

Iran builds a new road to aid Lebanese allies

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Under the cover of an aid project, Iran is consolidating Shia control over southern Lebanon by building a large mountain road that critics believe is a supply route for Hizbollah.

While Iran claims the road is nothing but a reconstruction project after the 2006 war with Israel, some observers believe it is a key component of the militant group's rearmament programme.

Iranian money is also creating two new Shia villages to protect the road at the expense of the country's non-Shia communities, including the Druze and Sunni Muslims.

Together, the road and the villages now threaten to destroy the delicate balance between the various ethnic groups in the aftermath of Lebanon's 15-year civil war.

"The Iranians are playing with fire," said Simon Karam, a lawyer and former ambassador to Washington, who comes from the local Christian town of Jezzine.

"Those of us who remember the civil war had hoped that the rivalry between the different groups was part of our past but it looks very much as if Iran is making it part of our future."

Work on the new road began last Easter and progress has been swift, with local contractors being paid at least twice the going rate. Where once there was a narrow track, there is now a asphalt highway protected by high retaining walls. "It is a great road," Khodor Kamaledine, a local driver, said with obvious pride. "Just look at the wall - that costs hundreds of dollars per metre and it goes on for kilometres." When finished, it will connect the predominantly Shia south with the Shia communities of the western and northern Bekaa valley.

During the 2006 war, the lack of good supply lines meant that Hizbollah struggled to move men and arms down from the Bekaa. But in the event of another war, there will now be a clear route - presently lined with banners announcing that it has been paid for by the "Iranian Contributory Organisation for Reconstructing Lebanon".

The new road did receive a licence from the central Lebanese government in Beirut, but only after criticism from local community leaders that it had been started without any consultation.

A local Druze leader said the creation of the two villages posed a threat to his community as they divide existing settlements. "There is nothing wrong with Iran donating money to Lebanon, especially after a war when much work needs to be done," he said. "But that money should be for the government to spend on what it decides is important."

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