

What Have the US and Protesters in Lebanon Achieved over Iran and Its Allies?

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For several weeks now, much of the Lebanese population has turned on the country's traditional political leaders and wrought havoc on the corrupt domestic political system. Those who have ruled the country for decades have offered little in the way of reforms, have paid little attention to the infrastructure, and done little or nothing to provide job opportunities outside the circle of their clients. The protestors were also driven into the street by the US measures strangling the Lebanese economy and preventing most of the 7-8 million expatriates from transferring financial support (around \$8 billion per year) to their relatives back home. This is how the US administration has conducted its policy in the Middle East in its failed attempt to bring Iran and its allies to their knees. The US seems to believe that a state of chaos in the countries where the "Axis of the Resistance" operates may help curb Iran and push it into the US administration's arms. The US seeks to break Iran's back and that of its allies and impose its own conditions and hegemony on the Middle East. What has the US achieved so far?

In Lebanon, since the beginning of protests, the price of merchandise has gone sky-high. Medicines and goods are lacking from the market and the Lebanese Lira has lost more than 40% of its value to the US dollar. Many Lebanese have either lost their jobs or found themselves with a salary reduced to half. Lebanon came close to civil war when pro-US political parties closed the main roads and tried mainly to block the Shia link from the south of Lebanon to the capital, around the suburb of Beirut and from Beirut to the Bekaa Valley.

War was avoided when Hezbollah issued a directive instructing all its members and supporters to leave the streets, asking its members to stop and persuade any ally members to come off the streets and to avoid using motorcycles to harass protestors. The instructions were clear: "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Hezbollah understood what the corners of Beirut are hiding: an invitation to start a war, particularly when for over a month the Lebanese army refused to open the main roads, allowing not only legitimate protestors but also thugs to rule.

The situation today has changed: the Lebanese President is using the constitution to his advantage, equally to the practice of the Prime Minister who has no deadline in forming a government. President Michel Aoun gave the Christians what they have lost after the Taif Agreement: he refused to ask a Prime Minister candidate to form a new government unless he offers a successful and harmonious cabinet membership that pleases all political parties and has strong chances of success.

Aoun was about to offer the mandate to a new candidate, Samir al-Khatib, had the caretaker

the Sunni Saad Hariri – who nominated al-Khatib initially – avoided to boycott him at the last moment or did not ask the ex-prime Ministers, the religious Sunni authority and political parties who support him to nominate Hariri in person. The nomination of the Prime Minister is most likely postponed to an unknown date.

However, the protestors have not achieved much because the traditional political parties will hold onto their influence. The new government, once and if formed, will not be able to lift US sanctions to relieve the domestic economy. On the contrary, the US administration is willing to resume its sanctions on Lebanon and impose further sanctions on other personalities, as Secretary Mike Pompeo sated a couple of months ago.

Today, no Lebanese citizen is able to dispose of his own saving or company assets in banks due to restrictions on withdrawals, effective “capital controls”. Only small amounts are allowed to be delivered to account holders-around \$150-300 per week in a country where cash payments prevail. No one is allowed to transfer any amount abroad unless for university fees or special demands of goods import of first necessities.

However, Hezbollah, the US-Israel main target, was not affected directly by the US sanctions and by the new financial restrictions. Militants were paid, as is the case monthly, in US dollars with an increase of 40% (due to the local currency devaluation) with the compliments of “Uncle Sam”.

Hezbollah not only has avoided civil war but also has managed to boost the position of its allies. President Aoun and the leader of the “Free Patriotic Movement” (FPM) the foreign Minister Gebran Bassil were in a confused state in the first weeks of the protests. Hezbollah leadership played a role in holding on to his allies and supporting them. Today, the situation is back under control and the President and the FPM leader are holding the initiative over their political opponents.

Hezbollah will be part of the new government with new personalities and perhaps one traditional minister. The “Axis of the Resistance” believes if “Hezbollah’s presence in the new government disturbs the US administration, then why it should comply and leave? Quite the opposite. It should stay or appoint Ministers on its behalf”.

The “Axis of the Resistance” is convinced that the exit of Hezbollah from the cabinet would trigger further US demands. It is Hezbollah’s legitimate right to be represented in the government since it holds a large coalition in the Parliament. Besides, who will stop any attempt by the US to allow Israel to annex the disputed Lebanese water borders? Who will campaign for the return of Syrian refugees back home? What about the US request to deploy UN forces on the borders with Syria?

Hezbollah enjoys large amount of popular support and this from a society that is behind it and that suffers as much as everybody else from the country of the corrupted Lebanese system. Notwithstanding its poverty, the society of Hezbollah stands with the “Axis of the Resistance” against the US sanctions and attempts to corner it.

The US administration failed to achieve its objectives, even when riding the wave of protestors’ legitimate demands. It has also failed to drag Hezbollah to street fighting. It is about to fail to exclude Hezbollah and its allies, determine to be part of the new government regardless of the names of individual ministers. The US failed to corner Hezbollah – as was possible with Hamas – because Lebanon is open to Syria and from it to Iraq and Iran.

Lebanon has also the seafront on the Mediterranean open to the outside world to import much needed goods. However, the “Axis of the Resistance” has asked its friends and supporters to cultivate the land in order to soften the increase of prices of food.

The “Axis of the Resistance’ also has lines open to Russia and China. Hezbollah continues trying to convince political parties to diversify the resources and cease depending on the US and Europe only. Russia is proving itself on the political international arena – even if still not enjoying influence in Lebanon – and is able to stand firm against US hegemony. Europe is also happy to see Hezbollah and its allies in power, afraid of seeing millions of Syrian and Lebanese refugees flocking to the old continent. China is willing to open a bank in Lebanon, collect and recycle the bins, offer drinkable water and construct electricity generators. The total of what China is ready to invest in Lebanon is close to \$12.5 billion, much more than the \$11 billion offered by CEDRE that is linked to the privatisation of Lebanese infrastructure.

Doors in Lebanon are open for an alternative to the US. Therefore, the more Washington is willing to corner the Lebanese government and its inhabitants, the more certainly they move towards Russia and China.

The Lebanese have lost much since the protests began. The US has gained a society ready to keep at a distance whihc is further from its hegemony and its allies have failed to trap Hezbollah. However, protestors did manage to sound an alarm and warn politicians that their corruption can’t continue forever and that they may someday be brought to justice. Once again, the agents of chaos have failed and the “Axis of the Resistance” has the upper hand in Lebanon.

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