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Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa  
On Lebanon and Iraq: After the Elections

# Lebanon and Iraq

After the elections

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## Lebanon and Iraq: After the Elections

Madam Chairman, Mr. Deutch, Members of the Committee, thank you for asking me join you here today.

A few months ago, I wrote an [oped](#) in the Wall Street Journal asking whether the United States intended to lose Iraq as we have lost Lebanon. The question feels all the more apropos today, in the wake of troubling elections in both those countries. And let's skip to the punch line: In both cases, the United States has, or once had a chance to challenge Iran at relatively low cost. But as we have already in Lebanon, and Iraq too, I fear, we will miss that chance because we are focused elsewhere, myopic about our potential influence, too willing to lie to ourselves about the status quo, and apparently indifferent to the march of the Islamic Republic of Iran across the greater Middle East.

Beginning with Lebanon, the results of recent elections are as depressing as they were predictable. Prime Minister Saad Hariri's party and allies lost 15 seats, a rout rooted in both Lebanon's own dysfunction, Hariri's lackluster performance and the bizarre interlude during which he was kidnapped to Saudi Arabia. The winners were two: one a protest vote for the Lebanese Forces (not to be confused with the Lebanese Armed Forces), which picked up seven seats, and the other Hezbollah, with its own party and allies picking up 14 seats.

This is the same Hezbollah that has amassed an arsenal that would be the envy of many countries. Israel estimates Hezbollah has more than 150,000 rockets in the south of Lebanon, built up in violation of UNSC Resolution 1701. Worse still, I understand that Hezbollah is changing its arms transfer modus operandi. Because it recognizes the difficulty of physical weapons transfers to its allies, it is transferring know-how – rocket and missile building, guidance systems and the like. If Hezbollah, or the Houthis, or Hamas, or any of Iran's many other proxies have the know-how to build more and more advanced weaponry, and the operational latitude to do so – as they do on Lebanese soil right now - what does the future hold?

The last elections confirm for us that the next government of Lebanon will be run by Hezbollah. And I fear many of the institutions of Lebanon will soon be as well. Which means they will be run by Tehran.

Here's Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on Iran and on the Lebanese Armed Forces:

- According to [CRS](#), Nasrallah has characterized the LAF as a “partner” and a “pillar” in what Hezbollah has described as the “golden formula, which means the resistance, the Army, and the people.”
- Hezbollah and the LAF coordinated along the Lebanon Syria border in a major battle last year: [Said](#) Nasrallah: “What the Lebanese Army did around Aarsal, on the outskirts of Aarsal, and along the contact line within the Lebanese territories was essential for scoring this victory.”
- On Iran, Nasrallah this year [said](#): “We believe in him [Khamenei] higher than the [Lebanese] constitution (some say that he says it is better to act within the framework of the constitution in so and so way). We consider this view *taklif*, legal obligation, and necessary.”<sup>1</sup>
- In 2016, he [said](#), “Hezbollah's budget, salaries, money, food, drink, weapons, all of this comes from Iran... as long as there is money in Iran, we have money.”

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<sup>1</sup> This speech has been denied and publications regarding it in Iran scrubbed, but most analysts suggest the denial is more political, because of Lebanese elections, rather than because the speech was not given.

Of course, Nasrallah is a known flunky. But here's what Lebanese President Michel Aoun has [said](#) of Hezbollah, a designated foreign terrorist organization:

- "Hezbollah has altered its political stance and has respected Lebanese sovereignty...Nasrallah has said as much in an address: Hezbollah has renounced its project to install an 'Islamic Republic' in Lebanon."
- "Hezbollah are not using their weapons in internal politics. They only ensure our resistance against the State of Israel, which continues to occupy part of our territory and which refuses to apply UN resolutions regarding the Palestinians' right to return."
- "As long as the Lebanese army lacks sufficient power to face Israel, we feel the need for (Hezbollah's) arsenal because it complements the army's role."
- "Iran is present and has its influence in the Middle East and it must be taken into account," he said. The president also stressed that Iran has "no ambitions in Lebanon."

The Lebanese military claims not to coordinate with Hezbollah, but there is evidence to the contrary. Last year, a Hezbollah military parade in Syria [included](#) a U.S. M113 armored personnel carrier. Did it come from the Lebanese Armed Forces? Intelligence sources say yes. We also know that in southern Lebanon, the LAF have allowed Hezbollah to restock, shared intelligence with them, and have jointly manned checkpoints.

Given the weight of the evidence —and there is more, I am certain, available in a classified setting—is it not inappropriate to worry that the government of Lebanon is effectively itself becoming a proxy of Iran?

In light of that, consider US assistance programs to Lebanon:

- According to President Trump's FY2018 budget request to Congress, the Administration sought \$103 million in total aid to Lebanon, mostly in economic aid (\$213 million was obligated for Lebanon in FY2016).
- Foreign Military Financing (FMF) has been one of the primary sources of U.S. funding for the LAF, along with Counterterrorism Partnership (CTPF) funds. Both the House (H.R. 3362) and Senate (S. 1780) FY2018 State and Foreign Operations appropriations bills continue FMF funding for Lebanon.
- The Senate appropriations report (S.Rept. 115-152) recommends \$105 million in FMF to Lebanon.
- In August 2017, Embassy Beirut announced the delivery of eight M2A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles and armored field artillery ammunition supply vehicles to the LAF, the first of a total shipment of 32 Bradleys to be delivered in the coming months. Ambassador Richard also stated that the following defense articles had been provided to the LAF in the past 12 months:
  - 40 M198 howitzers,
  - 50 armored Humvees,
  - an Armed Cessna aircraft with Hellfire missiles,
  - 55 mortar systems,
  - 50 Mark-19 automatic grenade launchers,
  - 1,100 machine guns, including 800 50 caliber machine guns,
  - 4,000 M4 rifles,
  - over 500,000 rounds of ammunition,
  - 320 night vision devices and thermal sights, and

- 360 secure communication radios.

Defenders of the U.S. posture in Lebanon, including some in the White House, State Department and Pentagon, suggest the LAF are an effective fighting force against ISIS. CENTCOM commander Joseph Votel [insists](#) that “the Lebanese people are realizing more and more that the LAF, their country’s most trusted and respected institution, is increasingly capable of protecting them from external threats.”

But if fighting ISIS is our sole standard, why not arm and support Hezbollah? They too are an effective fighting force vs ISIS. Why stop there? Why not Iran too?

This is the challenge we face. The enemy of our enemy is not always our friend. And the same is true in Iraq.

In part assisted by an alliance with the Iraqi military and so-called Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, *Hashd al Shabi*), we were able to secure a victory against ISIS in Iraq. But this pact with Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Forces-supported Iraqi units will mean the United States and the Government of Iraq pay a heavy price too. Look no further than the results of the recent Iraqi elections, in which U.S. ally Haidar al Abadi came in third place, trailing the leader of the PMF, Hadi al Ameri (and his Fatah party), and ex-Shia-Islamist firebrand Muqtada al Sadr.

Unlike in Lebanon, we are far from knowing the likely outcome of the elections in Iraq. Turnout was low, and the parties are incredibly close in seats. Haggling will take months, and none of this should yet be seen as a slam dunk for Tehran.

But there is an underlying point here, that is the lesson unlearned by the United States in Lebanon and apparently still unlearned in Iraq today. The Islamic Republic of Iran has a foreign policy model: they do not seek to dominate, they seek to influence, and if necessary, destabilize. They do so through their proxies – Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis in Yemen, and increasingly, through the Hashd al Shabi in Iraq. These are Iranian expeditionary forces, nominally loyal to their own countries, but answering to a command in Tehran.

Iran is no Soviet Union; its economy is weak, its hold over its own people tenuous. But victory after victory in the Middle East should suggest to us that Iran has a winning formula, one that could be countered with a serious U.S. strategy of engagement, a theory of our own victory – and one that would not contemplate an every-decade return for war in the Middle East. We must shore up the Iraqi government as we failed to shore up the Lebanese against Iran. We must do so without wavering in our commitments, and by offering choices: us or them. Us must mean genuine political and economic engagement and leadership, far cheaper than war. It must start with aiding the battle against corruption, which erodes confidence in democracy and markets in both Beirut and Baghdad (as well as every other Arab capital). It must continue with a commitment to institutions of governance.

You may well ask, isn’t that what we have done with the LAF in Lebanon, and my answer is no. We have looked away as the country has been sucked into the Iranian vortex and failed to bolster those who naturally despise Iran and its terrorist proxies. We have allowed weak leaders to take our money and our weapons while serving a foreign master – perhaps not always directly, but certainly indirectly. We have never put it to the LAF that they must stand against Iran and Hezbollah, not simply rhetorically, but actually. We have never laid the burden on them to prove they are not working with a designated terrorist organization.

We failed in Lebanon and we have lost. Now we are faced with the same choice in Iraq. We can either force these countries to choose between Washington and Tehran, or we can continue to bury our heads in the sand. And allow Iran to win and win again. That is up to us.

Thank you.