



By: TA | AP Insight

Iran steps up pressure on Lebanon by refusing to withdraw its ambassador



Iran on Monday defied Lebanon's expulsion order for its ambassador by saying he would stay, further increasing tensions in a country in the crosshairs of the latest fighting between the Iranian-backed **Hezbollah and Israel**.

Lebanon had declared Ambassador Mohammad Reza Shibani "persona non grata" in an effort to weaken Iran's diplomatic presence and have a charge d'affairs at its embassy instead. But the deadline to leave the country was Sunday.

"Our embassy in Lebanon is active," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei told journalists. "Our ambassador, following remarks made by relevant Lebanese bodies and the conclusions reached, will continue his mission in Beirut and he is still there."

Lebanese officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment. It was not clear what Lebanon would do next or how diplomatic relations might be affected.

The Iranian ambassador is reportedly in the embassy, where he is believed to have diplomatic immunity.

The Lebanese Hezbollah militant group entered the Iran war by firing at Israel, which has responded by **invading southern Lebanon** and bombing parts of the capital, Beirut.

Health officials in Lebanon say over 1,200 people have been killed, with over **1 million people displaced**.

"This morning, the Iranian ambassador is drinking his coffee in Beirut and making a mockery of the 'host' country," Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar said Monday on X. "Lebanon is a virtual country that is effectively occupied by Iran."

Lebanon banned activities by Iran's Guards and Hezbollah

Lebanon, under increasing pressure to disarm Hezbollah, earlier this month announced a ban

on its military activities as well as those by Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard. Then came the ambassador's expulsion order.

Hezbollah called it a "reckless and reprehensible measure" and "a clear capitulation to external pressures and dictates." It organized a rally near the Iranian embassy to back the ambassador.

Over the past week, Iran put extreme pressure on the Lebanon's government

A Lebanese diplomatic official said that over the past week, Iran "put extreme pressure" on the government and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, a key political ally of Hezbollah, in an bid to reverse the decision.

Beirut is concerned that Iran's inclusion of the war in Lebanon among its conditions for dialogue with Washington would affect Lebanon's efforts to disarm Hezbollah, the official added, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Hezbollah says Iran has been a key ally of the group that claims it serves as a military deterrent to Israel while providing social services, largely for Lebanon's Shiite Muslim community.

But critics say Hezbollah's armed presence, the most powerful in the country, and its independent decision-making violates Lebanese sovereignty and compromises its relationship with other Arab countries and the West.

Diplomatic efforts are at risk

The rift has weakened Lebanon's efforts to find a way to end the war.

President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, while critical of Israel's invasion, have condemned Hezbollah's firing of rockets towards Israel, in solidarity with Iran, that

sparked the latest fighting.



Hezbollah was weakened by its previous war with Israel, and many saw a chance to act - PM Nawaf Salam

Even before the war, Aoun and Salam were scrambling to win trust that they could **disarm Hezbollah** without aggressive confrontation.

The militant group was weakened by its previous war with Israel, and many saw a chance to act.

Aoun and Salam came to power not long after the last war ended in November 2024, pledging to disarm Hezbollah and all non-state actors.

But frictions inside Lebanon are worsening, especially after Foreign Minister Youssef Rajji, a staunch opponent of Hezbollah, announced the expulsion order for the Iranian ambassador.

“Don’t play with fire because this fire will burn you, your people, and those behind you,” Mahmoud Qamati, a senior official in Hezbollah’s political bureau, said in a recent fiery address aimed at Rajji, who is a cabinet pick by the Christian Lebanese Forces party, Hezbollah’s bitter rival.