

HEZBOLLAH AND THE LEBANESE POPULAR MOVEMENT

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Introduction

Since its creation, Hezbollah's resistance to Israel has given the party great popular legitimacy. However, the Party of God is today the target, like the whole of the Lebanese sectarian and neoliberal political class, of the anger of large segments of Lebanese society, as well as part of the Shi'a populations that constitute the heart of its popular base.

For the first time, the protest movement, which is ongoing since its beginning in mid-October 2019, has massively affected regions with a Shi'a majority, in particular southern Lebanon and the city of Baalbeck in the Bekaa. In these regions, the Amal-Hezbollah duo was not spared by the demonstrators, who accused them of having prevented the socioeconomic development of their regions by imposing patronage and authoritarian policies.

In the early days of the protest movement, the offices of Mohammad Raad, deputy and head of the Hezbollah-led "Fidelity to the Resistance" parliamentary bloc, and those of Hezbollah deputy Hassan Fadlallah, in the city of Nabatiyeh were attacked by the demonstrators. Some young people from the southern suburbs of Beirut, a bastion of the party's popular base, joined the protest movement, while others on social media have not hesitated to criticise Hezbollah's positioning against the protest movement.

Although more modest than in the south, the demonstrations that took place in Baalbek were marked by a large participation of women, including schoolgirls. For the first time in the history of Hezbollah, voices, albeit limited and in an anonymous manner, among its fighters were heard criticising the positions of the party against the protest movement, while supporting the socioeconomic demands of protesters and denouncing the political allies of Hezbollah perceived as corrupt. Beyond the Shi'a population, the aura of Hezbollah has been shaken even in the traditional media supporters of the party.

While Lebanon has experienced several protest movements in recent years, Hezbollah has systematically boycotted the protests, such as those in early 2011, calling for an end to the sectarian regime, and the “You Stink” protest movement in 2015, which was originally triggered after a waste management crisis but quickly turned into a challenge to the Lebanese political system. Hezbollah, although rhetorically supportive of some of the demands of the protesters in 2015, declared that the movement should not be a target of the protests because the only corrupt political actors were the ones in the March 14 coalition. Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah stated that the party had espoused a “neutral position towards the (“You Stink”) movement because we don’t know its leadership, its project and objectives.”

Hassan Nasrallah’s first speech after the eruption of the Lebanese uprising in October 2019 accused the demonstrators of pushing the country into chaos and of being the instruments of a foreign plot, unconditionally supporting the government and the President. The Party mobilised on the same day its popular base in the majority Shi’a majority-inhabited regions for a show of force whose aim was to demonstrate that it retained the support of the local populations. Hezbollah’s supporters and members did not hesitate to intimidate the demonstrators in different localities and to attack them, for example in downtown Beirut, or in the city of Nabatiyeh, in southern Lebanon.

In his speech on Friday 1 November, Nasrallah adopted a more moderate tone. He called for the formation of a new government and for a dialogue with “all political forces and sincere demonstrators,” while opposing, with his ally the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the President of the Republic Michel Aoun the establishment of a government composed solely of technocrats and would exclude any representative of political parties as demanded by some of the demonstrators and certain political forces.

This paper analyses the reasons why Hezbollah perceives the popular movement as a threat and why it opposes its basic demands.

A Protest Movement Against Social Injustice and Sectarianism

The working and popular classes in Lebanon have been buffeted by declining living standards for years. Between 2010 and 2016 the incomes of the poorest households stagnated or dropped, and unemployment remained stubbornly high: only one third of the working-age population had a job, and joblessness among those under thirty-five ran as high as 37%. Between 40 and 50% of Lebanese residents lacked access to social assistance. Temporary foreign workers, estimated at 1 million,¹ were denied all social protections. According to a study by the Central Statistical Office, half of workers and more than a third of the country’s farmers were below the poverty line.

¹ This estimate did not include the individuals in military barracks, refugee camps and other assimilated “regroupings”.

At the same time, the richest 10% pocketed, on average, 56% of the national income between 2005 and 2014. The wealthiest 1%, just over 37,000 people, captured 23% of the income generated – as much as the poorest 50%, more than 1.5 million people.

Lebanon's political and economic rot has triggered some protests in recent years: in early 2011, during the beginning of the regional popular uprisings; in 2012 and 2014, over labour conditions; and in the summer of 2015, after a waste management crisis. But the scale and breadth of the current demonstrations far outstrips previous ones. Protests have exploded not just in the capital of Beirut but across the country: Tripoli, Nabatiyeh, Tyr, Baalbeck, Zouk, etc. The social composition of the movement also distinguishes it from past protests: it is much more rooted in the popular and working classes than the middle-class-heavy demonstrations of 2011 and 2015. A final distinguishing characteristic is the movement's actively non-sectarian cast. Signs and messages of solidarity between regions and across religious sects have multiplied since the protests' emergence.

The popular movement started in October 2019 differs from previous mobilisations by the fact that it challenges the sectarian system in an even more radical way, explicitly denounced (all parties combined) as responsible for the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions. Lebanon's sectarian system (like sectarianism more generally) is one of the main instruments used by the ruling parties, including Hezbollah, to strengthen their control over the popular classes, keeping them subordinated to their sectarian leaders. In the past, ruling elites have been able to quash movements through repression or by playing up sectarian divisions.

Hezbollah's Gradual Political Integration into the Sectarian System

Although the Party maintains the same populist rhetoric of rupture with the established order, the initial radical opposition of Hezbollah to the Lebanese sectarian and neoliberal political system in the 1980s has indeed gradually disappeared since its entry into parliament in 1992 and then in government in 2005 following the withdrawal of the Syrian army. In other words, Hezbollah has not tried to challenge the sectarian and neoliberal political system but rather seeks a greater influence and position within it, therefore consolidating it. Similarly, its integration into this system as a political fraction tied to the sectarian bourgeoisie demonstrates its approval and support of the current political economy framework of Lebanon and therefore to neoliberalism. In this perspective, it has deepened its political collaborations with other sectarian bourgeois political parties such as the Maronite Christian dominated party of the Free Patriotic Movement by notably supporting its leader Michel Aoun to become president of the country in 2016 and maintained his close alliance with Amal. In addition to this, despite Hezbollah's rivalry with Saad Hariri's political party, the Future Movement, and the March 14 Alliance, the Lebanese Islamic Shi'a movement has cooperated with this bloc at various points of crisis, and has been part of all united national governments with these forces since Syria's withdrawal from the country in 2005.

Similarly, the evolution of the Lebanese Islamic movement toward the Lebanese sectarian system was also linked to Hezbollah's regional allies, Syria and Iran, both of which supported its integration into the Lebanese political scene after the end of the Civil War. Another important feature in this integration into the political system was the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon, which compelled the party to participate in all Lebanese governments from that point onwards.

In addition to the formal role that Hezbollah plays in Lebanon's political economy, its integration into the system has also encouraged forms of clientelism and corruption.

This had consequences. Growing criticisms of the party could be heard in these past few years, including in the "favouritism" displayed by the Amal-Hezbollah coalition vis-à-vis certain entrepreneurs and the role of municipalities in the abusive grabbing of land. Some Hezbollah deputies and ministers were criticised for their shortcomings in improving the socioeconomic situation, the infrastructures and public services of their constituencies.

Hezbollah's control of municipalities, which have significant autonomy when it comes to planning and housing, has similarly shown its commitment to a neoliberal economic logic. These urban neoliberal policies have, however, witnessed resistance and even small popular rebellions. In November 2017, for example, in the impoverished neighbourhood of Hay Sellom, residents protested in the streets and started burning tyres and blocking roads against the destruction by the Lebanese police and Internal Security Forces – with the approval and support of Hezbollah – of the stores of unlicensed street vendors, who had been operating there for years. Some of the demonstrators loudly criticised Hezbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah, who they blamed for the destruction of their shops (their sources of incomes). In addition, they also condemned the party's involvement in the Syrian civil war, which has led to the death of many young men of the community.

Similarly, in August 2017, in the Hussaynia of Shmustar, a town located in the Baalbek-Hermel Governorate, local residents blamed Hezbollah for its poor performances in successive governments and for failing to achieve their promises such as water services or better roads in a meeting with Minister Hajj Hassan. They also accused the party of putting its own interests first and letting down the people of their constituencies. A few months later, in mid-February 2018 after the announcement by Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah's candidates for the legislative elections in May, banners were held on the Zahle-Baalbeck highway, signed by supporters of the party, who contested the candidacy of the MP and Minister of Industry at the time Hussein Hajj Hassan criticising his policies in the region.

In a public meeting with Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah in August 2018, a video appeared on Lebanese al-Jadeed Television showing an individual from the south criticising Hezbollah and

Amal for their policies regarding social economic issues, notably the lack of provision of public services, including education, health and electricity, in the south of the country, and their lack of struggle against corruption.

Evolution of the Party's Social Base, and Conversion to Neoliberalism

Hezbollah's acceptance and participation, especially from 2005 following its entry in all Lebanese coalition governments, in the consolidation of neoliberal dynamics in the Lebanese economy has its roots in the expansion of Hezbollah as a mass party following the end of the Lebanese Civil War and its embourgeoisement. It was no longer mainly constituted by young radical clerics and individuals who wanted to establish an Iran-style political system. The popular base of Hezbollah increasingly included the growing Shi'a sector of the bourgeoisie and middle classes, especially in Beirut. In Beirut's southern suburbs, for example, many individuals of wealthier families and large sectors of retailers have been joining the party, while Hezbollah's activities and institutions (especially those linked to tourism and leisure) provide services to middle-class Shi'a.

This socioeconomic evolution of the party's popular basis was also demonstrated in the profile of Hezbollah cadres, who increasingly came from a professional class holding secular higher education degrees, and in the growing role party members had in professional associations. Hezbollah's links to the Shi'a factions of the bourgeoisie in Lebanon – particularly in the key sectors of construction, real estate, services and trade – and in the diaspora have been strengthened through the neoliberal period after the end of the Lebanese civil war to today.

Hezbollah's increasing integration in the Lebanese political system has had significant implications for the party's relationship with Lebanese neoliberalism. This has notably implied the party's direct responsibility for implementing many neoliberal reforms at all levels, including national and municipal administrative bodies, promoted by the Lebanese elite and international institutions.

The party has for example supported the progressive privatisation processes of some key public services, including the state electricity company, Electricité du Liban (EDL). Hezbollah minister Muhammad Funayyish, as Minister of Energy and Water between July 2005 and November 2006, actually participated in the EDL privatisation process. Funayyish promoted the complete privatisation of electricity production, arguing that experience demonstrated that the "state is an unsuccessful merchant," adding that the government "should not be involved in any commercial activity" and "that the private sector should be given a bigger role in some of the public departments' affairs that have a commercial nature."

During the 2018 legislative elections, Hezbollah, which, like all political parties, once again promoted the deepening of the EDL privatisation process by calling for the implementation of

law no. 431 of 2002, which sets out the strategy of liberalisation of telecommunications companies, in particular through the establishment of a third telecommunications company based on a private-public partnership (PPP).

In the legislative elections of May 2018, despite a Hezbollah campaign promoting socioeconomic development and the fight against corruption according to the party's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in his 34-point agenda for institutional and economic reforms, this same programme called for controlling and rationalising expenditures in relation to the general financial situation of the state and for the deepening of privatisation processes in the electricity sector (EDL) and telecommunications companies.

In addition, there was Hezbollah's support for the nomination of Saad Hariri as Prime Minister of the national unity government following the legislative elections, who made several pledges to implement the neoliberal policies of the "Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises", known as the CEDRE.

Hezbollah Against the Protest Movement, or the Willingness to Defend and Preserve the Sectarian and Neoliberal Political System

In Lebanon, the popular protest movement has continued and intensified since 17 October. It has expanded to other causes, including feminist, ecological and socioeconomic (the issue of foreign workers, etc.). Protesters maintain demonstrations and the blocking of some roads. Organised feminists and students have joined the protests and intervened in coordinated ways across the country. Women in particular have participated in massive numbers, with feminists pushing for women's rights and equality within the movement.

Across the country, protesters carried out targeted actions in front of public institutions, exposed for their corruption and also against institutions and urban places representing symbols of wealth. Among them, the Banque du Liban and private banks more generally, institutions linked to telephone services and the management of the electricity system such as EDL and Ogero. Likewise, civil disobedience campaigns have been launched, calling on Lebanese citizens not to pay the electricity bills to the EDL to denounce the inability of the sector to ensure a continuous power supply, or to no longer pay back their bank loans to challenge restrictions imposed by the banking sector for several months while leaders and businessmen were able to transfer billions of dollars to Swiss banks from the uprising of the protest movement.

Other civil disobedience campaigns have also been ongoing under the slogan "Mech Def'in" ("We will not pay"). Another campaign, made up of leftist activists, called Tamîm al-Mâsarif ("nationalisation of banks") has encouraged and assisted bank savers wishing to withdraw

their money from private banks and organised political discussions on the need for a radical change in the economic policy of the country through the nationalisation of banks.

Several significant victories have been obtained by the protest movement since the withdrawal of the taxes that had triggered it and the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on 29 October 2019. These include the court decision obliging the mobile phone companies to issue their invoices in Lebanese pounds following the complaint filed by “The Judges’ Club” to the Consumer Protection Directorate of the Ministry of Economy and Commerce. Melhem Khalaf, an independent candidate from the civil movement, was elected head of the bar association, while the Bekaa League candidate Ali Yaghi, an independent supported by the popular movement, won the elections of the council of the order of dentists.

The protest movement, however, faces many challenges, most notably the lack of organisation and alternative representations likely to counter the domination of sectarian and neoliberal parties and ruling economic groups.

There are nevertheless various and diverse organisational attempts by various social and political actors to structure the protest movement across sectarian and geographical differences, especially as the repression increases, and channel the main demands. Some are also attempting to organise through communes in different regions, under the name of “Communes of October 17th”, and others at the neighbourhood level.

At the same time, new trade unions independent of the sectarian political parties are emerging.² A “Professionals’ Association” has notably been established, partially following the model of the Professional Association in Sudan, which brings together representatives of different professions (medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, engineering, law, social action, university education, journalism, economics, and cinema) and which has been playing an increasingly important role in protests. Some of their members have declared in the press that they want to rebuild an independent trade union activism free from the sectarian and neoliberal parties. The purpose of this new trade union structure is to promote the productive sectors of the economy, provide better working conditions for employees and facilitate students’ access to the labour market.

² The weakness of working-class institutions is a longstanding problem. Sectarian parties have actively tried to weaken the labour movement since the 1990s, forming separate federations and trade unions in a number of sectors in order to win significant power in the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL). As a result, the CGTL has been unable to mobilise workers despite intensifying neoliberal policies. They are conspicuously absent in the current protest movement. The Union Coordination Committee (UCC), the leading actor in the labour protests between 2011 and 2014, has been similarly hamstrung. At the UCC’s January 2015 election, the sectarian parties united against the combative trade unionist Hanna Gharib, who only managed to draw support from independents and the Lebanese Communist Party. Ever since the election, the UCC’s influence has waned.

Faced with this situation, Hezbollah is trying to end the protest movement by proposing solutions that maintain the Lebanese sectarian and neoliberal framework, while continuing to use intimidation and sometimes violence against protesters.

Despite a rhetorical speech supporting some of the movement's demands, the party, which initially kept calling for the return of Saad Hariri to the position of prime minister or a Sunni personality chosen by the latter, has supported the establishment of a politico-technocratic government, which would reflect the different sectarian political forces, and thus preserve its political control. Meanwhile, Hezbollah and Amal supporters have continued on many occasions to act violently against groups of protesters in Beirut, Nabatiyeh, Tyr and other Lebanese cities. Similarly, they have not hesitated to raise sectarian slogans, like "Shia, Shia" or "We want a new 7 May", reminiscent of the military invasion of the regions from West Beirut by Hezbollah and its allies, to divide the protest movement, while personalities of the popular protest movement known for their opposition to Hezbollah were threatened.

The main objective of Amal and Hezbollah through these shows of strength was to quell the demonstrations by re-occupying public places in the regions dominated by these parties. Members of Hezbollah also collected information on people in the southern suburbs participating in the protest movement in an attempt to intimidate them.

Hezbollah also sought to maintain its political alliances with movements denounced by the demonstrators for their corruption and their patronage, in particular Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement. The unchanged support for the reforms announced by Saad Hariri before his resignation as part of his 2020 budget plan (the symbolic halving of ministers and lawmakers' salaries, cost-cutting steps like the merging or abolition of some public institutions, and the privatisation of the state-run power sector). These measures, supported by all the main parties, including Hezbollah, would not improve the lives of ordinary people. They are largely the fulfilment of demands by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the CEDRE agreement, which Lebanon signed in Paris in April 2018. In exchange for about \$11 billion in loans and aid, the government agreed to pursue public-private partnerships, bring down debt levels, and enact austerity measures.

On 11 November 2019, if the party recognised the need to fight corruption, the secretary general of Hezbollah nevertheless accused the United States of being responsible for the economic crisis in the country and of preventing Chinese, Iranian and possibly Russian companies to invest in Lebanon, encouraging the next government to open up to China, Iraq and Syria. These explanations of the economic crisis, which did not convince, including in its own camp, highlighted the fact that the new moderation of the party vis-à-vis the popular movement was primarily intended to preserve it.

At the same time, since the beginning of 2020, the repression against the protesters by the army and security forces has increased considerably with hundreds of injured protestors in these past few weeks.

The Lebanese government has started a process to request technical assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while the new Prime Minister Diab's policy statements have hinted at austerity measures, saying that some of the measures needed to revive the economy would be "painful", while promising to try to mitigate adverse effects on families with "limited incomes". In his latest speech on 16 February 2020, Hassan Nasrallah did not explicitly state whether he was for or against the assistance of the IMF, while calling all Lebanese political parties to support the current government and achieve a form of consensus around financial and economic decisions.

Few days after, Naim Qassem, deputy leader of the party, declared that Hezbollah will not accept submit to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to manage the crisis, but nothing prevented however the Lebanese government, supported by the party, to consult the IMF. At the same time, he also stressed that the Lebanese government can work out a rescue plan and take adequate measures to start solving the crisis both economically and financially. The Prime Minister Diab's political economic orientation is however not in contradiction with IMF solutions, including austerity measures coupled with neoliberal policies of privatisation, regressive taxation and increase in tariffs on utilities.

The economic crisis in the country has increased since mid-October 2019. According to some statistics, more than 220,000 workers have lost their work temporarily or permanently since October. At the same time, the Lebanese pound suffered a strong depreciation against the dollar, a consequence of the decision taken by the Banque du Liban at the end of the summer to restrict the quantity of dollars on the market: the pound was trading around 2,000 pounds at the end of December, while its official price was still 1,507.50 pounds, a fixed rate in effect since 1997. The banks reacted to this measure, which caused a significant increase in the prices of consumer goods, by putting restrictions on certain banking services, in particular transfers abroad or withdrawals of large sums of dollars by their customers.

Conclusion

The demands of the protest movement for social justice and economic redistribution cannot be separated from their opposition to the sectarian political system, which protects the privileges of the wealthy and powerful. The Lebanese ruling sectarian parties and different fractions of the bourgeoisie have exploited privatisation schemes and control of ministries to build and strengthen their network of patronage, nepotism and corruption, while the majority of Lebanon's population, both foreign and native-born, suffer poverty and indignity.

In this perspective, Hezbollah is opposed to the fundamental roots of the Lebanese protest movement. The support given in mid-December 2019 and reiterated on different occasions by Hezbollah and its allies of Amal and FPM, through the appointment as Prime Minister of Hassan Diab, former Minister of Education, proves once again that the party's political project does not represent an alternative to the neoliberal and sectarian economic system in Lebanon. On the contrary, it supports it. The party, in many aspects, only strengthens the prevalent dynamics of Lebanese society, those of a social system based on primordial or primary identities (family, sect and sectarian political party) rather than social rights. Hezbollah does not offer any political vision that could challenge the neoliberal economic system or the sectarian political system. On the contrary, like all other sectarian and neoliberal parties, it sees this system as a means of serving his own interests.

As such, the contradiction between Hezbollah's proclaimed support for the "oppressed" and its orientation favourable to Lebanese neoliberalism and the country's elite class is increasingly problematic for the leadership of the Lebanese Islamic movement. Although the party sees the current mobilisations in Lebanon, as well as those that agitate Iraq³ and Iran, as a regional plot that seeks to counter the influence of Tehran and its allies, it is indeed support of Hezbollah for the neoliberal policies favoured by the sectarian system, and to a lesser extent its murderous participation in the war in Syria alongside the Assad regime, which caused a growing cleavage between Hezbollah and its grassroots base.

However, particularly in a context of worsening regional tensions with the United States following the assassination by Washington of the Iranian Pasdaran commander Qassem Soleimani⁴ on 2 January 2020 in Baghdad, the party still has a significant mobilisation capacity within the Lebanese Shi'a populations among which he can easily plead the imperative of the struggle against Washington to oppose the popular protest movement in Lebanon. Without the construction of a mass credible and inclusive, non-sectarian and social political alternative, defending the interests of all in the country, and in a context where the other sectarian parties have also demonstrated their capacities to continue to mobilise their bases, it is difficult to envision a complete break between Hezbollah and its popular base.

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³ Hassan Nasrallah called in his latest speech in mid-February 2020 for preserving and strengthening the pro-Iranian militia of the Hachd el-Chaabi, guilty of violent attacks against Iraqi protesters, including assassinations.

⁴ In mid-February 2020 Hezbollah installed a giant statue of Iranian commander Kassem Soleimani in the village of Maroun el-Ras, on the border with Israel in South Lebanon.