



Hezbollah's Position on the Wave of Protests in Lebanon

December 9, 2019

Overview

When the wave of protests began in Lebanon, Hezbollah avoided criticizing them, possibly assuming they would wane of their own accord, not expecting them to pose a significant threat. However, as the demonstrations continued, the more they posed a challenge to the Lebanese government, **the more Hezbollah openly came out against them**. Hezbollah was concerned that they might spin out of control and **threaten its political power, and possibly even erode the foundations of Lebanon's sectarian regime, of which Hezbollah is an integral part**.

► Hezbollah's **propaganda** accused the demonstrators of **causing chaos and possibly leading the country to a civil war**. Hezbollah supporters threatened the "thugs" and "terrorists" who blocked the roads leading to Beirut's southern suburb (the Dahia), and the highway linking Beirut to the south, thereby imposing a "siege" on the [Shi'ite] population living there. Hezbollah also initiated a campaign claiming that the United States and its allies were behind the protest demonstrations, which automatically delegitimized them. **On the ground** there were instances in which road-blocking demonstrators were attacked by Hezbollah (and Amal) supporters, but **no prolonged frontal confrontation developed**.

► Although Lebanon is in the midst of an economic and governmental turmoil and the government is in chaos, **routine daily life apparently continues in the Hezbollah-controlled Shi'ite regions**. Generally speaking, **Hezbollah successfully prevented the protests from leaking into its "state within a state,"** with the exception of isolated demonstrations in Nabatiyeh, Tyre and possibly also the Beqa'a Valley. A case study of how Hezbollah preserved daily life in the regions under its control occurred at the end of November 2019, when the Lebanese Syndicate of Gas Station Owners went on strike and closed the gas stations throughout Lebanon (threatening to worsen the existing chaos). However, **Hezbollah prevented the spread of the strike to the areas under its control by keeping its own gas stations open**.

► Keeping its gas stations open was a demonstration of Hezbollah's power, intended to increase its popularity among the Shi'ites, and in Lebanon in general. It was accompanied by a media campaign in which Hezbollah supporters **presented the many benefits of living in what Hezbollah supporters called "the State of Hezbollah."** Hezbollah supporters, with inspiration from the organization, said that the operation of the gas stations illustrated that in **"the State of Hezbollah" civilian institutions continued operating and the residents enjoyed security and employment, as opposed to the chaos in other regions of Lebanon.**

"Hezbollah will cause some of the corrupt people in this country to have a heart attack. **The gas stations strike in order to rob citizens, while the [Hezbollah-owned] al-Amana stations are open for everyone to use. The banks hold people's money to rob them, [while] the al-Qard al-Hasan [Hezbollah's semi-bank institution] continues to give [loans in] dollars.¹ The minister of education closes the schools to close the country, [while] all [Hezbollah's] schools are open!** #together#breaking#themonopoly" (Twitter account of Eman Bashiri, November 29, 2019).



Tweet about the benefits to the residents of "the State of Hezbollah," who can continue their daily routines since the gas stations remained open.

¹ For further information, see the May 23, 2019 bulletin Hezbollah's socioeconomic foundations: Al-Qard al-Hasan, a quasi-bank that provides interest-free loans, mainly to members of the Shi'ite community."

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The Wave of Protests in Lebanon: Overview

► On October 17, 2019 a **widespread wave of protests** began in Lebanon, manifested by mass demonstrations. The protests were mainly aimed at the extensive corruption in Lebanon and at the economic crisis which had worsened in the past year. Demonstrators called for the fall of the ruling elite of all the sects, but they did not focus on Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah or on the organization itself. They also did not undermine the narrative of support for the "resistance" which represents Hezbollah as the "defender of Lebanon" (thereby giving Hezbollah justification for its military buildup and strengthening the status of the Shi'ites over the other sects).

► **The focus of the protest demonstrations, in which hundreds of thousands of Lebanese participated, was Beirut.** From there they spread to other cities and towns throughout Lebanon, primarily among the Christian and Sunni populations. The protest demonstrations also occasionally leaked into concentrations of Shi'ites near where Hezbollah has constructed its state within a state. However, demonstrations in Shi'ite regions were far less intense than in other regions (See below). On October 29, 2019, Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri announced his resignation. No new government has been formed and the crisis continues with demonstrations of fluctuating intensity.

Hezbollah's Position on the Protests

Overview

Hezbollah's position regarding the demonstrations is complex: on the one hand, **in principle Hezbollah and its supporters identify with the objectives of the protest, especially with the struggle against corruption and the oppression of the people.** The narrative of defending the oppressed has accompanied Hezbollah since its inception² and was at the core of its platform in the most recent Lebanese elections (May 2018). On the other hand, Hezbollah enjoys a position of power in internal Lebanese politics and is concerned lest the protests spin out of control, cause chaos in Lebanon's political system and **weaken the power of Hezbollah**, which is an integral part of the Lebanese political system.³

► Therefore, when the protests began, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah refrained from criticizing them, possibly because he thought they would wane of their own accord. Hezbollah also supported the government's proposals to bring the crisis to an end. However, as the protests continued, and openly became a threat (in Hezbollah's view), **Hezbollah strongly opposed them:** Hezbollah and its supporters initiated propaganda campaigns attacking the demonstrators who blocked roads, and claiming the protests were being handled by the United States and its allies.

² The powerful narrative of the struggle against the oppression of the Shi'ites by the Lebanese government and by the Sunnis was behind the social and political movements founded by the Shi'ites during the 1970s (the Movement of the Oppressed and the Amal Movement, were founded by the Imam Musa Sader). The narrative was later adopted by Hezbollah, which was founded in 1982. See the book by Shimon Shapira, *Hizbullah between Iran and Lebanon*, (Hebrew), pub. by Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2000, p. 109).

³ For further information, see the article by H. Varulkar and C. Jacob, "Lebanese protests place Hezbollah in a bind – Part 1: Hezbollah's hostility to the protests and the reason behind it," MEMRI.

Opposition to blocking the roads

Hezbollah supporters in Lebanon strongly criticized the blocking of the main roads which linked the southern Shi'ite suburb (the Dahia) with the rest of the city. They also criticized the cutting off of the road from Beirut to Shi'ite south Lebanon. They claimed that by blocking the roads **the demonstrators prevented the delivery of supplies and provided "service to the Zionists."** In some instances Hezbollah (and Amal) supporters clashed with demonstrators blocking roads, but such clashes have so far been sporadic and have not led to a prolonged frontal confrontation between Hezbollah supporters and demonstrators.

► Some examples follow of propaganda attacks on Twitter by Hezbollah supporters against demonstrators who block roads:

On October 28, 2019, Muhammad Smeha, who was an attendant at the [Hezbollah-owned] al-Amana gas station on the airport road in the Dahia, tweeted, "Most of the roads the thugs block are the main thoroughfares for the delivery of food and other basic necessities for the residents of #southern_Dahia. Perhaps it is a different kind of siege, meant to starve the environment of the resistance. Maybe it is a service for the #Zionists, deliberately or not" (Twitter account of Muhammad Smeha, October 28, 2019).



On October 30, 2019, Muhammad Aloush, a wounded Hezbollah fighter, tweeted "A suggestion for the **thugs** and road blockers: **We opened the Beirut-Tehran road, so think again if you want to close [the road] from Beirut to the south**" (Twitter account of Muhammad Aloush, October 30, 2019).



On December 5, 2019, [Hezbollah supporter] Sara Haj tweeted, "For hours the TV has been broadcasting live coverage of the storm and the traffic jams on the [Khalde] highway [leading from Beirut to the south]. Those are the same stations that didn't spend one minute on live coverage of **the suffering of the residents of the south when they were trapped for hours on the same road because of the #terrorist road_blockers**" (Twitter account of Sara Haj, December 5, 2019).



On December 4, 2019, Muhammad Baker Tarshishi (a Hezbollah-supporting journalist) shared a video of blocked roads. The Arabic reads, "**#road_blockers, thugs of al-Mustaqbal and ISIS terrorists block the highway of #Khalde**" (Twitter account of Muhammad Baker Tarshishi, December 4, 2019).



Anti-American propaganda campaign

Hezbollah and its supporters **adopted an anti-American rhetoric, accusing the United States and its allies of being behind the protests.** They called on the United States to leave Lebanon and stop ruining its sovereignty. **Jeffrey Feltman**, formerly American ambassador to Lebanon (and currently advisor to the American Secretary of State for Middle East affairs) **was accused of inciting a "civil war" in Lebanon. The significance of the campaign is the delegitimization of the protest by representing it as the fruit of an external conspiracy.**

► Hezbollah's campaign against the United States takes its **inspiration from Iran.** Following the protests in Lebanon and Iraq, senior Iranian officials, including Ali Khamenei, accused the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia of igniting the protests in Lebanon and Iraq. The Iranian response reflects concern that the current political order in Lebanon and Iraq may be undermined, which could have negative consequences for Iranian interests.

Anti-American tweets



Hezbollah supporters began a hashtag called #Feltman_ambassador_civil_war against Jeffrey Feltman, former American ambassador to Lebanon (2004-2008). Right: The tweet is from Jawad Nasrallah, son of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, on November 23, 2019. The Arabic reads, "In every scenario, regardless of the cost, what they demand is Hezbollah's head. Once America leaves Lebanon, I swear, it will become a different country." Inside the picture the Arabic reads, "Leave us already! #Feltman_ambassador_civil_war." Left: Tweet from Um Ali, December 3, 2019. The appended text reads, "America destroyed every person and the economy of the entire country."



Tweet from Ali Shoeib, al-Manar's south Lebanon correspondent, condemning Jeffrey Feltman, former American ambassador to Lebanon.⁴ Feltman is accused of encouraging a civil war, hurting Lebanon's oil and gas sources and demanding concessions harmful to Lebanon's sovereignty (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, November 23, 2019).

⁴ **Ali Shoeib**, al-Manar's correspondent in south Lebanon, **Jawad Nasrallah**, son of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and many other Hezbollah **operatives use their Twitter accounts to disseminate anti-American anti-Israeli propaganda**. Twitter's attempts to limit its use for incitement have proved ineffective.

Hezbollah's fundamental interest in preserving the sectarian regime in Lebanon

In ITIC assessment Hezbollah's position on the protests **reflects a fundamental interest of Hezbollah and Iran to preserve the sectarian regime in Lebanon. Hezbollah and Iran know how to derive the greatest benefit from the continuation of the sectarian regime. The regime is based on the National Pact of 1943 and the Ta'if Agreement⁵ of 1989 and exploits to the fullest the weakness of Lebanon's central government.** In the three decades since the signing of the Ta'if Agreement Hezbollah, with massive Iranian support, has constructed **a strong military force and an extensive civilian infrastructure**, giving the Shi'ite sect a significant advantage in the internal Lebanese political system. At the same time, the state within a state created by Hezbollah enables Iran to deepen its influence among the Shi'ite population in Lebanon using Hezbollah to indoctrinate the younger generation through its extensive educational, cultural and youth movements and women's organizations..

Conduct of "the State of Hezbollah" during the protests

The wave of protests in the Shi'ite regions were **far less intense** than in the rest of the country. There were some isolated demonstrations in Shi'ite regions, mostly on the first days of the protest in Nabatiyeh, Tyre and possibly in other locations in south Lebanon.

⁵ The **Ta'if Agreement**, also known as **National Reconciliation Accord**, was signed on October 22, 1989, at Ta'if in Saudi Arabia. It marked the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989) and gave Syria prominence as the main power in Lebanon. **The agreement called for the reassertion of Lebanese sovereignty in all of Lebanon and the disarming of all the Lebanese militias (i.e., Hezbollah and other armed Lebanese organizations) and non-Lebanese militias (i.e., Palestinian organizations). In practice Syria did not force Hezbollah to disarm and allowed it to construct a strong military infrastructure, making it politically and militarily more powerful than other sects.**



Demonstration in front of the government offices in Nabatiyeh to protest the difficult economic situation in Lebanon (NBN TV, October 20, 2019).

► As opposed to the chaos in other areas of Lebanon, **apparently routine daily life continued in the Shi'ite regions**, and Hezbollah was careful to emphasize that to all the Lebanese and foreign media outlets. For example, on November 17, 2019, an AP correspondent visited the southern Beirut suburb of the Dahia, a Hezbollah stronghold, accompanied by a Hezbollah guide. He reported that in the Dahia there were no signs of the chaos and paralysis that had taken hold of other parts of the country, and that daily life continued there as usual (AP, November 18, 2019). The following are other indications that in "the State of Hezbollah" it is business as usual:

- ◆ On November 28, 2019, the Janubiya website of Ali al-Amin (a Shi'ite who opposes Hezbollah) posted that **the office of Hezbollah's secretary general had distributed to Hezbollah operatives in the Dahia and the southern Beqa'a Valley \$70 million, part the salaries organization operatives and senior figures receive, and part of the allotments paid to the mothers and wives of shaheeds**. That was in spite of the recent severe shortage of dollars which had contributed to the outbreak of the protests (Janubiya website, November 28, 2019).

- ◆ On December 6, 2019, Nabil Abdel Sater tweeted after a flood in Beirut, **"Didn't it rain in the Dahia? Of course it did, but the regional municipalities in the Dahia did their jobs. Thank you, association of regional municipalities of the Dahia, thank you, Hezbollah"** (Twitter account of Nabil Abdel Sater, December 6, 2019).



Praise for Hezbollah for ensuring that the heavy rains would not flood the Dahia.

Keeping the Gas Stations Open: A Test Case for Preventing the Crisis from Leaking into Areas under Hezbollah Control

The gas stations in Lebanon go on strike: Background information

- ▶ On **November 28, 2019**, while the protest demonstrations continued, **the Lebanese Syndicate of Gas Station Owners announced a strike and the closure of the gas stations throughout the country**. The reason for the strike was **the loss of income of the gas station owners** caused by the devaluation of the Lebanese pound against the dollar. Customers pay for gas with cheap Lebanese pounds, but the gas station owners use expensive dollars to buy gas from dealers. The owners demanded the price of gas for the consumer be raised and closed the stations in protest, **threatening to accelerate the economic chaos in Lebanon in any case, and striking another blow to the Lebanese regime**.
- ▶ To protest the closing of the gas stations angry drivers used their vehicles to block various roads in Beirut and throughout Lebanon. After two days an agreement was forged which ended the strike. The agreement included dividing the burden of the rise in the dollar among the companies importing fuel, the companies transporting fuel and the gas stations (al-Jazeera, November 30, 2019).



Right: A gas station, closed because of the strike (al-Nile news website, November 28, 2019). Left: Drivers gather at the barricades at the entrance to a closed gas station (Akhbar Arabiya website, November 28, 2019).



Drivers struggle to fill containers and bottles with fuel (al-Khalij Online website, November 30, 2019).

The gas stations owned by Hezbollah and its affiliates

The state within a state Hezbollah constructed provides its Shi'ite residents with a variety of services, including health, education, culture, activities for youth, welfare, banking and communications. Among other enterprises, Hezbollah and its affiliates run **two networks of gas stations** which operate for the Shi'ite population. They did not join the strike, probably **on instructions from Hezbollah**. It was **a demonstration of Hezbollah's power**, intended to increase its popularity among Shi'ites. It sent the message that **developments in the Shi'ite regions were influenced by Hezbollah's considerations and not by what happened in other locations in Lebanon**, thereby increasing Hezbollah's power and prestige. The message was fully understood by Hezbollah's supporters, and the move was represented through the social networks as another expression of **the many benefits enjoyed by the residents of "the State of Hezbollah," who received a wide variety of services and were shielded from the crisis visited upon other areas**.



Hezbollah logo with a gas pump instead of a rifle, i.e., Hezbollah provides Shi'ites with fuel and meets their needs (Shaza Muhammad Sa'ad Twitter account, November 29, 2019).

► There are two gas station networks owned by Hezbollah and its affiliates that operate in the Shi'ite regions in Lebanon:

◆ The **al-Amana fuel company**, owned by **Atlas Holdings SAL**,⁶ which was founded by **Hezbollah's Martyrs Foundation** (which provides social and economic support for the families of Hezbollah shaheeds). Atlas Holding has four companies. One is **al-Amana**, which sells fuel and fuel products and imports, markets and distributes fuel. Al-Amana has about 300 employees and operates **42 gas stations**, all of them located in regions with an overwhelming Shi'ite majority: 22 gas stations in **south Lebanon**, 14 in **the Beirut region** (mainly in and around the **Dahia**), and six in the **Beqa'a Valley** (al-Amana website).



Logo of the al-Amana fuel company
(al-Amana website)

◆ The **al-Aytam company for general and fuel commerce** is owned by the **Sayed Muhammad Fadlallah Social Services Institutions** (al-Medan, December 1, 2019), a network of charitable institutions. It was founded by Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a senior Lebanese Shi'ite cleric who played an important role in determining the character of the radical Shi'ite movement in Lebanon and in the establishment of Hezbollah. His son, **Sayed Ali Fadlallah**, today heads the network of his father's

⁶ For further information about Atlas Holding, see the March 14, 2019 bulletin, "Hezbollah's Martyrs Foundation: purpose, mode of operation and funding methods."

charitable institutions, and one of its properties is al-Aytam. **The company operates 34 gas stations**, all of them located in Shi'ite regions: 13 in **south Lebanon**, 13 in **Beirut** (mainly in and around the **Dahia**), and eight in the **Beqa'a Valley** (al-Aytam website). Sayed Ali Fadlallah does not belong to Hezbollah but his public positions over the years clearly express Hezbollah ideology. **It can be assumed that the operation of the gas stations, which finance his charitable institutions, is authorized by and coordinated with Hezbollah.**



Right: The logo of the al-Aytam fuel company (al-Aytam website). Left: Sayed Ali Fadlallah, son of Sayed Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, who today heads his network of charitable institutions (Facebook page of the Sayed Fadlallah Social Services Institution").

Hezbollah gas stations break the strike

► **On November 29, 2019, the two gas companies announced they were breaking the strike the Syndicate of Gas Station Owners called the previous day** and were open for business (Twitter account of al-Manar correspondent Ali Shoeib, November 29, 2019). The decision, which was most likely Hezbollah-authored, caused **an onslaught of customers who came to buy gas.**



Right: Long lines at an al-Amana gas station on the night of November 29, 2019 (Lebanon Files website, November 29, 2019). Left: People waiting to get gas at an al-Aytam gas station (Bint Jbeil website, December 2, 2019).

► **The gas distributors in Lebanon punished al-Aytam by providing it with only 25% of the gas it needed to operate its stations.** That forced the company to temporarily close 14 of its stations (Twitter account of Sayed Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, December 1, 2019; Bint Jbeil website, December 2, 2019). It is not known if Hezbollah's al-Amana was punished in the same way, possibly **because it has its own sources of fuel** (and may have used "the good offices" of Iran). In any event, breaking the strike by the two Shi'ite companies **brought about a swift end to the strike in the rest of Lebanon**, which ended on November 30, 2019 (al-Jazeera, November 30, 2019).

Hezbollah supporters' enthusiastic reactions to breaking the strike

Breaking the strike got enthusiastic reactions from Hezbollah supporters on the social networks. It was represented as a move helping the needy and "against the corrupt [officials]" who try to "rob" the public. Beyond that, it showed **the many benefits enjoyed by the citizens of the "State of Hezbollah,"** where civilian institutions continue operating and the residents enjoy security, as opposed to the chaos in other regions of Lebanon. In addition, two hashtags were created praising Hezbollah's activities for the (Shi'ite) residents and thanking Hezbollah, "beloved of Allah." It can be assumed that Hezbollah was behind the enthusiastic support on the social networks and the creation of the hashtags.

► Some of the reactions in the social networks and the creation of the hashtag campaigns were the following:

◆ **"Hezbollah will cause some of the corrupt people in this country to have a heart attack. The gas stations strike in order to rob citizens, while the [Hezbollah-owned] al-Amana stations are open for everyone to use. The banks hold people's money to rob them, [while] the al-Qard al-Hasan [Hezbollah's semi-bank institution] continues to give [loans in] dollars.⁷ The minister of education closes the schools to close the country, [while] all [Hezbollah's] schools are open! #together#breaking#themonopoly"** (Twitter account of Eman Bashiri, November 29, 2019. Among the responses to the tweet were, **"This is the resistance in all its forms, it defends the civilian, even his income"** (Twitter account of Hussein Shawish).

⁷ For further information, see the May 23, 2019 bulletin Hezbollah's socioeconomic foundations: Al-Qard al-Hasan, a quasi-bank that provides interest-free loans, mainly to members of the Shi'ite community."

Another response was, "**This is the culture of resistance: it is for the sake of the people and within the people**" (Twitter account of Salam Ibrahim)

◆ "**Al-Qard al-Hasan** [check mark], **gas stations** [check mark], **medial care**⁸ [check mark], to be followed...soon #thanks_Hezbollah" (Twitter account of wounded Hezbollah fighter Salam Rahim, November 29, 2019).

◆ "**In the State of Hezbollah the crisis is as follows: the banks = al-Qard al Hasan; the gas stations = al-Amana and al-Aytam; hospitals = al-Rasoul, al-Sheikh Raghav,⁹ Bahamn,¹⁰ etc.; schools = al-Mahdi al-Mustafa¹¹, etc.; employment = full-time jobs, contractors, a protective system and active security, #thanks_Hezbollah, #Hez_mercy [of]_Allah**" (Twitter account of Aloush Murtada, November 29, 2019).

⁸ For further information, see the August 8, 2019 bulletin, "The Islamic Health Organization: Hezbollah institution providing health services to Hezbollah operatives and the Shiite population in general as a means for gaining influence and creating a Shiite mini-state within Lebanon."

⁹ Two hospitals owned by Hezbollah's Martyrs Foundations in the Dahia and Nabatiyeh, respectively.

¹⁰ A private hospital in the Dahia, owned by the al-Mubarad charitable institution, established by Sayed Muhammad Fadlallah (al-Hura TV, January 10, 2019). It is managed by his son, Sayed Ali Fadlallah (al-Hayat, May 22, 2016).

¹¹ For further information see the July 21, 2019 bulletin, "Hezbollah operates networks of private schools indoctrinating Shiite youth in Lebanon with the ideology of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and with loyalty to Hezbollah and the path of terrorism."