” to a very large extent has already been taken over and instrumentalized by Hezbollah!

However, we need to acknowledge that Hezbollah, and Iran that is behind it, continue to prove how genius they are in adjusting the visibility of their control over Lebanon according to the needs of the hour.

At a juncture where Iran itself is under so much pressure from all sides and on all fronts, “revolutionary wisdom,” as Rahbar (Führer) Khamenei would put it, demands that Iran play the game discreetly and mute the spate of rhetoric, such as the one which prevailed at the peak of the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts when Iranian officials fell over each other to count the number of Arab capitals that had already fallen under the hegemon of Tehran—Beirut at first of course! It’s exactly what’s happening right now. Iran is no longer talking of South Lebanon as its border with Israel, and Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s Secretary General who once apologized publicly for not personally going to Yemen and joining the fight there, is dedicating his rhetorical skills to denounce the corruption in Lebanon,

⁽³⁾ "Fight against graft equal to fight against Israel: Nasrallah," *The Daily Star*, March 8, 2019.
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Mar-08/478347-fight-against-graft-equal-to-fight-against-israel-nasrallah.ashx>

with promises to fight it as though it were a sacred war!⁽³⁾

In the shadow of this tactical low profile adopted by both Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, the evidence has concurred to prove that Hezbollah's control over each of the four pillars of "official Lebanon" (presidency, parliament, cabinet, and army) hasn't decreased at all.

While the election of General Michel Aoun to Lebanon's Presidency on October 31, 2016, reflected a regional shift on the Lebanese scale, at that time, of the balance of power in favor of the pro-Iranian axis, the cosmetic doubts about him being Hezbollah's yes-man at the Presidency were totally dissipated when Hezbollah's MP Nawwaf Moussawi, in a surge of anger and of megalomania, committed the greatest blunder of his career during the parliament session of February 13, 2019. That day, he publicly claimed that it was "an honor for the Lebanese that President Michel Aoun had come to his post alongside the rifle of the resistance." The summum of the unintended "insult" was that he used Michel Aoun as a counter example to the late 1982 President-Elect Bashir Gemayyel, who had reached that same post in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. It is noteworthy that Colonel Aoun at that time was part of Gemayyel's inner circle! Consequently, any discussion on the status of General Michel Aoun in his capacity as President of the Lebanese Republic in relation to Hezbollah is pure nonsense. Aoun, as Moussawi implied it, is literally indebted to Hezbollah—a debt that he will never be able to discharge himself, or his clan, of.

Speaker Nabih Berri, even though he and his AMAL movement were the first victims

⁽⁴⁾ Regarding Berri's feeling towards Hezbollah, it's enough to check on Wikileaks some of the exchanges he had in 2006 with American diplomats, during which he provided "advice" on how Israelis should be dealing in military matters with Hezbollah. As to the quotation, refer to *Al-Akhbar*, May 28, 2018.

⁽⁵⁾ About the November 2017 episode, see: Anne Barnard and Maria Abi-Habib "Why Saad Hariri Had That Strange Sojourn in Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/24/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-saad-hariri-mohammed-bin-salman-lebanon.html>

⁽⁶⁾ About the Saudi-Lebanese "break-up," Lokman Slim, "Liban-Arabie saoudite: chronique d'un divorce annoncé," *L'orient-Le Jour*, November 25, 2017. <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1085946/liban-arabie-saoudite-chronique-dun-divorce-annonce.html>

of the ascension of Hezbollah in the 1980s, has long since accepted the *fait accompli* and is much more interested in remaining Hezbollah's *premium alter ego* rather than aspiring for anything else. Regardless of what brews deep inside Berri's mind, we need to take him for his word when he says that Nasrallah and he are "two bodies beating with the same heart!"⁽⁴⁾

The case of the two other pillars, Premier Saad Hariri and the Lebanese Army, may seem a bit more complex. For Prime Minister Saad Hariri, this is primarily due to the blood legacy of his father Rafic, whose assassination is attributed to Hezbollah and for the historical obligation that the Hariri family has toward Saudi Arabia. As for the Army, this institution has a reputation of being cross-confessional and of having preserved its cohesion, notwithstanding some breaches, over the last years and especially during the heyday of the Syrian conflict.

Howsoever uncomfortable this may seem, the relationship of patronage between Saudi Arabia and Saad Rafic Hariri is not the same anymore since the episode in November 2017 when Saad was forced to resign on air through official Saudi's *al-Arabiyya* television after having been roundly lambasted.⁽⁵⁾ This episode was the culmination of a long re-evaluation process that Saudi Arabia had initiated vis-à-vis Lebanon after the death of King Abdullah.⁽⁶⁾ The idea that Saad Hariri's positions reflect those of Saudi Arabia quite simply needs to be updated.

As for the legacy of his father Rafic, be it in terms of wealth or blood feud, this too requires similar revision. Most of his share of the wealth, as he has admitted, is gone and Saad is now in the situation of having to save by all means, including political concessions,

⁽⁷⁾ The most recent significant humiliating concession is bringing Saad Hariri around to admitting that a Sunni pro-Hezbollah wing exists within the Lebanese Sunni community and deserves to be represented in the cabinet.

what may be still salvaged, while the blood is looking more and more like a stumbling block that keeps him from making even bigger and more overt concessions. Paradoxically, this situation is very suitable for Hezbollah that is getting from Saad Hariri and his Future Movement all it wants while keeping him in the role of the *primus inter pares* Sunni leader for being the “scion of the Martyr [Rafic].”⁽⁷⁾ So far, based on Saad's behavior and dealings, especially since the November 2017 episode, it doesn't seem that he is in the grip of any ethical dilemma about whether to restore his financial standing and situation or remain true to the blood of his father and predecessor!

Last but not the least are the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) that enjoy the greatest amount of praise, assistance, and offers of assistance from all sides. Contrary to the three other pillars, whose overt or disguised alignment with Hezbollah's position is not to be questioned, the LAF is perhaps the only institution that still does not inspire complete confidence to Hezbollah, despite reciprocal lip services.

It is not that the high echelons of its leadership are not trustworthy in Hezbollah's view, but the fact is that the LAF is:

(1) the body whose official job description is to maintain the defense of the country and, consequently, is objectively concerned that someone else is encroaching on their field;

(2) by definition, a body with a strong intrinsic esprit de corps;

(3) politically diverse precisely because it is a cross-confessional and cross-regional body.

If we add to all these factors the native suspicion that Hezbollah has toward the rush

⁽⁸⁾ The assistance provided to the LAF by western powers doesn't escape Hezbollah's attention. Overt warnings, when needed, are publicly sent to the LAF commandment in this regard. See, for instance, the editorial of pro-Hezbollah *al-Akbar* dated January 26, 2019: "Intents to Change the LAF Doctrine?" that conveys an overt "put on notice" regarding the alleged endgame of some of that assistance.

of the international community to assist this institution and allow it to stand as a *success story*, we understand better the lack of full confidence from Hezbollah's end toward this institution and their repeated claim that the LAF is not capable to protect Lebanon alone.⁽⁸⁾

Nevertheless, despite Hezbollah's attitude, we cannot say that the LAF has so far seriously overshadowed Hezbollah or posed any embarrassing challenge to it. From the 2006 War through the 2008 Beirut Campaign, where Hezbollah invaded the strongholds of their Sunni and Druze political opponents, to the so-called "liberation" of the eastern border regions from Nusra and ISIS fighters (2017), to the tunnel issue at the southern border (December 2018–January 2019), the LAF has played fair.

Overall, it is no exaggeration to say that while Hezbollah takes advantage of the public complicity of the LAF, this same complicity has held the LAF up to ridicule at various moments and harmed its reputation. There is no sign that this situation is about to change in the foreseeable future or that the LAF will fulfill the wishful thinking of those who consider it their trump card. That being so, there is no serious reason to give the LAF preferential treatment over the three other pillars of "official Lebanon."

All that has been stated above is open secret. In addition we can confidently assure that none of those rushing in since the formation of the new government on behalf of the international community haven't had, at some point or another, one or more unpleasant surprise in their dealings with the representatives of "official Lebanon" and

haven't received, first hand or indirectly, the proof that this "official Lebanon" is in fact a "fictional Lebanon," and, to a very large extent, a mere theoretical construction of that same "international community" serving its own political purposes.

It is not a bad thing, in general, to help a country on the brink of bankruptcy to avoid the worst. In addition to the inherent virtue of lending a hand, the international community has all the required rationales to do so, especially in the case of Lebanon where around two million refugees are caged (Palestinian, Syrian, and others), whose unique dream is to slip through the fences of this cage – not to talk of the hundreds of thousands of Lebanese living below the poverty line and wanting to share the same dream.

While helping Lebanon now, for the sake of maintaining it at a certain threshold of stability, would postpone the headache that ensue the failure of any state, it needs to be clear that milking the he-goat, under the current circumstances, will only profit the elephant in the room and will increase the chances of this elephant trading *stability* for for sustaining its *immunity* and its ongoing hegemony over the country.