THE IMPACT OF THE STRATEGIC LOCATION OF LEBANON ON ITS POSITION AND ROLE IN SHAPING THE REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SECURITY

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Abstract: Authors draw attention to various issues security threats in Lebanon. Regardless of the size of the country, its economic capacity, and socio-cultural achievements, in the current globalized world, the increasing importance of a particular state in the international arena is determined by its strategic location and geopolitics. Therefore, Lebanon - in spite of a very small area it covers, small number of inhabitants, and limited resources of raw materials – has been attracting attention of major political players in the world due to its geo-strategic location, including counties such as: Iran with its imperial ambitions, Syria and Israel because of the constant threat of attacks by armed Islamic groups from the area of Lebanon on Israeli territory, the United States actively interested in global security, as well as Russia aiming to strengthen its position and influence in the region. Consequently, the country, or group, that will manage to dominate Lebanon through its political and military influence, will thus possess the key to influence the security within the region, which also translates into impacting global security as a whole.

Keywords: Strategic Location, Regional Security, Global Security

1. History of Lebanon in outline
Lebanon is one of the smallest countries in Asia. It is located in South-West Asia, by the Mediterranean Sea, in the area of the broadly defined Middle East. The country covers the area of 10,450 square kilometers, and is bordered to the north and east by Syria on the stretch of 375 kilometers, and from the south - by Israel on the length of 75 kilometers.

Going back to ancient times, on the territories of the present Lebanon, we would find Phoenicia. Then, from the seventh century B.C., these lands successively passed under the authority of: Babylon, Assyria, Macedonia, and Persia, only to find themselves under the rule of the Arabs 635 years later. It was then when part of the population adopted Islam, while the others remained faithful to Christianity. The Mamluks came to power in 1250, and were replaced in 1575 by the Ottoman Turks, who ruled supreme practically until the World War I. Similarly to Syria, Lebanon was part of the Ottoman Empire. However, the events that took place between 1914–1918 also affected the affairs of the Middle East. Under the Treaty of Versailles, the area of Palestine and Jordan was awarded to the United Kingdom, while France received the area north of Palestine reaching up to Turkey, which stretched from the Mediterranean Sea up to Persia. Thus came to life the Great Syria. In 1920, in San Remo, the Council of the League of Nations approved this division, under which Syria and Lebanon came under the French protectorate. The protectorate period is the time when Syria and Lebanon were merged into a single state, although Paris soon started to treat each of these regions as an autonomous country. Both Syria and Lebanon systematically sought to
maximize their autonomy within the protectorate. In 1926, the Republic of Lebanon was formed, being granted its own constitution. Nevertheless, the country still remained in the French sphere of influence. It was not until the World War II and the occupation of Paris, that, on 8 June 1940, French delegate, who administered the mandated areas (i.e. regions under the French protectorate), declared independence of Syria and Lebanon. Finally, on 22 December 1943, France formally handed over all legislative and administrative powers to the governments of Lebanon and Syria. This was also when the so-called National Pact was drafted and signed. It constituted the religious key to filling the seats in parliament and public offices. According to this key, 55% of the seats in parliament and government offices were to be awarded to Christians, and 45% - to Muslims. This condition was the result of the 1932 census. Lebanon has been a member of the United Nations since 1945. On the initiative of Lebanon, the League of Arab States has been established. The situation in Lebanon radically changed the moment the Autonomous State of Israel was formed in 1948. As a consequence, the armies of Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Iraq entered into Israel. Despite the significant numerical superiority of the Arab coalition forces, the intervention was successfully resisted by the Israeli troops. Successively, several conflicts were erupting within Lebanon itself, including religious fights from the end of the fifties caused by pro-Western policies of the Christian government. In 1958, a civil war broke out in Lebanon, affecting the territories of Jordan and Iraq. It came to an end only after the military intervention of the United States.

By the end of the sixties, exactly in 1967, the Israeli troops engaged in systematic attacks on Lebanese territory. The reason for this was the fact that Lebanon had granted refuge to the militants of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which often conducted attacks on territories occupied by Israel from the area of south Lebanon. Mutual military action led to the escalation of tensions and bloody events. The conflict was being additionally exacerbated by the actions of other paramilitary troops, including the Lebanese Phalange, Lebanese Resistance Movement, and PLO. The new threat was, conceived by Iranian Islamists, Hezbollah - a fierce enemy of Israel. The following years proved to be a recurring scenario of fights provoked by Hezbollah and PLO’s attacks on Israel. Undoubtedly, the increased tension in Lebanon was due to Iran, which - by supporting and funding Hezbollah - wanted to consolidate its influence in the region. The pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian Hezbollah forces often provoked and incited armed conflicts in Lebanon in order to consolidate their position and thereby weaken the influence of the Western countries, mainly the United States. Unrest and tensions in Lebanon have yet to find their positive outcome.

2. The importance of Lebanon’s strategic location for regional security

In the region of the Levant, namely the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea - which includes the Middle East countries such as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the Autonomous State of Palestine - it is primarily Lebanon, lying in the very center that constitutes a strategic political and military point for many countries in this region. Due to its geostategic location, Lebanon is an extremely important area from the standpoint of the policy pursued by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which for many years has been trying to expand its Islamic ideology throughout the Middle East. Iran believes that its borderline position between the Near and Middle East, as well as its control over the Gulf region and possession of one of the largest oil and gas resources, predisposes it to play the role of a regional power.

The Islamic Revolution that took place in that country in 1979 gave rise to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The revolution was inspired by the Shiites actively supporting all
ideological movements, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the revolution and the effective seizure of power by Khomeini. Meanwhile, internal fights in Lebanon continued, resembling the features of a civil war. Therefore, the Iranian Shiites sent between 1981–1982 about one thousand officers and instructors, the so-called Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to Lebanon. Their task was to set up a network of training camps for Lebanese Shiites. The training, next to ideological indoctrination, was aimed at preparing participants to conduct sabotage and terrorist operations. It was not long until the world saw first results of these actions in the form of dozens of Shiite extremist organizations that had sprung to life. Some of them ceased operations after a few months, while others have been absorbed by the Shiite organization of "Hezbollah", also called the "Party of God" (literally “Party of Allah”). The main goal of Hezbollah was, and still is, to create a state of fundamentalist Islamic foundations, where civil power would be completely subordinated to the authority of orthodox Islamic clerics. Another goal of Hezbollah is to destroy the state of Israel, and significantly reduce the influence of the Western countries in the Middle East, mainly the United States. Hezbollah has, in fact, become the hinterland of Iran's politics. It developed its extremist activities through participation in a number of attacks, including that on the American embassy in Beirut in 1983, with 63 casualties. It then attacked the barracks of international forces, where French and American soldiers were stationed. This terrorist attack claimed the lives of 299 soldiers, including 241 Americans.

Notwithstanding the terrorist activities, Hezbollah was also frequently present on the Israeli-Lebanese frontier, showering the area with rockets. This caused the reaction of the Israeli army which often encroached on the territory of south Lebanon.

Lebanon has therefore become the epicenter of fights between the intervening Israeli army, and the PLO and Hezbollah operating on its territories. This already complex situation was further complicated by the presence of the Syrian army, which in 1976 officially crossed Lebanese borders in defense of its alleged "integrity". All the above factors greatly contributed to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war which lasted, intermittently, until the end of the eighties. Lebanon also became the area of UN peacekeepers’ intervention, who sent there their quotas under the United Nations Interim Force called UNIFIL. Some positive signals indicating the end of the war came with the Israeli army retreating from Lebanon in 1985. The next step leading to normalization was the fact of withdrawing by Lebanon from the agreement with J. Arafat, under which the PLO militias could conduct military operations against Israel on Lebanese territories. Ultimately, the PLO left Lebanon. The last force in Lebanon, apart from the remaining branches of Hezbollah, was Syria which pursued its policy of building the "Greater Syria". The Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination was the agreement signed between Syria and Lebanon in 1991, aiming to solve the problem of Syrian presence in Lebanon. However, not only did it not provide any solution, it also led to the establishment of the Syrian protectorate of Lebanon.

Strengthening of the position of Syria in Lebanon is also a period of strengthening the position of Hezbollah, who moved its terrorist activity outside Lebanon, for instance to Argentina, where in 1992 and 1994 took place attacks on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, as well as the Jewish Center, where killed were more than a hundred people. Hezbollah in Lebanon has developed a number of social, charity and business activities. The organization continues to receive financial assistance from both Iran and Syria – so far, it is said to amount to five billion dollars. This amount includes funds for the organization and delivery of equipment, also weapons. The money is also spent on wide-scale propaganda within the Lebanese community. This has brought about tangible results in the form of gaining by Hezbollah a strong political position in
Lebanon. When the Israeli army retreated in 2000 from a buffer zone in south Lebanon, Hezbollah immediately overtook the area by creating the state within a state. The withdrawal of the Israeli army contributed to further popularity of this extremist organization. In elections of 2005, Hezbollah obtained 11% of seats in the Lebanese parliament. In effect, Hezbollah has become an actual political party, without which it would be difficult to create stable governments.

On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah attacked Israeli territories shelling settlements and military bases along the Lebanese border. This resulted in a serious military conflict between Israel and Hezbollah troops, which lasted over a month. This situation shows how a small terrorist organization, established and supported by Iran, has managed to evolve into a significant political and military power. One could, for example, refer to the data showing that during the conflict with Israel, Hezbollah was in possession of fourteen thousand Katyusha missiles.

Regardless of the strengthening of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria continued to protect the country, shaping its foreign policy in order to strengthen the position of Lebanon in the region of the Levant. Syria's influence in Lebanon was disrupted when, on 14 February 2005, Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, was killed in a bomb attack. The bombing was linked to Syrian agents, who thereby wanted to weaken the pro-Western government led by Hariri. Hezbollah seized the moment and fueled sentiments in society by organizing huge demonstrations in which, at their peak, the estimated number of one million participants was involved. The aftermath was the withdrawal of the Syrian troops after thirty years of their presence in Lebanon.

When outlining the situation that prevails in Lebanon, one should clearly state that the country's geostrategic position is unquestionably used by other countries, like Iran and Syria, to pursuing anti-Israeli policies. Lebanon has been turned into a battlefield where the enemy is the Israeli army. The country has also become a very safe area for the preparation of operations by various terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah. Earlier, Lebanese territory was also used by the PLO. All this is currently taking place without the consent of the Lebanese government who simply cannot control the presence of these organizations especially that Hezbollah has transformed into an actual political party in Lebanon. Due to this, it can freely strengthen the role of Iran in the region, and promote its fundamentalist views. Therefore, one cannot conclude that Lebanon in any way shapes security in the region of the Levant directly, through its own policy. One can, however, say that Lebanon for decades has been the cause of destabilization in the Middle East. Naturally, it is not to say that the country itself has a destructive effect on the region. It is simply not an independent state, neither politically or militarily. It is used instrumentally by Islamic forces, mainly by Iran, whose goal is to eliminate Israel, and establish itself as a leader at the regional level (which it, de facto, is because of the policy it pursues), and a significant player in global politics – the position that, too, does not seem to be out of its reach at all.

3. The effects of the struggle for political and military domination in Lebanon between Syria, Iran, Israel and other Arab countries, and its implications for global security

By placing their interests in Lebanon, each country of the Middle East set itself to strengthen its position and sphere of influence within the region. Undoubtedly, Iran has proved to be the most effective of all of them, with its activities having led to the formation of a very strong political and military base in Lebanon, namely Hezbollah. Through its political and social activities, Hezbollah has grown to be a major political and military force in Lebanon. At the same time, operations of this group became the
perfect foothold for Iran to further expand its activities with regard to policy and development of security strategy. It also enables Iran to continue the pursuit of its destabilizing policy in the region, especially around Israel. One should also mention the enormous commitment of the United States aiming to stabilize the political situation in the Middle East, with particular attention to eroding the position of Iran by neutralizing Syria, and thereby also Hezbollah, as Iran’s ally. The negotiations on the issue between Washington and Damascus began in 2006, and were hoped to convince the Syrian authorities to join the anti-Iranian bloc, together with Saudi Arabia and the United States. The negotiations lasted until 2011, but did not produce the expected results. The interest in Lebanon and political developments on its territory do not involve only countries of the region, but also major international powers, with the United States at the forefront. One should not forget the growing ambitions of the Russian Federation to strengthen its influence in the Middle East. Russia’s influence in Libya ended with the overthrow of Gaddafi. Which is why, in the eyes of Russian strategists, the area of Syria took on special significance, with Russia now trying to turn Syria into a strategic partner in the region of the Mediterranean. Russia needs Syria as an ally in order to be able to expand its network of bases for the military fleet. Modernization and expansion of the base in the Syrian port of Tartus is planned, where naval units of the USSR, and then Russia, have docked ceaselessly since 1971. These plans are subject to change with the fall of the Syrian government and the implementation of democratic reforms in Syria. Such scenario can naturally reverse Syria’s political partisanship for Iran in favor of the pro-Western policies. The complicated situation in the Middle East, increasingly more tense situation in Lebanon (inspired by the actions of Hezbollah), Iran's attempts to dominate the political scene of the Levant, and the development of a nuclear program by Iran make it impossible to consider the area of the Middle East, with its center in Lebanon, as stable or safe, both from the regional and global perspective. Turmoil in the Middle East, real threat of Israel being attacked by Iran, destabilized political and military scene in Lebanon are all a permanent part of the increased threat to security at the regional and global level.

4. Conclusion
Concluding the reflections on Lebanon’s impact on regional and global security, it should be noted that this small country - in relation to the bigger and much more influential countries surrounding it, with huge political and military potential – remains, inexplicably, the center of many world powers’ activities, as well as most states in the region. The biggest influence in Lebanon has been gained by Iran, where it has managed to establish its ideological base, and now also political and military one. Iran’s ideological and military blade, Hezbollah, has been destabilizing the region from within Lebanon since 1979, repeatedly provoking armed incidents with Israel. By implementing Iran’s policy, Hezbollah sometimes provoke incidents that could possibly lead to the outbreak of conflict between the parties involved in the political turmoil in the Middle East. This happens at times most favorable to Iran, e.g. when international organizations are demanding transparency from Iran with regard to its nuclear program. Through skillful and sustained gameplay in the Middle East, Iran has managed to involve in the conflict such countries as the United States, Russia, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, making the Levant a region with a low level of security. It is therefore not at all surprising that it is perceived as a constant, potential inflammatory focus for possible conflicts, even on a global scale.
References


