



By: Ferry Biedermann

# Will Hezbollah disarmament drive Lebanon to the brink (again)?



Much-plagued Lebanon is in for another rough ride amid rising tensions surrounding Hezbollah that could also draw in neighbouring Israel and Syria.

The country is still on the ropes after a period of devastating Israeli attacks while also mired in an ongoing severe economic crisis. It is additionally housing hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees and has barely recovered from the huge Beirut port explosion.

Now a government plan, in line with UN resolutions but adopted under US pressure, to disarm the still dominant Shia Hezbollah movement, is reviving fears of civil war or at least conflict.

With an increasingly belligerent Israel to the south and on other sides surrounded by a still unstable but now Sunni Islamist-dominated Syria, chances of Lebanon facing yet more destabilisation are growing. Particularly as the internal situation is increasingly fraught.

## A dangerous misrepresentation of the actual situation

The fear of internal conflict is not far-fetched. In 2008, Hezbollah fought a short but vicious mini-civil war with several other Lebanese factions.

This was just to prevent the government at the time from shutting down its separate telecommunication network and re-asserting control over Beirut airport, allegedly an important conduit for the group's weapons and cash and its smuggling operations.

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Circumstances are now said to be different, with Hezbollah weakened by last year's Israeli assault that took out much of its leadership and rocket arsenal.

Also, there's a new **government** in charge in Beirut, with former army chief Joseph Aoun as president and an experienced international **diplomat** and judge, Nawaf Salam, as prime minister.

This, however, is a dangerous misrepresentation of the actual situation. Hezbollah is still by far the **dominant** military force in Lebanon and has no intention of disarming. And the Lebanese central government remains weak, divided along sectarian and political lines, economically squeezed and militarily restricted.

## Vast and profitable criminal sidelines

In 2008 the Lebanese army (LAF) remained outside the fray and let Hezbollah overrun its opponents. Since then, it has only grown closer to Hezbollah under the previous president, Michel Aoun (no relation to the current president), who was aligned with the movement. Yet it kept receiving weapons from the US.

The American rationale in keeping up support for the LAF throughout, except for a short period during Trump I, has been that this would at least not leave Iran-backed Hezbollah as the only military force in the country.

In practice, the LAF has often acted as a shield for Hezbollah, especially in the South.

Despite Hezbollah's somewhat weakened status and the shifted political alliances in Lebanon, there's very little chance of the LAF decisively **confronting** Hezbollah.

Even were it inclined to do so, it knows that it would risk not only military defeat but also internal collapse.

The US envoy to Lebanon and ambassador to Turkey, Tom Barrack, seems to **think** that pushing for a full Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon might give the government more leverage over Hezbollah.

It would seemingly deprive the group of the excuse that its arms are necessary to resist the Israeli occupation.

**Prior to 7 October 2023, there had been an extended period of relative quiet on the border**

But that's a mirage. While a full withdrawal is imperative for all sorts of reasons, the Israeli presence and other Israeli violations of Lebanon's sovereignty are by now mostly an excuse for Hezbollah to retain its arms.

Prior to 7 October 2023, there had been an extended period of relative quiet on the border.

There was no Israeli presence inside Lebanon, and the UN peacekeeping operation UNIFIL and the LAF could have maintained security. Yet Hezbollah never even considered disarming. It then attacked Israel, ostensibly in support of Hamas in Gaza.

The movement has various more or less overt reasons to want to retain its arms. It partly genuinely believes that an asymmetric military counterweight is needed to deter Israel.

More than that, it distrusts other Lebanese factions and sees its arms as necessary protection for the Shia community and its interests.

The less overt and most problematic parts of the motivation to retain arms are the group's vast and profitable criminal sidelines, such as the drugs and arms trade.

And it maintains an allegiance to Iran, which sees Hezbollah as a means for projecting power all the way to the Mediterranean, even though this was useless in Tehran's recent confrontation with Israel.

## A heavy blow to the group

The idea that Hezbollah could now be forced

into disarmament comes in the wake of the ceasefire agreement reached by the end of last year to end the Israel-Hezbollah fighting.

International and US focus on the **ceasefire** – only partially adhered to and implemented – is logical but will not address the longstanding realities of Lebanon.

The thinking might be, though, that gradually strengthening Lebanese central control over borders and the rest of the country could squeeze Hezbollah enough to force it into disarmament.

The airport, at least, has been brought under tighter government control, although still wholly surrounded by Hezbollah strongholds.

The **loss** of Hezbollah's regular supply routes through Syria, which under Bashar al-Assad, was aligned with Iran, is seen as an additional heavy blow to the group.

**At some point Lebanese Sunni factions or a strengthened Syrian government might judge the group sufficiently weakened to think it vulnerable to attack**

However, arms **smuggling** reportedly is rife across the Lebanese-Syrian border. The danger is that not only Hezbollah is still getting arms through, but that these also reach Lebanese Sunni Islamist groups that are emboldened by the Sunni Islamist takeover in Damascus.

The idea that Hezbollah can be squeezed is a long-term proposition, given its still formidable arsenal and the various other means it says it has developed for maintaining its arms.

At some point, though, Lebanese Sunni factions or a strengthened Syrian government might judge the group sufficiently weakened to think it vulnerable to attack.

Because of Hezbollah's more than a decade-long fight alongside Assad against Syria's Sunni

forces and the pre-existing sectarian divide, animosity towards the group in Syria and among Sunnis in Lebanon is running high.

Clashes continue along the Lebanese-Syrian border, involving Syrian soldiers and Hezbollah.

## A post-Gaza conflict constellation

Lebanese-Syrian relations have always been fraught. The countries have recently agreed to work on fully demarcating and securing their border. But any future consolidated government in Damascus is likely to aspire to influence in Lebanon.

Syria effectively dominated its neighbour from the end of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war until Damascus withdrew its forces in 2005. Damascus was then ruled by the Iran-leaning Alawite Assad regime that gave Hezbollah all the support it needed right up to its demise last year.



*Not only the Syrian government but also some of its sponsors in the Arab world would dearly like to see Hezbollah eliminated and their own influence in Lebanon strengthened - Ahmad al-Sharaa*

The situation is radically different now. Not only the Syrian government but also some of its sponsors in the Arab world, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, would dearly like to see Hezbollah eliminated and their own influence in Lebanon strengthened.

Especially in a post-Gaza conflict

constellation, the Arab Gulf countries can be expected to pull closer to Israel again and encourage Syria and Israel at least to cooperate on the issue of reducing Hezbollah.

While this might look promising from an American point of view, favouring regional realignment, it is likely to present a serious danger of disruption in Lebanon.

Any grand bargain would have to take into account restraining both Israeli and Syrian designs on Lebanon and the even more challenging task of managing Hezbollah's disarmament without a Lebanese conflagration. Whether any of that is feasible in the least is highly doubtful.