
Was 'Beirut' A Botched Act of Deterrence?

Description

[ALASTAIR CROOKE](#) via [Russia in Global Affairs](#)

Director of Conflicts Forum, a small geo-political and geo-financial consultancy, and adviser to a number of larger geo-financial entities. He was formerly advisor on Middle East issues to Javier Solana, the EU Foreign Policy Chief. He has worked in the region for 35 years, including managing a number of ceasefires in the Occupied Territories on behalf of the European Union and working on a number of hostage cases.

Most Lebanese do want reform – their anger is real and justified. But the price of western-led 'IMF-reforms' – austerity, higher taxes, the end to subsidies, and the expulsion of Hizbullah from all positions of responsibility – will amount to a cost impossible for any government to bear – with some 44% of the Lebanese population slipping towards the poverty level. Equally, most, of course, will not accept to be placed under a new colonial mandate. What happens next?

Dr Uzi Rubin, the founder and first director of the *Israel Missile Defence Organization* (which developed the state's first national missile defence shield), [wrote](#) — in wake of the 14 September 2019 attack on Abqaiq, (the Saudi Aramco oil facility) that it was: "A brilliant feat of arms. It was precise, carefully-calibrated, devastating yet bloodless – a model of a surgical operation ... The planning and execution of the operation was flawless ... The two formations of incoming threats – each following a different flight path to its assigned target – was neither detected by Saudi Arabia's air traffic control nor by its air defence sensors. Neither were they detected by the US air control systems deployed in the area, nor by US satellites ... This had nothing to do with flaws in the air and missile defence systems; but with the fact that they were not designed to deal with ground-hugging threats. Simply put, the Iranians outfoxed the defence systems".

Dr Rubin did not spell it out in 'black and white', but this was hardly needed: The implication was that Israel has no defence against an Abqaiq-style attack – and none against Hizbullah's ability to overwhelm Israel's air defences by 'swarming' them with too many incoming missile targets (Hizbullah has tens of thousands of missiles).

We do not know (at the time of writing) whether 'Beirut' was an attack or an accident (the negligence and corruption at the port is not in contention). President Trump said – and reiterated – that his generals told him it might have been an attack ("a bomb or something"). Defence Secretary Esper spoke similarly on *Fox* over the weekend. It is very unusual for Washington to speak like this — for the hermeneutics of this would be that of an American finger pointed directly at Israel.

The Beirut explosion constitutes a major geo-political event (whether determined to be accidental, or purposefully detonated). That is, because either way, there is a pattern to these events. And that pattern, more than anything, is the more telling factor (amidst a melée of narratives).

In 2005, an explosion in Beirut killed PM Rafic Hariri. That event enabled the 'International Community'

forcefully to insist that Lebanese independence would only be obtained through ‘cancelling’ Syria from Lebanon. It succeeded in its aim.

Then in 2006, there was the attempt to cancel Hizbullah’s growing military strength (the 2006 war). It failed when Hizbullah, forewarned, forced the operation’s premature implementation two months early, (through taking IDF soldiers hostage).

After the 2006 war, as John Hannah, a participant at the meeting has [chronicled](#) how Saudi Intelligence Chief, Prince Bandar, persuaded Dick Cheney that Syria was the ‘weak’ link between Iran and Hizbullah, and could be collapsed *via* an Islamist insurgency (that he – Bandar — would orchestrate). An initially sceptical Cheney later acceded to Bandar’s notion.

Now, in the wake of last week’s ‘new’ Beirut explosion, what do we have? We have the former Israeli Defence Minister Ya’alon [leading](#) the ‘international’ cry that Lebanon — finally — can only “achieve its independence” through ‘cancelling’ Hizbullah.

This is being accompanied by efforts to stimulate *fitna* (civil strife) and [stir protests](#) in Lebanon, through social media (both domestic and Gulf driven). This social media campaign targets Hizbullah, and aims to depose the present Lebanese government of President Aoun. France, the former colonial power, demands political change and reform as the price for external financial assistance. Macron has said that he will write his own blueprint for its future governance, and has vowed to return to Beirut on 1 September and warned that financial assistance will be held hostage to the government’s performance on the matter of reform.

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What happens next? The attempt at stoking *fitna* (civil strife) is unlikely to be fully successful (through there were thousands on the streets of Beirut on Saturday night protesting, and calling for the government to go). The PM in response, has offered to resign and hold fresh parliamentary elections. But it is more complicated than that. It is for the President alone to accept, or refuse, the PM’s resignation (and likely he will decline it).

In any event, were elections to be held on the existing constituency demarcation, the outcome might change little (or nothing) in terms of the political composition of a new parliament.

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Yet to move to a new constituency dispensation would – in Lebanon – probably take years to negotiate between the various parties.

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Fundamentally though, the calculus has changed from that of 2005: The *Zaim* (‘tribal’ élites) of 2005 no

longer command the resources (i.e. the militia) that they once had. And the economy, (post-independence the Sunni-Christian ace-card) is destroyed. Lebanon's business model must be re-invented (a task facing the present government). The forces opposing Hizbullah therefore, are significantly weaker — for all the noise they are rousing.

There will, of course, be a further effort to stoke *fitna* on 18 August when the Special Tribunal indicts members of Hizbullah for the murder of PM Rafic Hariri in 2005. Israel will use the opportunity to lobby those European States which have not already placed Hizbullah on the terrorist list, to do so. Some, no doubt, will accede.

Whatever the findings of the investigation committee into the circumstances of the port explosion, inevitably the verdict will be deliberately muddled. Hizbullah and its regional allies can, and will, read the runes — and will draw their own conclusions.

I (having lived in Beirut for nine years) know, like most Lebanese, that the Beirut port was always a Sunni 'asset' and source of Sunni plunder. That is to say that Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's denials of even one round of ammunition being present at the port are entirely plausible.

The 'pattern': The pattern from 2005 onwards is quite explicit: Repeated and ongoing attempts to 'cancel' Hizbullah. And today's context, too, is plain: From the ongoing Israeli attacks into Syria, from the heightened pressures on Iraq, from the knee on the financial throat of Lebanon, and to the siege of Iran — everywhere, events speak to US and Israeli escalation in pursuit of weakening Hizballah and Iran. The appointment of Elliot Abrams is an additional, obvious signal. And to link this escalation to the fast-closing 'window of opportunity' in the run-up to the November US elections is an obvious connection for the 'Axis of Resistance' to make.

The point here is that, 'the Axis' is like a wiry, nimble boxer in the ring, facing a burly, hulking opponent: He will not let the heavier man land, a first mighty punch — else, taking an early blow, this might foreclose on his having the stamina to go the full eight rounds — by which time the wiry one will hope the hulk to have exhausted himself chasing around his dancing, taunting opponent. Hizbullah will not be Pavlovian: It understands provocation, and understands the American political timetable.

And so, back to Dr Rubin. Effectively he was writing that the September Abqaiq attack had exposed Israel's lack of deterrence *on the Iranian front* — as well as what was already well-known *on its northern front*.

What to do? Was this act initially intended to send a message to Iran and Hizbullah that Israel still possesses deterrence, but that the messaging-act somehow was botched — and that the pressure blast radius from the explosion was not fully anticipated?

If instead, a solitary deep crater had appeared in the Beirut port, just out at sea, off Beirut, (without casualties, as was the case in Abqaiq), this would, of course, have constituted a very compelling message. Just speculation, naturally ... As it is — irrespective of the findings — the explosion is a major geo-political event. Trump and Esper may be trying to distance the US from any potential fall-out, but can the US and Europeans really [hold aloof](#), given the massive damage and casualties incurred? Killing Hizbullah fighters or "Shi'i militia" in Syria may be within the rules of the game, but destroying a third of Beirut, and killing and injuring thousands, is quite another.