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THE FATAL EMBRACE: LEBANON AND HIZBULLAH



James Watt CVO served extensively in the Middle East, including most recently as British Ambassador to Egypt (2011-14), Jordan (2006-11) and Lebanon (2003-6). His 37-year diplomatic career covered many of the major political and security questions of the day, providing wide experience also of economic, business and development issues.

For a region never short of news, November in the Middle East was an extraordinary month. In Saudi Arabia the detention of leading figures on corruption charges seized the world's attention. The resignation speech on Saudi television of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, who had been abruptly summoned to Riyadh, also sent shock-waves through the region and beyond. The two events happened in the same 24-hour period, but their origins and significance are distinct. What unites them is that both were decided by the powerful Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. They illustrate his two overriding objectives: to transform his country's political governance and its social future, and to start the long push-back against Iranian domination of parts of the Arab world.

It is the second of these that I want to consider here. Some media reporting presents Iran's role in the region as new, and thus the threat it poses as acute and demanding urgent countermeasures. In reality the projection of modern Iran's power into its Arabian neighbourhood began in 1972 with its seizure of three islands and their oil and gas fields belonging to Abu Dhabi. At the time Iran's Cold War ally was the United States, and its regional ally Israel. With the fall of the Shah in 1979 everything changed: the new revolutionary Islamic Republic challenged not only the Western security presence in the Arabian Gulf, but the Gulf States themselves. It espoused the popular Arab nationalist cause and its symbol, Jerusalem, and made a virtue of denouncing Israel. It set new standards of religiously-driven politics. In a defensive reflex, the Arab states overnight changed their easy-going and modernising social ways and adopted a new conservatism, unwittingly playing into the hands of the resurgent Muslim Brotherhood movement centred on Egypt, and catching the *zeitgeist* of growing religious zeal in the wider Muslim world. It was this reflex that Mohammed bin Salman was referring to recently when he announced a return to a more liberal social order, above all concerning the rights of women, as part of his message that his country and the region have to move on.

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The message of moving on has received a massive welcome from his own young population, and in general from the wider world. But how to move on with improving regional security is not a question that has been properly answered so far. Entrenched and hostile positions have become more so over time: Iran's threats to Israel prompted threats in return. These in turn prompted Iranian intervention in the Lebanese war of 1975-90, from 1980 onwards, to build up a Shi'ite militia, Hizbullah, not only as a means of pushing Israel back from Lebanese soil, but in time as a deterrent to Israel's threats to attack Iran and its nuclear capacity. Some believe that the 160,000 missiles that Hizbullah is said to have accumulated in Lebanon do now constitute an effective deterrent, and that Israel can no longer attack Hizbullah there, as it did in 2006, without incurring significant damage itself.

The uprising in Syria in 2011 gave regional and other players a chance to back their chosen factions, just as the war in Lebanon had. The rival Sunni states of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, backed or condoned different militant Sunni factions in the war, taking risks that their support would boost the same hard-line jihadist movements that threaten not just the region but the world beyond as well. The Saudi aim was clear: to remove the Assad regime which had become wholly dependent on Iranian military support to survive the national uprising against it. Iran in turn reinforced its Revolutionary Guard Corps presence, and Hizbullah entered the fighting as the best trained and most effective force on the regime's side. Iran then brought in Shi'ite militias from Iraq and Afghanistan. When the last IS-held town on Syria soil was reported taken in mid-November - an event which normally would have led the news from the Middle East - it was Hizbullah and Iraqi militias that were doing the fighting.

Recent media comment has also tended to repeat the claim that Hizbullah's presence in the Lebanese government is something new and uniquely dangerous. The Taif Accord of 1989 which ended the war in Lebanon not only gave Hizbullah seats in the Council of Ministers but endorsed Syrian hegemony over Lebanon. All militias had to disarm, under the terms of the Accord, but Syria enabled Hizbullah to retain its arms, and with Iranian help to grow its military strength. Every Lebanese government since Taif has included Hizbullah ministers as part of the power-sharing formula, allowing Lebanon a partial and provisional respite from destructive conflict. But Lebanon is also held hostage by Hizbullah, and its ability to develop a credible modern form of government - the demand of its citizens - has been systematically undermined by Syrian and Iranian power-plays.

The defeat this year of IS in Syria and Iraq, at least in terms of territorial control, has removed a brake on dealing with the underlying confrontation between Iranian ambitions and Arab resistance to them, and with the linked stand-off between Iran and Israel. Iran's military contribution to defeating IS in both Iraq and Syria has been major, and has left it even more strongly placed in both countries. These are deep and long-present conflicts, the logic of which has fuelled the ever-growing intensity and frequency of war in the region. The only way to escape the cycle is to grasp peace-making in a serious, sustained and statesmanlike manner, being ready on all sides to climb down from old positions that have outlasted their justification, and to seize new opportunities. The alternative of more war carries huge risks for Arab societies already left fragile by recent events.

The world-wide reaction to Sa'ad Hariri's surprise resignation statement on Saudi television on 3 November was one of fear that another unnecessary war was about to be unleashed, and another Arab country destroyed (in Lebanon's case for a second time). Egypt's President Sisi spoke out firmly against it. The US and EU (including the UK) made equally strong statements. Lebanese society rallied in a moving display of unity and affirmation of Lebanon's sovereignty and the right to live in peace. President Macron skilfully arranged for the Saudis to step back from the position they had taken, and for Hariri to return to Lebanon, where he continues for now as Prime Minister. Releasing Hizbullah's hold on Lebanon will be a vital part of a wider solution for sustained peace in the region. But Lebanon can not serve as a starting point.

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