

A person wearing a dark balaclava and a military-style jacket stands with arms crossed. The background is a dark blue world map with several bright orange and yellow flames scattered across it, suggesting a global crisis or conflict.

Hezbollah and the Global Corona Crisis

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The global Corona crisis provides Hezbollah a unique opportunity to position itself as an actor determined to protect the Lebanese citizens from the pandemic threat. It is evident that its enlistment to this fight expresses its wishes to restore its image that was damaged in the wake of the recent popular uprising against government corruption, the severe financial crisis and the political instability. That said, its plan seems to have been doubted by the public and it has a hard time marketing itself as an entity that holds the public interest paramount. Yet, as a hybrid terror organization it shows high organizational capabilities and leverage them to consolidate its rule as a hybrid terror organization, over Shiite regions in southern Lebanon through the supply of healthcare services.

The Lebanese Ministry of Health and the COVID-19 Fiasco

Lebanon a low rate of infections compared to other countries in the world, but it stands to reason that the real number is much higher due to the low number of Corona detection tests. As of April 4th, 2020 the number of sick was 520 and 17 dead¹. Like other countries Lebanon took several preventive measures. For example, in February and March 2020 it prohibited its residents from travelling to disease-stricken regions such as Italy and Iran,² ordered tests for anyone suspected of infection and quarantined those who have positive . On March 15th, 2020 it declared a state of medical emergency.

Despite the above, the government and particularly the Minister of Health, **Hamad Hassan**, a Hezbollah appointment, suffered harsh criticism claiming incompetence in handling the pandemic. For example, **Hadi Murad**, a doctor and a prominent Lebanese activist accused Hassan of neglecting the public health and dubbed him the Corona Minister for allowing Irani planes to land in Beirut knowing full well that the came from an infected country and therefore pose an infection threat to the public. Murad wrote on his Facebook account that *"The Minister of Health, Hamad Hassan, has primary responsibility and liability for any Corona infection. Yet, since he cannot carry his load and does not heed calls to quarantine all those who came from infected countries... and lets air travelers [considered] ticking time bombs to come on contact with the people"*³. Per him, Hassan played with the Lebanese' lives and therefore needs to resign. In response Hassan revoked Murad's medical license which led to wide public protest online and on the street that demanded that Murad's license be reinstated, and Hassan fired⁴.

Other Lebanese citizens accused Hezbollah of spreading the virus in Lebanon. Per them, political interests and the close ties between the Iranian regime and Hezbollah were the motive for the latter's decision to

¹ "[Total Coronavirus Cases in Lebanon](#)", *Worldometers*. 4 Apr 2020.

² Abby Sewell, "[Lebanon limits flights to countries with coronavirus, stops pilgrimage trips](#)", Al Arabiya. 25 Feb 2020; Timour Azhari, "[Lebanon to ban flights from 11 coronavirus-hit countries](#)", *al-Jazeera*. 11 Mar 2020.

³ [@hadi.a.mourad.1](#), Facebook.com. 1 Mar 2020.

⁴ The online protest focused on the following hashtags: no to oppression, free doctor, we are all Hadi Murad, reverse the decision, Corona Minister, independent doctors, fire the criminal minister, #لا_للقمع; #طبيب_حر; #كلنا_هادي_مراد; #الاستقالة_للوزير_المجرم#تراجع_عن_القرار; #وزير_الكورونا; #اطباء_مستقلين;

pressure the government to allow Iranians to enter the country. For example, **Sabine Yusuf**, a Lebanese media personality, posted a selfie clip where it accused Hezbollah of taking control of the Beirut airport to allow the entry of Corona infected Iranians to Lebanon. Per her, it would be better if Hezbollah sacrificed its own people rather than the Lebanese public⁵.

It should be noted, since the formation of the government in January 2019 the Ministry of Health is headed by a Hezbollah appointee. The importance Hezbollah attributes to the Ministry of Health comes from a financial hardship it is in for allocating a fortune take care of its injured, payment of damages to the families of its fighters killed fighting ISIS in Syria and concerns of a reduced Iranian financial aid due to the international sanctions imposed on the latter. In light of the above, Hezbollah sees the large Ministry of Health budget a source of funds to fund the above and even create a scenario wherein the Lebanese state institutions protect Hezbollah from international sanctions⁶. Alongside the above, Hezbollah operates an extensive healthcare system developed over the years which includes five hospitals, hundreds of clinics and medical centers and more.



Photos disseminated by Hadi Murad supporters on social media. On the left: the hashtags “we are all Hadi Murad” and “against the Corona Minister”⁷

Hezbollah and the Fight Against COVID-19

The spread of the virus in Lebanon, the growing public criticism against the organization in the wake of the Iranian planes in Beirut and the rumors that **Nasrallah** contracted the Corona virus, led the latter to announce on March 13th that the Lebanese Ministry of Health has acted in full transparency without any conflict of interests and that Hezbollah was fully committed for a national fight against the disease. He called upon all political factions to put their differences aside and unite. “We are amid a global campaign

⁵ @UCKtC2BkSpp5uR7mtWcTq5Ow, Facebook.com. 13 Mar, 2020.

⁶ Hanin Ghaddar, "Why Does Hezbollah Want Lebanon's Health Ministry?", *The Washington Institute*, 19.10.18.

⁷ @dyaa.ghazal.3, Facebook.com. 14 Mar, 2020.

the world is fighting. We must fight and not give up because the threat is not just on the economy and schools but also on people's lives and survival [...] the responsibility in Lebanon is not only on the head of the Ministry of Health but on everybody's, every sector, the entire Lebanese people and everyone on Lebanese soil whether they are Palestinian or Syrian⁸.

At first Hezbollah agreed to contribute the use of its healthcare system to state of Lebanon while cooperating with state agencies however as the virus spread in Lebanon Hezbollah focused on quietly developing its own plan to assist Shiite in Southern Lebanon.

On March 25th, 2020, **Hisham Safi al-Din**, Head of Hezbollah's executive council, announced a broad plan to fight the virus and cooperate with state agencies. Per him the plan included allocation of 1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and medics, 5,000 medical teams' personnel, 15,000 service personnel on the ground, 100 ambulances, a designated web site, workshops for more than 15,000 people, the erection of a joint operation center, allocating resources and personnel to build ventilators, designating St. George hospital as a Corona dedicated hospital, allocating hotel rooms for quarantined people, leasing private hospitals for quarantined people, forming COVID-19 diagnosis centers, building 32 medical centers and investing \$2,321,275. Per him the Hezbollah non-profit organizations assisted 1,600 families so far and there is "an army of volunteers in the field in all regions". He also promised that Hezbollah would form a committee that would monitor the health status of the Lebanese diaspora and assist them as much as they can⁹.

Al Manar, Hezbollah's TV station, broadcasted on March 31st, 2020 that a within the framework of the COVID-19 campaign a total of 24,500 employees have been allocated and a designated bank account was opened by the **Qard al-Hassan Association** (a non-profit organization). Further, the special operations center formed to fight COVID-19 included the following committees: (i) designated technical committee to fight COVID-19; (ii) health administration; (iii) popular and organizational administration; (iv) cooperation and social solidarity; (v) propaganda; (vi) culture and education. **Majid Nima**, the head of the first aid department in the **Islamic Health Organization** clarified in an interview that the Hezbollah plan was meant to assist the government hospitals and alleviate their case load¹⁰.



The Hezbollah plan to fight COVID-19 were posted on al-Ahd web site

⁸ 13.3.20. <http://www.alnour.com.lb/episodes/410946/الله-حول-آخر>

⁹ Al Manar, March 26th, 2020. <https://almanar.com.lb/6444187>

¹⁰ 31.3.20. <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/102841>



Al Manar reporting on Hezbollah's plan to fight COVID-19; Left: Majid Nima

Hezbollah managed to harness its organizations as well as its military wing and collaborate the Amal movement to fight COVID-19 in Lebanon's Shiite regions. So far Hezbollah has demonstrated superior organizational skills to those of the other factions in Lebanon, thanks in large part to the Irani financed infrastructure it has built over decades. For example, Hezbollah converted **Imam Khomeini City**, normally a hostel and a youth movement compound in Nabatiyeh, to a quarantine site and allocated 150beds and 54 personnel for that matter¹¹. They also converted hospitals such as Dar al-Hikma to take on COVID-19 patients¹². In interview for **al-Ahd** magazine, **Dr. Muhammad Bashir**, **al-Rasul Kabir** hospital's CEO and chairman of **St. George's** hospital that the latter was ready to take on 70 COVID-19 patients and provide 12 ventilators¹³.

The Islamic **Health Organization**, owned by Hezbollah, also stood out in the COVID-19 campaign. On March 21st, 2020 it launched in Sidon and east of it a propaganda campaign titled "From House to House". The campaign included six groups of volunteers that made house calls in the Shiite regions to educate the residents on the type and scope of disinfections to apply to all surfaces they come in contact with to protect from the virus¹⁴. For example, they conducted a widespread disinfection of public spaces in Hanouiyeh¹⁵ and even in churches to send a message of solidarity with the Christians¹⁶. On March 31st, 2020 they erected a COVID-19 diagnostics center in the village of al-Ghaziyya¹⁷. It even expressed their consent

¹¹ 4.4.20. <http://www.alnour.com.lb/news/health/413911/حزب-الله-يخصص-مدينة-الامام-الخميني-الكشفية-الى-مكان-خاص-للحج>

¹² 28.3.20. <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=17737&cid=125>

¹³ Dr. Bashir on St. George's readiness to treat COVID-19 patients; al-Ahd March 31st, 2020; <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=17844&cid=155>

¹⁴ 21.3.20. <https://almanar.com.lb/6421989>

¹⁵ @2494153230901652, Facebook.com. 30 Mar 2020.

¹⁶ 31.3.20. <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/102841>

¹⁷ 1.4.20. <http://almanar.com.lb/6472589>

to assist Syrian refugees in Lebanon in case they got hit by the disease¹⁸.



The Islamic Health Organization members disinfect public space¹⁹



Lebanese citizen praises The Islamic Health Organization for disinfecting churches²⁰

The Injured Institute (al-Jarha), a Hezbollah entity also chipped in and posted a COVID-19 guide, its threat to the population²¹, and general infection safety guidelines in various situations (e.g. grocery shopping)²².

¹⁸ 27.3.20. <https://www.al-akhbar.com/Community/286239/ملف-النازحين-العودة-بعد-كورونا-ناجيات-حتمي>

¹⁹ @alisaleh1251, Twitter.com. 28 Mar 2020.

²⁰ @mayahoumani16, Twitter.com. 2 Apr 2020.

²¹ 31.3.20. <http://www.aljarha.net/article.php?id=473&cid=60>

²² 31.3.20. <http://www.aljarha.net/article.php?id=473&cid=60>

COVID-19 كورونا فايروس
نصائح وإرشادات - أخبار وإحصاءات

#خليك_بالبيت

عند الرجوع إلى البيت:

- إخضع حثثك خارج البيت.
- إخضع ليابيك وضعمو في غسالة على حرارة عالية وفي أقرب وقت ممكن.
- أفرغ مشربانك في ساحة واحدة.
- إسبح بالمشيم ألعاب والصناديق.
- إغسل المنتجات قبل تخزينها.
- إسبح مقابض الأبواب وخرائن المون والثلاجة.
- إغسل يديك بالصابون جيداً.

أثناء التسوق:

- أترك هاتفك ومحفظتك في البيت أو في السيارة.
- أوقف سيارتك بعيداً عن المدخل.
- إبقى بعيداً لمسافة مترين على الأقل من أي شخص آخر.
- إسبح بالمعقم العرية أو سلة الأفراس.
- لا تأخذ إيصلاً أو فلتورة.
- ضع المشربيات في صندوق السيارة.
- إزمني في سلة المهملات الفلزات المستعملة.
- إسبح بالمعقم مقابض (سكات) السيارة.

قبل أن تذهب:

- أغلب على ورقة لائحة بالأفراس التي تذهبها لعدسة أسبوع.
- أخذ معك بعض المتداول المعقمة والفلزات العديدة يمكن التخلص منها بعد الانتهاء.
- إختر ليابياً يمكن لك غسلها في حرارة عالية.
- أخدم معك أكياس لوضع للأفراس مصنوعة من القماش.
- ضع أوراقتك الموثنية ومبلفات الإمتام، وأموالك خارج محفظتك.

كيف نقلل من مخاطر الإصابة بفيروس كورونا قبل وبعد القيام بالتسوق

إمكانية إصابة شخص بـ [COVID-19] مرتبطة بسلوكياته، كلما إلتزم بسلوكيات غسل الأيدي وأداب الشعل وتجنب مخالطة أشخاص عليهم أعراض المرض، تقل فرصة الإصابة بالمرض بعرف النظر عن العمر والحالة الصحية (منظمة الصحة العالمية)

Left to right: the virus guide; infection safety instructions

Hezbollah supporters on social media praised it for its organized and detailed plan to eradicate COVID-19. **Ibrahim al-Moussawi**, a Lebanese parliament member, wrote on his Twitter account the plan is “a source for pride for Lebanon. It inspires a degree of trust and confidence in the ability to eradicate this new disease, the big party [Hezbollah] has power and efficiency in all fields”²³. Similarly, hashtags such as “thank you Hezbollah” “we will fight and heal” were launched²⁴.

That said, Lebanese citizens opposing Hezbollah were suspicious of the plan and doubted whether Hezbollah acted out of pure motives and was genuinely interested in the well being of all Lebanese or out of narrow interests of protecting solely the Shiite. **George Hayek**, a Christian Lebanese journalist and a member of the Central Council of the Lebanese army posted on his Twitter account that the plan was meant to only serve the “Hezbollah State” and the announcement of the plan attests that Hezbollah has been acting arbitrarily without any collaboration or coordination with the government and it would best to put an end to its lies. Other Lebanese users mentioned that Hezbollah formulated its plan only because Iran wanted to strengthen its influence in Lebanon.²⁵ **Fares Said**, a former parliament member known for his opposition to Hezbollah protested the entry of disinfection teas to mixed villages flying Hezbollah banners. Per him, all municipalities must fly the Lebanese flag, especially in the time of the disease²⁶.

²³ @ibrahimmoussawi, Twitter.com. 26 Mar 2020.

²⁴ #شكرا_حزب_الله; #نقاوم_ونداوي

²⁵ @georghayek712, Twitter.com. 26 Mar 2020.

²⁶ @FaresSouaid, Twitter.com. 1 Apr 2020.

Hezbollah as the “Representative” of the Entire Lebanese People at the Time of the COVID-19 Crisis

Fighting COVID-19 enabled Hezbollah to market itself as a powerful and highly organized element capable of eradicating COVID-19, one that has the entire people of Lebanon’s well-being in its heart. On March 28th, 2020 **Nasrallah** reiterated the importance of national cooperation at this time of emergency and stressed that all the Lebanese, as well as the Palestinian and Syrian refugees, and even the Lebanese diaspora should partake in the effort to eradicate COVID-19. In his speech he made sure to express concern for the fate of the Lebanese diaspora and called upon them to return



Nasrallah demands that the Lebanese government will make every effort to repatriate the Lebanese diaspora (al-Muqawama, March 28th, 2020)

to Lebanon. He said that “no matter the reasons, the risks, the difficulties and challenges. This is their natural right [to return] to their city, their country [...]. He stressed that the government of Lebanon bears the responsibility to make all the arrangements that will enable them to repatriate. He cautioned that one shouldn’t leave the Lebanese diaspora at the mercy of the failing healthcare systems of some of the countries and expressed his concern of a security and social decline in other countries due the economic crisis caused by COVID-19 which would put the Lebanese diaspora facing danger. He mentioned that even the U.S. shows signs of collapse as is evident from the mass weapons acquisition by American citizens concerned about the future. He assessed that after the crisis a new world order would emerge, as has happened after the two world wars and the collapse of the USSR and no one knows whether the U.S. or the EU will collapse in the wake of the crisis. Therefore, Lebanon, its government and its people should show responsibility and repatriate the diaspora²⁷.

Nasrallah’s motivation to repatriate the diaspora is connected to its wishes to repatriate Hezbollah members residing in Iran. Apparently some have contracted the disease and he wanted to bring them to Lebanon to be treated by his organization.

Hezbollah leverages the Lebanese national emergency to strengthen the perception that it is an integral and inseparable of the Lebanese society and its fate is aligned with that of the entire Lebanese people. It hopes that its stepping up to fight COVID-19 would assist it with fending off criticism that it is an Iranian proxy driven by Shiite, rather than Lebanese interests. It is too soon to assess the effect of this effort on the Lebanese public opinion, however even now there are those who suspect its motives and think that this is the same Hezbollah, driven by the same narrow Shiite motives. That said, it does have an important role in the fight to eradicate COVID-19 in Lebanon and an opportunity to demonstrate the strength of its healthcare system.

²⁷ 28.3.20. <https://video.moqawama.org/details.php?cid=1&linkid=2106>

ABOUT THE ICT

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ICT is an independent think tank providing expertise in terrorism, counterterrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability and risk assessment, intelligence analysis and national security and defense policy.

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