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## *Hizbollah's Victory and the U.S.-Iran Conflict*



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Among the things that the Iran deal critics demand is a broader, better deal that curbs ballistic missile construction and prevents Iran from supporting “terrorists.” The media never questions the proposition that Iran in fact supports such people. Who are these terrorists? Hizbollah in Lebanon tops the list. ( Hamas is usually next, and then the Houthis of Yemen, the Shiite militias in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Army, etc. Even the Revolutionary Guards a division of the Iranian military, is listed by the State Department as a “terrorist organization.”)

The elections in Lebanon last Sunday gave Hizbollah and its allies (mostly Maronite Christians, actually) a majority in Parliament. They won 67 out of 128 seats. Israel politician and leader of the Jewish Home party Naftali Bennett declares that now “Lebanon equals Hizbollah.” (Since Israel has invaded its northern neighbor in 1982 and 2006, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths, including at least 400 in the Shatila-Sabra massacre of Palestinians in West Beirut in two days in September 1982, such talk must worry most Lebanese.)

Hizbollah is little known to people in this country. Maybe some have seen that Anthony Bourdain “Parts Unknown” episode from Lebanon in 2015. Bourdain spent some time with a Maronite Christian family in Beirut who had a Hizbollah poster on the wall; the host praised their role in resisting Israeli attacks. (Bourdain in his typical way was nonjudgmental. It’s unfortunate that some of the best, most objective commentaries on some countries are provided by this professional cook on CNN.) Maybe some question the routine designation, by the State Department echoed by the media, of the organization as “terrorist.” I myself do. But we doubters are surely few. Few organizations have been more systematically vilified.

Why has Hizbollah been designated a “terrorist” organization by Israel and the U.S., followed (somewhat reluctantly) by the EU in 2013 under U.S. pressure? Germany continues to refuse to designate Hizbollah “in its entirety” as terrorist; like the EU in general it distinguishes between the “military wing” and the political party. Neither Russia nor China see it as terrorist. They realize that Hizbollah is a large political movement based in the Shiite community but enjoying an alliance with Christian and other minorities. It maintains a robust militia, more powerful than the Lebanese Army. It also maintains radio and TV stations, charities, hospitals. It has a genuine social base in Lebanon; that, rather than Iranian aid, is the key to its success. But instead of examining it in its specificities, successive U.S. administrations have simply condemned it while emphasizing its Iranian ties.

Just like the current administration smears Houthis in Yemen as Iranian proxies. Or the Alawi-led government of Syria as a pawn of an Iran striving for regional dominance. Anyone paying attention knows that while the Houthis practice a form of Shiism it is very different from that of Iran; that a Shiite imam ruled Yemen for 1000 years; and that there is little evidence for Iranian arms support for the Yemeni rebels. They know too that the Damascus government is led by the secular Baathist Party, which is ideologically at odds with Iran’s Islamic republicanism; the alliance is based on mutual security in the face

of ongoing imperialist encroachment. But the Saudi-promoted specter of a “Shiite crescent” extending from Iran through Iraq (the only majority-Shiite Arab nation) into Syria and Lebanon, threatening to absorb Yemen and perhaps Bahrain, ruled by the Iranian ayatollahs, guides the minds of the benighted U.S. policy makers.

Trump apparently demands a new deal with Iran that curbs its ballistic missile program and ends its support for (whatever the boss calls) “terrorism.” The principle recipients of this aid, always mentioned, are Hizbollah and Hamas. Hamas of course is the Palestinian party that governs the vast concentration camp of Gaza. It swept the Palestinian legislative election, the first and only free Palestinian election, in 2006. It has responded to Israeli occupation with violence on occasion; this itself, for the Israelis and U.S., constitutes terrorism. Iran-backed terrorism.

Why would Iran withdraw support from Hizbollah, even as it rises in electoral popularity and strength? Even as it successfully assists the Syrian Arab Army in fighting al-Qaeda and ISIL forces challenging the Assad government in Syria? It is an unreasonable imperialist demand. The demand of the Syrians and Iranians that the 2000 U.S. Special Forces illegally in Syria withdraw is eminently reasonable, but U.S. efforts to remold the Middle East through military intervention are outrageous. The U.S. demand to determine who the world views as terrorist is similarly outrageous.

By demanding that Iran renegotiate the nuclear deal to include the irrelevant question of Tehran’s ties to different political groups in the region, Trump does what the U.S. has done time and time again with those targeted for regime change: he sets the bar too high, and paves the way for war.

In 2002 the French and Germans made clear that they did not accept the U.S. justification for the impending war on Iraq. But the Brits were on board, reliably, and some other NATO allies. U.S. prestige took a blow in the court of world public opinion as the savage attack and occupation produced civil war, half a million died, and the U.S. engaged in the types of torture revealed in the Abu Ghraib torture photos. In 2011 Germany opposed NATO airstrikes on Libya, but France and Britain strongly advocated it, and drew in Hillary Clinton who convinced a hesitant Obama.

This time, however, all the U.S.’s top three European allies (with the 4th, 5th and 7th largest GDPs in the world), join China (2nd) and Russia (12th) in firmly opposing the U.S. action against Iran. (Japan—3rd—is opposed but will not speak up. All major powers think Trump is crazy to try to sabotage a deal that’s good for them, Iran and the world. The only ones applauding are the Israelis (who fantasize that Iran is an “existential threat”) and the

Saudis (who see Tehran as the headquarters of Shiite heresy, and in their republicanism threatening to Sunni monarchies throughout the Gulf).

Many must marvel at how the absolutely clueless Trump has been influenced by the snake oil salesman Netanyahu, who tried so hard to dissuade Obama from signing the deal—from a U.S. Senate podium at that, and railed against it at the UN, and lectured Trump in English with a power point presentation a couple days before the announcement. And by the Saudi King Salman and Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, who flattered him during his sword-dance visit last year. These are not the most reputable or trusted people in Europe or the world in general. Trump is choosing his friends on the basis who flatters him best.

Meanwhile Hizbollah, a big Iran ally, expands its control and hence Iran's influence over Lebanon—through peaceful electoral means. And Bashar al-Assad, another big ally, militarily defeats his opponents with Russian, Iranian, Hizbollah and Iraqi Shiite militia assistance. The (Shiite, allegedly ) Houthis of Yemen hold out against the savage (Sunni) Saudi assault. These forces are not mere Iranian proxies but agents acting in their own right, with varying degrees of Iranian support.

Hizbollah was founded in 1982 as a response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The group was inspired by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini. But to see it as a mere proxy is to deny agency to the Lebanese people who support it, for reasons that have nothing to do with Iran but everything to do with resistance to Israeli aggression.

To demand that Iran, in addition to the major concessions it has already made on its nuclear program, withdraw support from the various groups it supports (to some extent; sometimes the extent is exaggerated) in the region, is to demand it concede the field to the U.S., Israelis and Gulf Arabs and their own favored terrorist proxies. It's a demand that the whole world accept the U.S. State Department's evolving list of "terrorist organizations" as universally definitive. Enough already.

The Iranian organization Mujahadin-e Khalq (MEK), founded in the 1960s to violently oppose the Shah's regime, was considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. until 2012. Why did the designation change? Hint: It had nothing to do with any change of behavior, but had something to do with ongoing ties to U.S. and Israeli intelligence in relation to producing regime change in Iran.

MEK famously sided with Saddam's Iraq during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. It has allegedly killed U.S. citizens. But now it's cool, while Hizbollah is not. While the U.S.

embraces MEK Iran is supposed to abandon Hizbollah, because the U.S. demands it, threatening to destroy a UNSC-approved treaty if Tehran persists in supporting this group which—did I mention?—just with its bloc swept the Lebanese elections. The arbitrary reasoning is obvious, and unjustifiable.

The U.S. under Trump has truly lost reason. Europe should now say, “It was a fun seven decades together. But now, it’s just not working. You’ve become offensive, unreasonable. You may overestimate your power. We will for our part resist your efforts to curb our trade with Iran or any other country where we have the right to operate.” Perhaps I think too optimistically. But the instability of our times and the president’s stubborn stupidity might just finally provoke the necessary Atlantic split.