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Is Iran's Power Slipping?

Massive protests in Iraq and Lebanon seek to nullify 40 years of Iranian work. Will they succeed? Bible prophecy answers.

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JERUSALEM

Iraq and Lebanon are very different countries, but in recent months they have experienced similar turmoil: The streets are swarming with protesters, and for similar reasons.

Many Iraqis and Lebanese recognize a strong force interfering in their politics, and they are reacting against it.

That force is Iran.

These protests worry Iran's leaders. If the governments of Iraq and Lebanon succumb to the will of the people, its control over these nations will be finished. So Iran is doing all it can to prevent the people's demands from being met.

These protests reveal a basic tension between pro-Iran governments and anti-Iran segments of the populace. What will happen? Will these two countries remain in Iran's camp, or will the protesters prevail? Bible prophecy answers.

Lebanon

Protests began in Lebanon on Oct. 17, 2019. Since 2015, the Lebanese have endured daily water and power cuts, sewage crises and trash in the streets as the government has proved unable to serve its people's basic needs. In October, the announcement of new taxes on the use of online calling programs such as WhatsApp and Telegram tipped the nation over the edge. If you have lived in the Middle East, you know you can't touch people's WhatsApp.

Small demonstrations quickly escalated to Lebanon's largest protests in decades. Universities and schools closed. Banks limited the amount people could withdraw. Normal life in Lebanon skidded to a halt. Within a week, over a million Lebanese, nearly a quarter of the population, were on the streets demanding fundamental change.

As the people demanded resignations of the same leaders who have ruled since the end of the civil war in 1990 *Ƙilon yanni Ƙilon* ("all of them means all of them") became their mantra. Back then, a sectarian democracy was set up to account for Lebanon's diverse religious population. Former warlords, generals and tribal leaders who claimed leadership over the Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and Druze sects became political leaders representing these varying factions.

These leaders and their offspring have ruled ever since, and the protesters view them as corrupt, mafia-like political families that enrich themselves and preserve their power rather than serving the people. The revolutionaries demand that all these familiar leaders vacate and let the people set up a government of technocrats, so-called experts without sectarian affiliation.

Understandably, the political class has different views. The protests have forced the resignation of Prime Minister Saud Hariri, but Christian President Michel Aoun, who is aligned with the powerful Hezbollah terrorist group, is staying put. In a November 12 interview, he said that if demonstrators "see no decent people in this state, then let them emigrate."

Hala Nasreddine was one of thousands who marched outside the president's palace after those remarks. "His words were offensive; it was an insult. It just fueled everyone, made everyone very angry," she told Al Jazeera. "If anyone should leave this country, it should be him and his cronies."

Aoun won't go easily. Not only is he motivated to preserve his power, but he has support from Iran. Iran's proxy, the Shiite group Hezbollah, is the kingmaker in the current Lebanese Parliament and wants to preserve *its* power.

What It Means for Hezbollah

After Lebanon's civil war, the only militia allowed to keep its weapons was Hezbollah, which is based mainly in southern Lebanon. The rationale was that Hezbollah needed to protect Lebanon from a possible invasion by Israel. In the years since, Hezbollah has engaged in deadly exchanges with Israel, but it has also used its position to conquer political rivals. In the latest election in 2018, Hezbollah won enough seats and cabinet posts to make it the nation's de facto political leader.

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Now, Hezbollah won't allow protesters to nullify its years of hard work. Yet the longer the government fails to serve people's basic needs and refuses to comply with their demands, the more Hezbollah exposes itself to criticism.

Surprisingly, many Shiites and even some Hezbollah supporters are beginning to voice disdain for their own leaders. "[F]or the first time since Hezbollah was formed in the 1980s, Lebanese Shiites are turning against it," wrote Hanin Ghaddar for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "In Nabatieh, the group's heartland in the south of Lebanon, Shiite protesters even burned the offices of Hezbollah leaders" (Oct. 22, 2019).

One Hezbollah fighter who returned from fighting in Syria told the *Christian Science Monitor* he was tired of being underpaid while Hezbollah's elite still live luxuriously. "The most important thing is, if a person cannot feed and support his family, what is he doing with Hezbollah? ... And they [leaders] drive Range Rovers, very rich, don't care about anybody. It's a big problem. People can't take it anymore" (Nov. 12, 2019).

Hezbollah seems left with no good solutions. If it tries to physically force the protesters off the streets, the people will resist. "If Hezbollah itself attempts to intimidate the protesters and possibly moves into areas of non-Shiite religious sects to do so, this would almost certainly lead to civil war," wrote *Diwan* editor Michael Young (Nov. 13, 2019).

The United States, the United Kingdom and others consider both the political and military wings of Hezbollah as terrorist entities. Reporting indicates that the U.S. and others will offer a bailout package for Lebanon conditioned on Hezbollah's removal from government. If Hezbollah and other leaders try a compromise with the protesters that preserves their own power, and the nation is denied that aid money, the people will be back out on the streets.

It seems Lebanon's fate likely rests on Hezbollah's next move. But it is hard to see how Hezbollah can come out on top.

Iraq

Iraqis started demonstrating in the streets against the government on Oct. 1, 2019. Their issues were similar to Lebanon's: an enduring housing shortage, an unstable power supply, high unemployment and political corruption. But that's not all they were protesting.

Iraqis were also upset over the ouster of a popular general, Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, who was instrumental in the fight against the Islamic State. According to Iraq analyst Johnathan Spyer, Saadi was viewed as an Iraqi nationalist, independent of Iran. Iraqi citizens view his firing as a blatant move by Iranian-linked Popular Mobilization Units to eliminate a rival. In other words, it symbolized the power that Iranian-backed groups wield inside Iraq.

Anger against Iran had already been rising. Since the removal of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has steadily gained political power in Iraq. Through diplomacy and especially through the militias of the Popular Mobilization Units, it has infiltrated Iraq's military, parliament and top cabinet positions, and even influenced the selection of its current prime minister.

According to a recent *New York Times* report, Iran-linked parties now hold at least five major ministries, including the lucrative Interior Ministry, which it can use to reward and empower other pro-Iran elements in Iraqi society. "That gives them access to thousands of patronage jobs, contracts and grants, and breeds the corruption that the protesters are condemning," wrote Alissa Rubin (*New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2019).

Many Iraqis have simply grown weary of the combination of poor quality of life and deepening Iranian infiltration.

The day after the protests began, Iran reportedly sent Qassem Suleimani, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, to Iraq. As a direct emissary of the supreme leader in Tehran, Suleimani brought a message to the government in Baghdad: Use any means necessary to stop the protests. Within a week, clashes between protesters and the Iraqi government left more than 100 dead. Reuters later reported that snipers belonging to Iran-backed militias were deployed on rooftops surrounding the protesters with orders to shoot to kill.

Protests in Iraq continue to swell despite arrests and violence, leading to hundreds killed and thousands wounded. Ahmad Al-Rubaye/AFP/Getty Images

Rather than scare people off the streets, this crackdown galvanized even more people to protest. Many were convicted that Iran was behind the massacre. The sentiment that increasingly dominated the protests was resentment toward Iran. Protesters burned pictures of Suleimani and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Many chanted, "Iraq is free; Iran, get out!"

Soon Baghdad was flooded with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and tens of thousands filled other major cities. Iraqis stormed the Iranian consulate in the Shiite holy city of Karbala, Iraq, scaling the compound's concrete barriers and lobbing stones and firebombs. Outside, a mob chanted, "Iran, get out; get out from Iraq," as they burned Iranian flags and raised the Iraqi flag. Similar protests filled the southern port city of Basra, where Iraqis shouted, "Stop the Persian occupation of Arab Iraq."

Suleimani returned to Baghdad on October 31 and demanded that the government use more force. "We in Iran know how to deal with protests," he told Iraqi officials, according to *Haaretz*. "This happened in Iran, and we got it under control." There is evidence that Suleimani's Quds Force may already be operating inside Iraq to lead the crackdown.

By mid-November, more than 300 protesters had been killed. Iraq's government is standing firm.

What the Future Holds

The protests in Iraq and Lebanon have similar motives. In both nations, intense public distrust of leadership and poor living conditions have embittered people against Iran's powerful influence. As Spyer wrote, "In both the Lebanese and Iraqi situations, once the decorations, fictions and formalities are stripped away, the protesters are faced with an unelected, armed, utterly ruthless political-military structure which is the final decider and wielder of power in the country. This structure, in turn, is controlled from Iran" (*Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 31, 2019).

Yet the response from Iran and its proxies in these two nations could not be more different. In Lebanon, Hezbollah has been careful not to forcefully shut down the protest, at least not yet. In Iraq, Iran authorized lethal force on day two.

The difference reveals the contrast between the great power Iran holds in Iraq versus its more fragile position within Lebanon.

Iran has worked for 40 years to subdue Iraq, and has almost succeeded. Protests show that Iraqis have awakened to the fact that their nation is not their own.

Iran shares a thousand-mile border with Iraq, and its influence there enables it to project power through the region. Losing Iraq would significantly reduce Iranian power. "If [the protest] is not stopped quickly, it could undermine Iran's most important base of control in the Middle East," wrote Zvi Bar'el for *Haaretz* on November 4. Iran is worried that protests in Iraq could spill over into Iran itself and threaten the regime there. Iran also cares about the \$12 billion in trade it shares with Iraq each year. This is essential to help Iran mitigate the effect that United States sanctions are having on the Iranian economy. As Bar'el added, Iran's ability to control Iraq "establishes Iran's status as a regional superpower."

Iran has worked for 40 years to finally subdue Iraq, and it has almost succeeded. The mass protests show that Iraqis have awakened to the fact that their nation is not their own.

The boldness with which Qassem Suleimani flies into Baghdad to tell the government what to do shows how Iran's strategic ambitions will overtake Iraq's national aspirations. Iran cannot afford to lose Iraq, and it will stop at nothing to preserve its hold there, even if it requires sending in its forces.

In Lebanon, there is still hope that the shackles of Iranian domination can be cast off. While Iran's control of Hezbollah is total, the Shiites form a minority in Lebanon, unlike in Iraq. Iran will not give up its control in Lebanon easily, but if unrest both there and in Iraq forces Iran to choose which of the two to defend, it will choose Iraq. It is also possible that the international community will provide full support, even military help, to rid Lebanon of Hezbollah.

Astoundingly, a Lebanon free from Iranian influence, and an Iraq that is controlled by it, were forecast long ago.

Based on biblical prophecy, *Trumpet* editor in chief Gerald Flurry has made two relevant forecasts for more than 20 years: 1) Iraq will fall to Iran; and 2) Lebanon will separate from Iran. He bases these forecasts on two passages in Scripture that prophesy of the formation of two Middle Eastern alliances in what the Bible calls "the time of the end."

The first, found in Psalm 83, details an alliance of nations that includes "Gebal" (another name for Byblos, located in modern Lebanon) and the "inhabitants of Tyre" (located in southern Lebanon). For the most part, the current-day Lebanese are descendants of their ancient biblical counterparts. "Gebal" and the "inhabitants of Tyre" are the Lebanese today. Other nations in this Psalm 83 alliance are Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

This alliance of moderate Middle Eastern nations is largely an *anti-Iranian* alliance. This indicates Lebanon will flip from a proxy of Iran to an adversary. Such a dramatic shift probably could not happen if Hezbollah were to maintain its power in Lebanon. We can deduce that Hezbollah's power will be significantly reduced or even eliminated somehow. Given how well

armed the group is, this may well take a civil war.

The second prophecy is found in Daniel 11:40, which discusses a “king of the south” rising “at the time of the end.” This power possesses enough strength to make a provocative push at “the king of the north,” prophetic terminology for a German-led European superpower. In 1993, Mr. Flurry identified the king of the south as radical Islam, led by Iran, and events have powerfully vindicated this analysis.

At the time, Mr. Flurry warned explicitly that Iran would eventually dominate Iraq. In his December 1994 article “Is Iraq About to Fall to Iran?” he wrote: “The most powerful [Islamic] country in the Middle East is *Iran*. Can you imagine the power they would have if they gained control of Iraq, the second-largest oil-producing country in the world? If so, there seems to be little doubt that Iran would lead the king of the south (Daniel 11:40).”

Ten years later, right after America invaded Iraq, Mr. Flurry wrote, “It may seem shocking, given the U.S. presence in the region right now, but prophecy indicates that, in pursuit of its goal, Iran will probably TAKE OVER IRAQ.”

Now we are witnessing the complete fulfillment of this forecast as Iran reaches the point of dictating terms to Iraq.

These two prophecies found in Psalm 83 and Daniel 11 form the bedrock of our understanding of the future dealings of Middle Eastern nations and the foundation of our Middle Eastern analysis.

More than that, seeing how quickly these alliances are coming together is a reminder of the critically important times we live in. These prophecies are harbingers of the most decisive prophetic event: the return of Jesus Christ.

As Daniel 12:9 says, God intended these prophecies to be “sealed till the time of the end.” The fact that these prophecies have been unsealed shows that we are in the end time. But now they are more than just unsealed: The fact that they are being *fulfilled* shows that we are moving closer to their spectacular conclusion.

When Christ does come, He will usher in a time of effective government underpinned by God’s law. Self-serving, corrupt leaders will be history. And protest movements like those in Lebanon and Iraq will have no reason to take to the streets ever again.