



How Popular Is Iran in Lebanon?

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran's hard power in Lebanon is well-known. At its beck and call is the Hezbollah militia, the powerful military force through which it largely controls the Lebanese state. Its soft power, however, is limited to Lebanon's Shiites, and even among them it is hardly overwhelming.

Iran's hard power in Lebanon is substantial. It has the Hezbollah militia at its disposal – the most powerful military force in the state – and probably the Lebanese army as well.

This can be deduced from the behavior of the Lebanese army, which has on countless occasions used heavy-handed methods, indeed brutality, against Sunni fundamentalist groups of Lebanese, Palestinian, or Syrian origin. This sharply contrasts with its deep reluctance to interfere when Hezbollah infringes Security Council Resolution 1701, which forbids any armed presence other than the Lebanese army or UNIFIL south of the Litani River.

The army's obeisance to Hezbollah reached its zenith in May 2008, when the organization's fighters fanned out over Beirut and set siege to the Lebanese government complex, the Grand Serail, to induce the cabinet to make legislative changes that would allow Hezbollah veto powers over government decisions. The army stayed away from the fighting.

This begs the question: Is Tehran's hold over Lebanon a function of brute power alone, or does it wield soft power there as well?

Soft power can be gauged in a number of ways. Media sites are a good place to start.

Hezbollah possesses two major media sites in Lebanon – *al-Manar*, the organization's official site; and *al-Mayadeen*, which does not openly identify with Hezbollah but toes the party line.

The Iranian connection is clearly visible in both of them. Unlike all the other major media sites in Lebanon, they cover Iranian figures, principally the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Ayatollah Khomeini's successor). To a lesser extent, they promote religious themes like the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* (in Persian, *vilayeti faqih*) – the obligation that government actions and parliamentary legislation come under review of religious authorities and, most importantly, the Supreme Leader – instituted by Khomeini as the Islamic Republic's organizing principle.

In a 2014 study by a leading Lebanese bank of twenty of the largest websites according to searches or listeners, neither of Hezbollah's two media sites makes it onto the list of Lebanon's top twenty. This is striking, as Shiites comprise anywhere between 20% and 40% of the population. If these stations were popular among Shiites, they would have cracked the top twenty.

Searching lists of top singers based on the frequency of songs aired by media sites yields much the same result. Iranian singers are not aired on Lebanese media, primarily because of language (there is little appetite for music sung in Farsi; the overwhelming majority of songs aired are in Arabic, followed by English and French). Profiles of searched singers suggest a large percentage of Lebanese Sunnis and Christians and a relative dearth of Shiites.

Iran's film industry, even under the ayatollahs, can boast a significant number of films that have won awards in prestigious film festivals in the West (though rarely has such success been replicated at the box office). Scrutiny of a couple of weeks of movie ads in Lebanon suggests that few Lebanese allow the achievements of Iran's movie industry to dictate their choice of films. In the Lebanese movie scene, the US seems to have a near monopoly on soft power, as the cinemas screen film after film from Hollywood.

Serials and telenovelas are as popular a genre in Lebanon as they are the world over. Again, the Iranian versions have zero visibility despite a cosmopolitan taste among the population for such fare produced in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and of course the US and Europe. Serials from the last three are almost inevitably dubbed.

The Lebanese then are neither parochial nor particularly discriminating; they simply do not choose to watch dubbed Iranian productions. Much of this has to do with the low budgets of Iranian productions and the limited technology they employ (in part as a result of sanctions imposed on the import of such technology).

Since there is every reason to believe the viewers include Shiites, it appears that Lebanese Shiites are no more partial to Iranian productions than are their fellow Lebanese citizens.

In the “harder” aspects of soft power, such as ideology and identity, Iranian soft power is more visible.

As for Tehran’s ideological influence, searches in Lebanon for “Ayatollah Khomeini” in Arabic clearly show a following, but it is correlated to the Shiite population. The more predominantly Shiite the district – Nabatiyya in the south, or the southern portion of the Beka Valley in the east – the higher the proportion of searches for the leader of the Iranian revolution. Significantly, the district that is the most predominantly Sunni, Tripoli, in the northwest, yields hardly any searches.

Searches for other Iranian leaders, such as Ali Khamenei, the present Supreme Leader and arguably the most powerful figure in Iran, yield even more skewed results – high interest in predominantly Shiite districts and almost no interest at all in predominantly Sunni and Christian areas.

This should hardly be surprising in a Middle East where old communities still stick to themselves and where more cosmopolitan tastes tend to be absorbed into the confessional tapestry of society rather than replace it.

The Islamic Republic of Iran originally hoped that a focus on the downtrodden and then on Islam rather than Shiism would hide its imperialist urges.

It is now being rebuffed by a more aggressive Saudi-led counter-offensive, but even its limited soft power in Lebanon demonstrates that imperialism no longer pays.

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