



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Nasrallah funeral gives Hezbollah opportunity to show its force



Beirut will shut its airport for four hours this Sunday to allow the **funeral** of Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader who was killed by an Israeli air strike last September and who has been temporarily buried elsewhere.

The event could also turn into an important rally of support for Hezbollah as it proclaims defiance even after a bruising, months-long Israeli offensive.

The funeral's date was scheduled so it could take place after an initial 60-day ceasefire brokered by the US with Israel that was extended to 18 February. But on this day, Israel announced it would remain in five key positions in southern Lebanon for a "temporary" but unspecified period of time.

Israel's prolonged occupation in Lebanon gives Hezbollah further cause to keep its supporters fired up. It also makes it much more difficult for Lebanon's new and technocratic government to tackle some of the country's massive political and economic challenges.

Presently, there is much regional focus on the fantastical pronouncements of US President Donald Trump, who envisions clearing the Gaza Strip of its people to make a Middle East Riviera and more on this later.

In Lebanon, Israel's offensive against Hezbollah that started last September as well as Iran's loss of Syria as another important ally following the fall of Bashir Al-Assad had left the Shia group severely weakened.

Israel's presence in Lebanon

Israel's announcement of its extended military presence appears yet another example of the US giving its ally a free hand. There is little regard to managing the competing interests that must be balanced just when there was tentative hope that Lebanon, and its neighbour Syria, could start to lay the groundwork for a more stable future.

Furthermore, Israel has Trump's blessing to maintain a buffer zone it created in Syria after

the fall of Assad last December for years to come, the Jerusalem Post **reported** last week.

The newspaper also cited anonymous sources saying that despite public denials by the Lebanese government, both it and the US agreed to Israel's continued presence in southern Lebanon.

Israel's presence will likely make it harder to strengthen the Lebanese army and government

There is certainly no warmth between Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, a Maronite Christian, and the Shia Hezbollah group. But he **told** reporters after Israel said it would maintain its military presence that the "Israeli enemy cannot be trusted."

Israel's presence will likely make it harder to strengthen the Lebanese army and government, which since its formation on 8 February has been making moves towards sidelining Hezbollah.

Armed resistance

For the first time in decades, the Lebanese government **scrapped** the term "armed resistance" from a cabinet statement on its future priorities that will be debated on 25 February in parliament, whose approval is needed so the cabinet can start work.

The term was long associated with Hezbollah and its justification to carry arms against "Israeli aggression". The group called the move a "dangerous" departure from Lebanon's historical stance on armed resistance against Israel.

Aoun was appointed president in January after a two-year period of paralysis after parliament failed to fill the post. He is a military man, having completed US counter-terrorism training, and he previously served as commander of Lebanon's army.



President Joseph Aoun made clear in his inaugural address that the Lebanese army alone had an exclusive right to bear arms

His government, led by Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, who was president of the International Court of Justice, was formed after Hezbollah was unable to wield its previous veto of appointments and the group only approved five of its 24 members, further signalling its weakness.

On 15 February, the army **-fired** tear gas at Hezbollah supporters who were protesting against the government's blocking of an Iranian flight after the Israeli military accused Tehran of using civilian aircraft to smuggle cash to Beirut to arm Hezbollah. The government has since extended the flight ban indefinitely.

Aoun made clear in his inaugural address that the Lebanese army alone had an "exclusive right" to bear arms, and he has been a staunch defender of its troops, many of whom have to take second jobs amid economic crisis.

Future reform will be rocky

In a move seen as another step to sideline Hezbollah and Iran, the government hopes to get a deal with the International Monetary Fund to deal with the country's massive debt. Lebanon had reached a draft deal with the IMF in 2022, but Hezbollah resisted the necessary reforms.

Lebanon's economy collapsed in 2019, when it defaulted on its foreign debt and the Lebanese

pound's value fell by almost 100%. Now, the government is hoping to set up a reconstruction fund for rebuilding after the Israeli offensive as well as improved transparency after deep corruption has eroded trust in the state.

But future reform will be rocky because Hezbollah did manage to get its favoured appointee into the finance ministry, Yassin Jaber.

Hezbollah and its partners remain the largest parliamentary bloc until elections due next year

It remains to be seen if the government will muster the capacity to take on Hezbollah as **urged** by Marco Rubio, US secretary of state, in Jerusalem this week: "A strong Lebanese state that can take on and disarm Hezbollah."

Meanwhile, Hezbollah and its partners remain the largest parliamentary bloc until elections due next year, and the regional outlook under Trump is shaky, to say the least.

Arab governments are scrambling to meet Trump's challenge to come up with better ideas for Gaza that may include helping to form a Palestinian committee to run Gaza without Hamas and for Gulf states to fund reconstruction.

Arab leaders are keenly aware that anything that did not keep alive Palestinian aspirations for statehood could lead to unrest in their own countries.

Nasrallah's funeral this Sunday provides a chance for Lebanon's Shia community to come together, and Hezbollah says 79 countries will be involved in the funeral in some capacity, including Iran. It will also be another reminder that foes defeated militarily do not disappear.