

LEBANESE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS IRAN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Due to its high-risk location and weak administrative structure, in case of various political changes in the Middle East, Lebanon is very susceptible to all external factors, which in fact have a strong impact on the internal policy of Lebanon and determine changes in the country's foreign policy.

In the history of Lebanon there have been countless external factors having a strong impact on its internal and foreign policy, among others, each war with Israel, even such in which Lebanon was not involved (the Six-Day-War, the Yom Kippur War), development of the pan-Arab movement, or recently, the Iranian-Syrian competition or the war in Syria, as a result of which Lebanon was flooded by a huge wave of refugees (it is assumed that the number of refugees may be as high as 2 million).

The purpose of this article is to present the place and role of Iran in the 21st century foreign policy of Lebanon, emphasising the following main problems: Hezbollah's activity and its relations with Iran, the nuclear program of Iran and a discussion of political and economic relations.

An Outline of Lebanese-Iranian relations

Contacts between Shias from the territory of the present-day Lebanon and Persia date back to distant times in history. They became even more intense in the 16th century. Since that time Shias (in particular from the Jabal 'Amil region) migrated to Persia for educational reasons, while reputable clergy and Shia scholars sometimes chose distant Persia as their home for reasons of political repression by the Ottoman Empire. Well-known Shia immigrants to Persia include, among others, Ali ibn Abd al-Ali al-Karaki (al-Muhaqqiq al-Karaki), who is an author of a work on Muslim law entitled "Jami'a al-Makasid fi Sharh al-Kawa'id"¹. Another "Lebanese" was Baha al-Din al-'Amili (1546–1622), who migrated to Persia together with his family and, having settled in Isfahan², became a well-known Shia clergyman.

The contemporary Iran-Lebanon relations developed after the 2nd World War. In the 1950s, when the authority of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was firmly established, Iran became more interested in countries located on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. This concerned the development of Arab nationalism in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, which was an important centre of pan-Arabism. At that time Lebanon was an ideological battlefield and, thus, an area of pan-Arabists' activity, which all the same did not attract so much support as in Egypt or Syria. For this reason, Iran perceived Lebanon as an important player in the fight against the pan-Arab ideology, which it considered a threat to its foreign policy objectives³. That is why, the Iranians made efforts to strengthen the Shia activity and Shia religious institutions in Lebanon in order to have an impact on the political fluctuations in this country.

Since the 1950s, a figure providing a link between Lebanon and Iran was imam Musa al-Sadr of Lebanese de-

scant, who was born in Iran. He moved to Lebanon and settled there for good in 1959⁴. Musa al-Sadr contributed significantly to revitalisation of the Shia community in Lebanon. He founded the Movement of the Dispossessed (*Harakat al-Mahrumeen*), which became a starting point of the political and military institutionalisation of Lebanese Shias. Imam disappeared during his official visit to Libya in 1978. Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi was unable to explain the circumstances of his disappearance. It still remains a mystery⁵.

The year 1978 saw intensification of protests in Iran, which were transformed into the Islamic Revolution. The authority of Shah Pahlavi was overthrown and replaced by an Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the post-revolutionary leader of Iran. Iran became the centre of revolutionary Shi'ism, which announced export of the revolution outside the territory of the country. Against the background of ideological differences, this led, among other things, to an outbreak of a long-lasting and devastating Iran-Iraq conflict (1980–1988). At that time, Lebanon had already been in the state of war since 1975. Under the current circumstances, the unstable Lebanon plunged into war and with the radicalised Shia community became an easy target within the framework of the Iran's export of the revolution theory.

Moreover, for post-revolutionary Iran, the direct proximity of Lebanon and Israel alone was an additional geo-strategic value. The political and religious factions fighting one another also became an easy target of Iranian fundamentalist rhetoric. For this reason, Lebanon was transformed into an ideal place to promote the ideas of the Islamic Revolution among the Shia community, for which the Islamic Revolution became a model of resistance movement⁶.

Many politicians and figures from the period of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Mehdi Bazargan

were deeply involved in activities carried out in Lebanon. This was due to the fact that in early 1970s, a strong network was established between the Iranian and Lebanese Shia within the framework of contacts of the Freedom Movement of Iran (*Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran*) targeted against the authority of the Shah and imam Musa al-Sadr residing in Lebanon⁷. A key figure was the Minister of Defence in the Bazargan's Government Mostafa Chamran, who became the first commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pasdaran*) and performed also a function of a member of the Shia AMAL group (*Afwaj al Muqawama al Lubnanijja*) established by Musa al-Sadr. Chamran stayed in Lebanon for a few years and maintained very close relations with Musa al-Sadr⁸. In his memoirs, he pointed out the hardships of his stay in Lebanon, which was in the state of devastating war, emphasised his pride in co-organizing the AMAL group established by Musa al-Sadr, and regarded the activity at Musa al-Sadr's side as his duty⁹.

However, not all Iranians from the anti-Shah opposition camp were closely associated with imam Musa al-Sadr. In case of a number of issues, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, Muhammad Montazeri and Jalal ad-Din Farsi did not hold the same views as Musa al-Sadr. The main differences concerned Palestinians accused by al-Sadr of provoking the Israeli attacks on Lebanon. Mohtashemi and Montazeri had different opinions on this issue. They were for giving Palestinians full support in their attacks on Israel. Besides, the relations between imam al-Sadr and the leader of the Iranian Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini were not based on complete trust. Khomeini and his closest collaborators remembered that before the revolution Musa al-Sadr had maintained close contacts with the Iranian embassy (then an establishment of the Persian Empire) and SAVAK security service. For this reason, some of Khomeini's closest associates described al-Sadr

as “counter-revolutionist”. What is more, al-Sadr believed that Lebanese Shia should play an important role in the world Shia community, and taking into account the high position occupied by al-Sadr among the Shia, Khomeini treated him as his religious and political opponent¹⁰. This gave rise to disputes, which were never fully resolved after the mysterious disappearance of al-Sadr in Libya.

The Shia doctrine of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (*welayat-je faghih*) was not unambiguously accepted¹¹ among the Shia clergy in Lebanon. Musa al Sadr approached *marja at-taqlid*¹² ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, who was Khomeini’s rival and did not approve of the *welayat-je faghih* doctrine¹³. Later, however, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah Hussein Fadlallah expressed a positive attitude towards this doctrine, although he did not tackle this issue too frequently¹⁴. On the other hand, Secretary General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah had fully approved of and identified himself with the doctrine¹⁵ from the very beginning of his involvement in developing the Party of God (before he became Secretary General). The position of Hezbollah in the context of the *welayat-je faghih* doctrine was presented in the first 1985 Hezbollah political manifesto¹⁶ and was repeated many a time when Hezbollah defined its identity and objectives¹⁷.

The place and role of Iran in the foreign policy of Lebanon

Iran occupies one of more prominent positions in the foreign policy of Lebanon. This is due to a number of factors. The importance of Iran in the foreign policy of Lebanon is determined by historic relations between Shias of Lebanon and Iran, which is a Shia country. Such strong ties that go back hundreds of years have translated into increase in the importance of Iran among the Lebanese Shia population, in particular after the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which contributed to the

fall of the Persian Empire and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Hezbollah, formed in 1982, became a representative of Iran's interests in the war-torn Lebanon.

Since the establishment of Hezbollah, Iran has had an incredible opportunity to influence the Lebanese political scene, thus broadening its sphere of influence. Since the beginning of its existence, Hezbollah has been a non-state actor implementing the decrees from Iran. First, of a terrorist nature – carrying out spectacular attacks at the very beginning of its existence. In April 1983, the Party of God carried out an attack on the United States embassy, in which 63 people were killed. In October this year, a suicide bomber drove into the barracks of American soldiers. Two hundred people died in this attack. On this very day another attacked was carried out on the French barracks and 60 people were killed¹⁸. Then, Hezbollah kidnapped a number of U.S., British and French citizens staying in Lebanon. This was Iran's revenge for support given by the United States, France, and Great Britain to Iraq in the war with Iran that began in 1980, which led to a hostage crisis lasting between 1982–1992¹⁹.

Hezbollah has been recognised as a permanent feature of the Lebanese political scene since 1992, when it started to function as a political party (maintaining also its military wing). To this day, Iran has maintained the military arsenal of Hezbollah providing it with weapons of various types, and in particular developing the rocket systems used by the Party of God. Invaluable support provided by Iran to Hezbollah was revealed during the 2006 war of the Party of God with Israel, when Hezbollah effectively resisted the Israeli forces and maintained its position in relations with Israel. Since the outbreak of the war in Syria, Hezbollah has been actively involved, along with Iran, in military activities of the Bashar al-Assad authority. It is worthwhile to point out that for years Lebanese Hezbollah has been used by Iran as its proxy

towards the achievement of Iran's objectives. This was the case in Lebanon, among others, during the above mentioned 2006 war with Israel or in Yemen during the Houthi rebellion, when Hezbollah was used for logistics and operational purposes.

Due to the relations between Hezbollah and Iran, the Lebanese government has a difficult task to do. On the one hand, Lebanon is keen on maintaining positive relations with Iran that holds a position of power in the Middle East, on the other hand, for many years Prime Minister Saad Hariri has denied to accept the "arbitrariness" of Hezbollah and has been accusing the Party of God²⁰ of most of the Lebanese problems.

Another important issue which the Lebanese government must most certainly take into account in relations with Iran is the large Shia minority. Currently, according to demographic estimates, Shias are one of the major religious groups in Lebanon and account for approx. 30 percent of this country's population²¹. Other unofficial estimates indicate that the Shia population in Lebanon accounts for even 40 percent. To a large extent, they are a natural social group which is an addressee of the interests and various activities on the part of Iran.

The Lebanese Shia community plays a significant role in the foreign policy of Iran. Firstly, it reinforces geopolitical importance of Iran as a country capable of making an effective impact within the Middle East region. In this way, Iran not only has a direct impact on the Lebanese political scene, but is also able to compete for influence with other Middle East countries and world powers from outside the region, including in particular the United States. Lebanon has been experiencing rivalry between other countries within its territory practically since the early period after independence. Engaging in the accomplishment of its interests such an instrument as Hezbollah and its military wing, Iran has an opportunity to im-

pact the Lebanese political scene, as well as the intensity of Lebanese-Israeli relations. The mere fact that through Hezbollah Iran is able to take military action against Israel constitutes an important asset in the foreign policy of the country.

Secondly, with the support of Lebanese Shia and Hezbollah, Iran reinforces the existence of the Shia Crescent, which is also a geopolitical formula that relates to the “land belt” occupied by the Shia and stretching from Iran, through Iraq, Syrian Alawites, to Lebanon. Recently, Iran has officially renounced the establishment of the Shia Crescent as a political formula. However, at the 2016 Islamic Unity Conference held in Teheran, President Hasan Rouhani pointed out that Iran has no intention to establish the Shia Crescent²².

Evidence for the pro-Iranian attitude of the Lebanese Shia is provided by surveys conducted by the Beirut Centre for Research and Information (*Markaz Biyrouth li al-Abhaf wa al-Ma’lumat*). For example, in the survey on the Iranian nuclear program conducted in 2006, 100 percent of the Shias surveyed thought that the program was intended for peaceful purposes. Similarly, in response to a question concerning a potential conflict between Iran and the United States, 96.2 percent of the Lebanese Shia surveyed stated that they would support Iran. Only few percent would stay neutral, while none of the respondents would support the United States. Responses provided by representatives of other religious groups were not so unequivocal²³.

Iran in the foreign policy of Lebanon. The political sphere

Given the importance of Iran for the foreign policy of Lebanon and this country’s ability to effectively impact the international relations in the Middle East, many a time Lebanon had repeatedly struggled to maintain its

neutral position towards Iran, even with the huge pressure of the Western world or the Arab world. In the first decade of the 21st century, a key issue of international importance was the Iranian nuclear program. In the perspective of the US and numerous Western and Middle East countries, such as Israel or Saudi Arabia, the Iranians had sought to gain possession of nuclear weapons.

On 31 July 2006, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution requesting Iran to cease uranium enrichment and establish cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency²⁴. Then, the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran (i.a. resolution no. 1747, resolution no. 1803). On 9 June 2010, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution no. 1929 (so called the fourth round of sanctions imposed on Iran). At that time, Lebanon was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and, as one of three countries, abstained from voting and, thus, did not support the resolution. A representative of Lebanon to the UN Security Council indicated in his speech the importance and essence of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and called for dialogue with Iran²⁵. With reference thereto, the President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that Iran would not give up the nuclear program and encouraged Lebanon to build its own power plants²⁶.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah and the other Shia political party AMAL condemned the Lebanon's vote at the meeting of the UN Security Council and indicated that Lebanon failed to share the standpoint expressed by Brazil and Turkey that voted against the resolution²⁷.

In fact, such behaviour of Lebanon was part of its foreign policy – to adopt a “neutral” attitude towards large and strong entities in the Middle East, which Lebanon was in any way linked to²⁸. A good example of this is the Iranian-Saudi competition and their mutual hostility in the Middle East, towards which Lebanon is often forced

to take an appropriate stance in order to avoid a conflict with Iran or Saudi Arabia. With reference to this example, when in early January 2016, the Saudis executed the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, there were student protests in Lebanon and Hezbollah strongly condemned this act. The Lebanese government, however, tried to avoid any comments about the incident.

Since assumption of office, the Prime Minister of Lebanon Saad Hariri (in the years 2009–2011 and again since December 2016) has had to play the Iranian card very carefully, the more so that being the Prime Minister he performs the function of the leader of the “March 14 Coalition” (*Tahaluf 14 Adar*), in opposition to which is the March 8 Coalition with Hezbollah as its part.

In 2010, Saad Hariri paid an important visit to Iran and during this visit, held a meeting with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In a way, it was a response to an earlier visit of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Lebanon. The purpose of the Hariri’s visit was to obtain political support from Iran for improving the political stability in dispute and conflict-stricken Lebanon following the attack on Rafik Hariri in 2005. Hariri further emphasised then, with reference to the sanctions imposed on Iran, that Lebanon had never intended to exercise any pressure within the international system in connection with the Iranian nuclear program, fully respecting the right of Iran to develop its own nuclear technology for peaceful purposes²⁹. The issue of the Iranian nuclear program was a huge challenge for Lebanon. Because of the relations between Iran and Lebanon, including also Hezbollah, Lebanon has never officially condemned the Iranian activity aimed at the development of its nuclear program. This attitude was often maintained by the Speaker of the Parliament of Lebanon – Shia Nabih Berri. who emphasised an inalienable right of Iran to develop its nuclear program³⁰.

Having lost the position of Prime Minister, among others, because of political activity of Hezbollah, Hariri started to harshly comment the policy of Iranian interference in the internal affairs of the Arab world, including Lebanon, having in mind that by means of Iran's impact on the Lebanese political scene through entities linked thereto, Iran contributed to the collapse of the Saad Hariri's government³¹.

In 2016, before re-assuming the office of President, Hariri tried to restore the image of positive relations between Lebanon and Iran, among other things, he denied any reports of the Israeli government concerning the alleged location of Iranian rocket factories³² within the territory of Lebanon. Nevertheless, Lebanon is still keen on maintaining good political relations with Iran. Internationally, even within the Arab world, Lebanon takes the utmost care not to fall afoul of Iran. It has been proven over the last years in the form of lack of support on its part for a resolution of the Arab League condemning the Iranians' attack on the Saudi diplomatic mission after the execution of the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lebanon Gebran Bassil pointed out that Lebanon protested in this way against the fact that Hezbollah is mentioned in the resolution and accused of terrorism. Bassil emphasised that Hezbollah is part of the Lebanese government and the Parliament of Lebanon and, in this manner, the Lebanese government requested that this information be removed³³.

Likewise, Lebanon refrained from taking any action to condemn Iran in this respect within the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation³⁴.

The Lebanese-Iranian talks on military cooperation also had a wide impact. In 2008, the President Michel Suleiman asked Iran for help in equipping the Lebanese army. Given the United States' hesitancy to help in funding the development of the Lebanese army (finally, Amer-

icans provided resources for the development of the Lebanese army), in 2011, Iran came up with its own proposal of military cooperation with Lebanon and supplying it with arms. Such proposals were made repeatedly and now, when Iran has entered into an agreement on its nuclear program with the P5+1, the assistance and arms sales from Iran to Lebanon seem to be quite a realistic future³⁵.

Iran in the foreign policy of Lebanon. The economic sphere

Dynamic development of their mutual economic relations have been taking place since the early 21st century. In 2006, the trade balance between these two countries was 78.4 million U.S. dollars; and increased to 180 million U.S. dollars³⁶ in 2010. In 2010, both parties entered into the Memorandum of Understanding, which established a special committee to discuss their mutual economic cooperation. In October 2010, during its visit to Lebanon, the President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad discussed with the President of Lebanon Michel Suleiman a number of key issues concerning economic cooperation of these two countries. The result of these talks was the signing of 17 trade agreements concerning, among other things, the oil and gas sectors. In 2011 an agreement for the exploitation of gas deposits in Lebanon³⁷ was concluded between Lebanon and Iran. In 2013, Iran and Lebanon extended their cooperation in the energy sector. An agreement was signed for the construction and modernisation by Iranian companies³⁸ of refineries and gas-fired power plants in Lebanon. The signing by Iran in 2015 of an agreement to constrain Iran's nuclear program and gradual abolition of sanctions imposed on Iran have broadened possibilities of Iranian investments in Lebanon. For that reason, Iran also offered power supplies in order to supplement electricity shortages, a problem permanently faced by Lebanon³⁹. The term "open doors"

for Iranian-Lebanese cooperation⁴⁰ has been used in the talks. Since the abolition of sanctions, frequent meetings at the ministerial level have been held in the Iran-Lebanon relations to specify details of their cooperation in particular sectors⁴¹.

Besides, after the abolition of sanctions, Lebanon offered assistance to Iran in the selling of its goods to Europe, Latin America and Africa. In 2016, it was estimated that Iranian exports to Lebanon was worth 50 million U.S. dollars, while Lebanese exports to Iran was worth nearly 15 million U.S. dollars⁴².

Conclusions

Iran occupies one of more prominent positions in the foreign policy of Lebanon. This is determined by the history of mutual contacts that dates back hundreds of years, when the population of present-day Lebanon and Persia migrated in both directions. Today, however, apart from religious ties in the context of the Shia population living in Lebanon, tied more or less closely to Iran and its clergy, the Shia Hezbollah is a key player in the Lebanese-Iranian relations. Established with direct help on the part of the Iranians, right now it is the Lebanese non-state actor that implements directives from Iran. Because of that, in its foreign policy Lebanon is in some way a “hostage” of Hezbollah and Iran, and given the Iranian state potential, it cannot afford to and is not willing to take, as part of its foreign policy, any actions in conflict with Iran’s interests. Hence, in recent years, Lebanon has repeatedly refused its support for international resolutions condemning Iran. Such actions proved beneficial to Lebanon, not only because of Hezbollah, but most of all, due to the fact that at present, following the abolition of sanctions imposed on Iran, there has been a dynamic development of the Lebanese-Iranian relations. In addition

to political cooperation, there is also a chance for dynamic development of their mutual economic and even military cooperation.

NOTES

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