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Lebanon

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SUMMARY

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Carla E. Humud
Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

Lebanon

Since having its boundaries drawn by France after the First World War, Lebanon has struggled to define its national identity. Its population then included Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shi'a Muslim communities of roughly comparable size, and with competing visions for the country. Seeking to avoid sectarian conflict, Lebanese leaders created a confessional system that allocated power among the country's religious sects according to their percentage of the population. Since then, Lebanon's demographics and political dynamics have shifted, exacerbating tension among groups. Sectarian divisions have stoked violence, such as during the 1975-1990 civil war, as well as political gridlock on issues that require dividing power, such as government formation.

These dynamics are intensified by external actors—including Syria and Iran—that maintain influence in Lebanon by backing Hezbollah and its political allies. Other states, such as Saudi Arabia, have backed Sunni communities as part of a broader effort to curtail Iran's regional influence. The United States has sought to bolster forces that could serve as a counterweight to Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon, providing more than $2 billion in military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) since 2006, with the aim of creating a national force strong enough to counter nonstate actors like Hezbollah and secure the country's borders against extremist groups operating in neighboring Syria, including those affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Hezbollah, an armed group, political party, and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, plays a major role in Lebanon's relationships with its two neighbors: Syria and Israel. Despite Lebanon's official policy of disassociation from regional conflicts, Hezbollah forces have fought in Syria since 2013 to preserve the government of Syrian president Bashar al Asad, and have sporadically clashed with Israeli forces along Lebanon's southern border. Hezbollah also plays an influential role in Lebanon's domestic politics; the group is a key member of the March 8 political bloc that holds a majority in parliament and in successive Lebanese governments. The question of how best to marginalize Hezbollah without provoking civil conflict among Lebanese sectarian political forces has remained a key challenge for U.S. policymakers.

Humanitarian Crisis. As of 2021 there were roughly 855,000 Syrian refugees registered with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon, in addition to an existing population of nearly 175,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. Lebanon (a country of roughly 4.3 million citizens in 2010) has the highest per capita refugee population in the world, with refugees constituting an estimated 21.8% of the total population. The refugee influx has strained Lebanon's public services and host communities, and some government officials describe refugees as a threat to the country's security. The United States has provided more than $2.7 billion in humanitarian assistance in Lebanon since FY2012.

Protests, Political Upheaval. In 2019, a large scale protest movement broke out throughout Lebanon, with protestors from across the political spectrum and from all sectarian communities demanding political and economic reform, leading to the resignation of the government led by Saad Hariri. A new government led by Prime Minister Hassan Diab lasted less than eight months, resigning after a massive August 2020 explosion at the port of Beirut. In October 20204, President Aoun reappointed Hariri as prime minister. To date, Hariri has been unable to overcome political rivalries and form a government. Former Prime Minister Diab and his cabinet continue to serve in a caretaker capacity with limited authorities.

Economic Crisis. Lebanon faces what arguably is the worst economic crisis in its history—stemming from a confluence of debt, fiscal, banking, and currency crises. The World Bank has been critical of Lebanon's policy response, stating that, "policy inaction is sowing the seeds of an economic and social catastrophe for Lebanon." Analysts have warned that further economic deterioration could trigger a security breakdown.

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Historical Background

Prior to World War I, the territories comprising modern-day Lebanon were governed as separate administrative regions of the Ottoman Empire. After the war ended and the Ottoman Empire collapsed, Britain and France divided the empire's Arab provinces into zones of influence under the terms of the 1916 Sykes Picot agreement. The area constituting modern-day Lebanon was granted to France, and in 1920, French authorities announced the creation of the state of Greater Lebanon.[1] To form this new entity, French authorities combined the Maronite Christian enclave of Mount Lebanon—semiautonomous under Ottoman rule—with the coastal cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, and Tyre and their surrounding districts. These latter districts were (with the exception of Beirut) primarily Muslim and had been administered by the Ottomans as part of the *vilayet* (province) of Syria.

Figure 1. Lebanon at a Glance

Population: 5,261,372 (2021 est.)

Religion: Muslim 61% (30.6% Sunni, 30.5% Shi'a), Christian 33.7%, Druze 5.2%, relatively small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons. Note: 18 religious sects recognized

Land: (*Area*) 10,400 sq km, about one-third the size of Maryland; (*Borders*) Israel, 81 km; Syria, 403 km

GDP: (PPP, growth rate, per capita) $99.7 billion (2019 est.), 1.5% (2017 est.) $14,552 (2019 est.)

Budget: (spending, deficit, 2017 est.) $15.38 billion, -6.9% of GDP

Public Debt: (2017 est.) 146.8% of GDP

Sources: Created by CRS using ESRI, Google Maps, and Good Shepherd Engineering and Computing. CIA, *The World Factbook* data, March 3, 2021.

[1] In 1923, the League of Nations formalized French mandate authority over the territory constituting present-day Lebanon and Syria.

These administrative divisions created the boundaries of the modern Lebanese state; historians note that "Lebanon, in the frontiers defined on 1 September 1920, had never existed before in history."[2] The new Muslim residents of Greater Lebanon—many with long-established economic links to the Syrian interior—opposed the move, and some called for integration with Syria as part of a broader postwar Arab nationalist movement. Meanwhile, many Maronite Christians—some of whom also self-identified as ethnically distinct from their Arab neighbors—sought a Christian state under French protection. The resulting debate over Lebanese identity would shape the new country's politics for decades to come.

Independence. In 1943, Lebanon gained independence from France. Lebanese leaders agreed to an informal National Pact, in which each of the country's officially recognized religious groups were to be represented in government in direct relation to their share of the population, based on the 1932 census. The presidency was to be reserved for a Maronite Christian (the largest single denomination at that time), the prime minister post for a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament for a Shi'a. Lebanon has not held a census since 1932, amid fears (largely among Christians) that any demographic changes revealed by a new census—such as a Christian population that was no longer the majority—would upset the political status quo.[3]

Civil War. In the decades that followed independence, Lebanon's sectarian balance remained a point of friction between communities. Christian dominance in Lebanon was challenged by a number of events, including the influx of (primarily Sunni Muslim) Palestinian refugees as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the mobilization of Lebanon's Shi'a Muslim community—which had been politically and economically marginalized. These and other factors would lead the country into a civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990 and killed an estimated 150,000 people. While the war pitted sectarian communities against one another, there was also significant fighting within communities.

Foreign Intervention. The civil war drew in a number of external actors, including Syria, Israel, Iran, and the United States. Syrian military forces intervened in the conflict in 1976, and remained in Lebanon for another 29 years. Israel sent military forces into Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, and conducted several subsequent airstrikes. In 1978, the U.N. Security Council established the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to supervise the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, which was not complete until 2000.[4] In the early 1980s, an emerging militant group that would become Hezbollah, backed by Iran, began to contest Israel's military presence in heavily Shi'a southern Lebanon. The United States deployed forces to Lebanon in 1982 as part of a multinational peacekeeping force, but withdrew its forces after the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, which killed 241 U.S. personnel.

Taif Accords. In 1989, the parties signed the Taif Accords, beginning a process that would bring the war to a close the following year. The agreement adjusted and formalized Lebanon's

[2] Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 75.

[3] Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research firm, estimates that Lebanon's population is 67.6% Muslim (31.9% Sunni, 31% Shi'a) and 32.4% Christian (with Maronite Catholics being the largest Christian group, followed by Greek Orthodox). Druze are estimated to comprise 4.5% of the population. See U.S. Department of State, "Lebanon," *International Religious Freedom Report for 2019*. The 1932 census found that Christians comprised 58% of the population; some studies argue that the rules that determined who could be counted in the census were designed to produce a Christian majority. See Rania Maktabi, "The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who are the Lebanese?" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1999.

See also, Amos Barshad, "The World's Most Dangerous Census," *The Nation*, October 17, 2019; "Lebanon: Census and sensibility," *The Economist*, November 5, 2016.

[4] UNIFIL forces remain deployed in southern Lebanon, comprising 10,596 troops drawn from 45 countries.

confessional system (see "Politics," below), further entrenching what arguably was an unstable power dynamic between different sectarian groups at the national level. The political rifts created by this system allowed Syria to present itself as the arbiter between rivals, and pursue its own interests inside Lebanon in the wake of the war. The participation of Syrian troops in Operation Desert Storm to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, as well as Syria's engagement in peace talks with Israel, reportedly facilitated what some analysts described as the tacit acceptance by the United States of Syria's continuing role in Lebanon.[5] The Taif Accords also called for all Lebanese militias to be dismantled, and most were reincorporated into the Lebanese Armed Forces. Hezbollah refused to disarm—claiming that its militia forces were legitimately engaged in resistance to the Israeli military presence in southern Lebanon.

Hariri Assassination. In February 2005, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri—a prominent anti-Syria Sunni politician—was assassinated in a car bombing in downtown Beirut.[6] The attack galvanized Lebanese society against the Syrian military presence in the country and triggered a series of street protests known as the "Cedar Revolution." Under pressure, Syria withdrew its forces from Lebanon in the subsequent months, although Damascus continued to influence domestic Lebanese politics. The Hariri assassination reshaped Lebanese politics into the two major blocks known today: March 8 and March 14, which represented pro-Syria and anti-Syria segments of the political spectrum, respectively (see **Figure 2**). In 2007 the U.N. Security Council established the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to investigate the assassination. In 2020 the STL issued its verdict, convicting one Hezbollah operative; he remains at large.

2006 Hezbollah-Israel War. In July 2006, Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers along the border, sparking a 34-day war. The Israeli air campaign and ground operation aimed at degrading Hezbollah resulted in widespread damage to Lebanon's civilian infrastructure, killing roughly 1,190 Lebanese, and displacing a quarter of Lebanon's population.[7] In turn, Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets into Israel, killing 163 Israelis.[8] U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 brokered a cease-fire between the two sides and expanded the mandate of UNIFIL.

2008 Doha Agreement. In late 2006, a move by the Lebanese government to endorse the STL led Hezbollah and its Shi'a political ally Amal to withdraw from the government, triggering an 18-month political crisis. In May 2008, a cabinet decision to shut down Hezbollah's private telecommunications network—which the group reportedly viewed as critical to its ability to fight Israel—led Hezbollah fighters to seize control of parts of Beirut. The resulting sectarian violence raised questions regarding Lebanon's risk for renewed civil war, as well as concerns about the willingness of Hezbollah to deploy its militia force in response to a decision by Lebanon's civilian government. Qatar helped broker a political settlement between rival Lebanese factions, which was signed on May 21, 2008, and became known as the Doha Agreement.

War in Syria. In 2011, unrest broke out in neighboring Syria. Hezbollah moved to support the Asad regime, eventually mobilizing to fight inside Syria. Meanwhile, prominent Lebanese Sunni leaders sided with the Sunni rebels. As rebel forces fighting along the Lebanese border were defeated by the Syrian military—with Hezbollah assistance—rebels fell back, some into Lebanon. Syrian refugees also began to flood into the country. Beginning in 2013, a wave of

[5] See for example, Paul E. Salem, "Superpowers and Small States: an Overview of American Lebanese Relations," Beirut Review, 5, 1993; Joseph Bahout, "The Unraveling of Lebanon's Taif Agreement: Limits of Sect-Based Power Sharing," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2016.

[6] For additional details, see Ronen Bergman, "The Hezbollah Connection," *New York Times Magazine*, February 15, 2015.

[7] Human Rights Watch, *Why They Died: Civilian Casualties in Lebanon during the 2006 War*, September 5, 2007.

[8] Human Rights Watch, *Civilians under Assault: Hezbollah's Rocket Attacks on Israel in the 2006 War*, August 2007.

retaliatory attacks targeting Shi'a communities and Hezbollah strongholds inside Lebanon threatened to destabilize the domestic political balance as each side accused the other of backing terrorism. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hezbollah have both worked to contain border attacks by Syria-based groups linked to the Islamic State and Al Qaeda.

2019 Protest Movement. In October 2019, a mass protest movement unifying disparate sectarian, geographic, and socioeconomic sectors of Lebanese society around demands for political and economic reform resulted in the resignation of the Lebanese government.

Issues for Congress

U.S. policy in Lebanon over the past decade has sought to limit threats posed by Hezbollah both within Lebanon and to Israel, bolster Lebanon's ability to protect its borders, and build state capacity to deal with the influx of Syrian refugees. Iranian influence in Lebanon via Hezbollah, the potential for renewed armed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, and Lebanon's internal political dynamics complicate the provision of U.S. assistance. Lebanon continues to be an arena for conflict between regional states, as local actors aligned with Syria and Iran vie for power against those that seek support from Saudi Arabia, which backs Sunni elements in Lebanon, and the United States.

As Congress reviews aid to Lebanon, Members continue to debate the best ways to meet U.S. policy objectives:

Weakening Hezbollah and building state capacity. The United States has sought to weaken Hezbollah without provoking a direct confrontation that could undermine Lebanon's stability. Both Obama and Trump Administration officials argued that Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon can be addressed by strengthening Lebanon's legitimate security institutions, including the LAF.[9] Members have expressed a range of views regarding U.S. security assistance to Lebanon, with some describing the LAF as a counterweight to Hezbollah and others arguing that U.S. policy has failed because Hezbollah continues to amass weapons and remains a powerful force inside Lebanon.[10] The Biden Administration has not signaled any major changes to U.S. support for the LAF. In early 2021, both CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie and SOCCENT Commander Rear Admiral Bradley visited Lebanon and met with senior LAF leaders, reaffirming the strong U.S. partnership with the Lebanese force.[11]

Defending Lebanon's borders. Beginning in late 2012, Lebanon faced a wave of attacks from Syria-based groups, some of which sought to gain a foothold in Lebanon. U.S. policymakers have sought to ensure that the Lebanese Armed Forces have the tools they need to defend Lebanon's borders against encroachment by the Islamic State and other armed nonstate groups. While the LAF in 2017 recaptured border towns that previously had served as a base for Islamic State and Al Qaeda-linked fighters, as of 2021 the LAF continue to pursue IS militants in the border area.[12]

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[9] U.S. Department of State, "Daily Press Briefing by Spokesperson John Kirby," March 8, 2016; U.S. Department of State, "Background Briefing: Updating on Secretary Tillerson's Trip to Amman, Jordan; Ankara, Turkey; Beirut, Lebanon; Cairo, Egypt; and Kuwait City, Kuwait," press release, February 14, 2018.

[10] U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, *Lebanon and Iraq Protests; Insights, Implications, and Objectives for U.S. Policy*, hearing, 116th Cong., 1st sess., December 4, 2019, S. Hrg. 116-225 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2020).

[11] U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, "United States Central Command Commander Visits Lebanon," March 15, 2021; U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, "U.S. Support for the LAF Highlighted by Visit of Rear Admiral Bradley," February 12, 2021.

[12] "Lebanon army arrests 18 Lebanese, Syrians linked to Islamic State: statement," Reuters, February 1, 2021.

Assisting Syrian refugees. The influx of over a million Syrian refugees since 2011 placed significant pressure on Lebanese public services and host communities. The United States has provided over $2.7 billion in humanitarian assistance in response to the situation in Lebanon since FY2012,[13] much of it designed to lessen the impact of the refugee surge on host communities.

Strengthening government institutions. U.S. economic aid to Lebanon aims to strengthen Lebanese institutions and their capacity to provide essential public services. Slow economic growth and high levels of public debt have limited government spending on basic public services, and this gap has been filled in part by sectarian patronage networks, including some affiliated with Hezbollah. U.S. programs to improve education, increase service provision, and foster economic growth are intended to make communities less vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups.

Encouraging reform. While seeking to bolster the capacity and legitimacy of state institutions in Lebanon, Trump Administration officials also criticized "decades of mismanagement, corruption, and the repeated failure of Lebanese leaders to put aside their parochial interest and undertake meaningful, sustained reforms," sentiments echoed by the Biden Administration.[14] U.S. officials have warned that Hezbollah exploits corruption to advance its own interests in Lebanon, and stated that the United States is prepared to offer additional assistance to the Lebanese government "when we see Lebanese leaders committed to real change."[15]

Politics

The Confessional System

Lebanon's population includes Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shi'a Muslim communities of roughly comparable size.[16] In what is referred to as Lebanon's confessional system, political posts are divided among the country's various religious groups, or "confessions," in proportions designed to reflect each group's share of the population—although no formal census has been conducted in the country since 1932. The presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian, the prime minister post for a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament for a Shi'a Muslim. The 128 seats in Lebanon's parliament are divided evenly among Christians and Muslims, and Lebanese electoral law has traditionally allocated each seat within an electoral district to a specific religious community. Lebanon's confessional system—shaped by the 1943 National Pact and adjusted and formalized by the 1989 Taif Accords—was designed to encourage consensus among the country's sectarian communities, particularly in the wake of Lebanon's civil war. However, the need for cooperation between rival political blocs on major issues is widely viewed as contributing to political gridlock.

[13] USAID, "Lebanon—Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #1, FY2021," December 30, 2020.

[14] Testimony of David Hale, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *U.S. Policy in a Changing Middle East*, hearing, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., September 24, 2020; U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, "Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale's Statement after Meeting with Speaker Nabih Berri," April 14, 2021.

[15] Ibid.

[16] See footnote 6.

Political Coalitions: March 8 and March 14

Lebanese President Michel Aoun was elected in 2016 by Lebanon's parliament for a six-year term. Aoun is affiliated with the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), which along with Hezbollah and the Shi'a Amal Movement represent the major components of the March 8 political coalition. Parliamentary elections in 2018 gave the coalition, which advocates friendly ties with Iran and Syria, a simple majority (68 out of 128 seats). The coalition's political rival, known as March 14, opposes Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon, and instead seeks closer ties with regional Sunni-majority states such as Saudi Arabia, as well as with France and the United States. The March 14 coalition includes the Future Movement (Sunni), the Lebanese Forces, and Kataeb (both Christian).

March 8 Majority Challenges to U.S. Engagement

To date, each government formed under the Aoun administration has had a March 8 majority, reflecting the coalition's majority in parliament. Nevertheless, March 14 has held key seats in most governments, at times including the post of prime minister. The March 8 character of successive Lebanese governments has complicated U.S. engagement, due to the role of Hezbollah within the coalition. However, while Hezbollah is the most challenging member of March 8 in the U.S. view, it is not the largest component of the coalition. The largest component of March 8 is the Free Patriotic Movement (which holds 19 seats in parliament compared to Hezbollah's 13). U.S. officials meet with non-Hezbollah elements of March 8, including the FPM and Amal.

2016-2020: Multiple Governments Collapse

President Aoun's term in office has been marked by political instability and turmoil. Governments under Aoun's tenure include the following:

Hariri Government (December 2016-May 2018). Following his election, President Aoun appointed Saad Hariri as prime minister. This was Hariri's second term as prime minister (he previously served from 2009 to 2011 under President Michel Suleiman). Hariri temporarily resigned in November 2017 during a visit to Saudi Arabia, a move widely viewed as orchestrated by Riyadh.[17] Hariri withdrew his resignation a month later, upon his return to Lebanon. His government was considered resigned following the May 2018 parliamentary elections.

Hariri Government (January 2019-October 2019). In May 2018, President Aoun re-appointed Saad Hariri as prime minister. Hariri formed the new government in late January 2019, after more than eight months of political deadlock. The 30-member Hariri cabinet was majority March 8, reflecting the results of the 2018 legislative elections, but parties that were expected to align with March 14 held 11 seats. In October 2019, Hariri resigned amid mass protests.

Diab Government (January 2020-August 2020). In January 2020, President Aoun appointed Hassan Diab as prime minister. The 20-member Diab cabinet was the first since 2005 composed of parties from a single political bloc (March 8). On August 10, Diab resigned in the wake of the August 4 explosion at the port of Beirut.

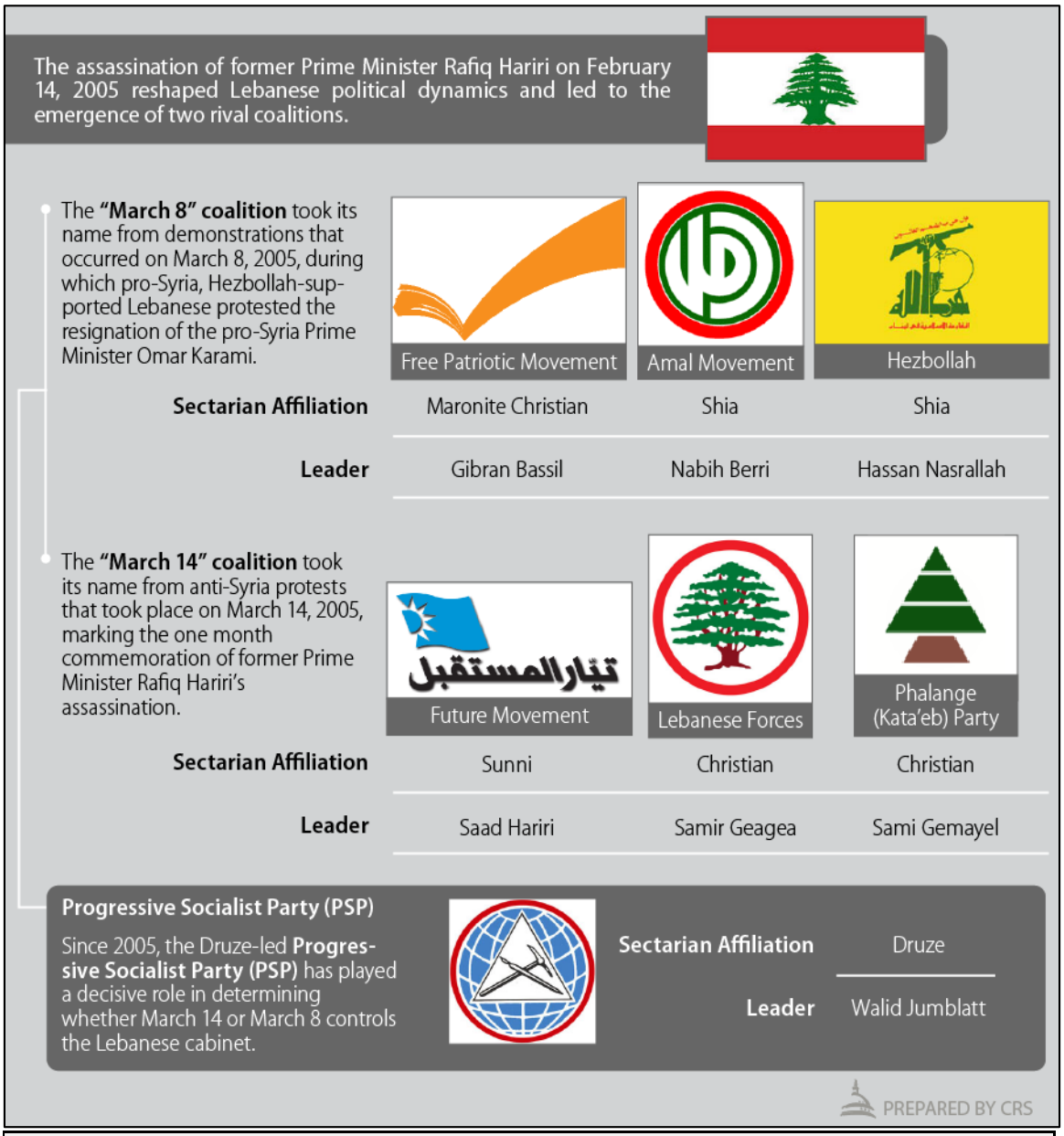
Adib Government (resigned before formation). On August 28, President Aoun appointed Lebanon's Ambassador to Germany, Mustapha Adib, as prime minister-designate. Adib resigned

[17] Anne Barnard and Maria Abi-Habib, "Why Saad Hariri had that strange sojourn in Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, December 24, 2017.

less than a month later, after failing to resolve a demand by Amal and Hezbollah that the Finance Ministry—one of Lebanon's four "sovereign ministries"—remain in Shi'a control.

Figure 2. Lebanon's Political Coalitions

Reflects those parties with the largest number of seats in parliament



Sovereign Ministries and Government Formation

Lebanon's four "sovereign ministries" (Defense, Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Finance) are not formally allotted to a specific sect, but customarily have been divided among the country's largest sectarian groups: Maronite Christian, Sunni, Shi'a, and Orthodox Christian. In recent years, the Defense Ministry has been held by an Orthodox Christian, the Interior Ministry by a Sunni, the Foreign Affairs Ministry by a Maronite Christian, and the Finance Ministry by a Shi'a. Amal and Hezbollah have opposed proposals to rotate the sovereign ministries among the sects, pushing instead to retain the Finance Ministry under Shi'a control.

2021: Status of Government Formation

In October 2020, Aoun reappointed Saad Hariri as prime minister-designate. As of April, 2021, Hariri has been unable to form a new government, despite agreeing to a key demand by Hezbollah and Amal that would keep the Finance Ministry under Shi'a control for one additional appointment only.[18] In December 2020, President Aoun rejected a proposed cabinet lineup presented by Hariri, stating that it was "unbalanced." Hariri countered that Aoun had rejected the proposal because he seeks a blocking third of cabinet seats (see below).

As of April, 2021, government formation appears stalled due to disagreements between Hariri (March 14) and FPM leader Gebran Bassil (March 8). Bassil is the son-in-law and senior advisor to President Aoun, and is thought to exert significant influence over the 87-year-old president.[19] Points of contention include the following:

- **The blocking third**. Hariri has claimed that Bassil and Aoun seek a blocking third of seats in the cabinet for the FPM, which effectively would give the FPM veto power over government decisions.[20] Aoun has acknowledged that he seeks six ministers but stated that, "this is the representation quota and not the blocking quota," in a reference to what is known as the "president's share" of cabinet seats.[21] (See textbox below for an overview of the blocking third and the president's share.)
- **Christian representation**.[22] Hariri has said that the delay in government formation stems from a demand by Aoun and Bassil to name all the Christian ministers in the new cabinet.[23] Bassil and others have stated that other sects have been permitted to name their ministers and that Christians should have the same rights—adding that government formation will occur when unified standards are applied.[24] Aoun has stated that "It is natural for the President of the Republic to name the Christian ministers."[25]

Observers have expressed wide-ranging views on additional factors that may be delaying government formation. Some analysts argue that Aoun's efforts to shape government formation are rooted in his desire to facilitate the election of his son-in-law Bassil as president when Aoun's term expires in 2022.[26] Sources close to Aoun have argued that Hariri is awaiting Saudi approval to form a government.[27] Other analysts have suggested that government formation in Lebanon

[18] Hussein Dakroub, "Hopes rise for swift Cabinet formation," *Daily Star*, October 26, 2020.

[19] "Who is Lebanon's Gebran Bassil?" *Reuters*, November 6, 2020.

[20] Hussein Dakroub, "Hariri says Aoun's veto power demand blocking Cabinet formation," *Daily Star*, February 15, 2021.

[21] "Hariri Says Aoun Remarks a Bid to Turn Political Dispute Sectarian," *Naharnet*, January 29, 2021.

[22] Lebanese cabinets traditionally contain an equal number of Christian and Muslim ministers, per the country's confessional system. The Taif Accords, which ended Lebanon's civil war, requires an equal distribution of Christian and Muslim seats in parliament, as well as in "top-level jobs," which traditionally have included cabinet posts. Lebanon's constitution states that in the "transitory period" before political sectarianism is eliminated, "The sects are fairly represented in the formation of the Cabinet."

[23] Houshig Kaymakamian, "Unified criteria can usher in govt soon: Bassil," *Daily Star*, December 18, 2020.

[24] Georgi Azar, "How a public spat between Aoun and Hariri reveals the deeper political rift preventing cabinet's formation," *L'Orient Today*, March 23, 2021.

[25] "Hariri Says Aoun Remarks a Bid to Turn Political Dispute Sectarian," *Naharnet*, January 29, 2021.

[26] Michael Young, "Why Lebanon just can't seem to form a government," *The National*, January 27, 2021.

[27] Georgi Azar, "How a public spat between Aoun and Hariri reveals the deeper political rift preventing cabinet's

will remain stalled until there is greater clarity on the outcome of U.S.-Iran negotiations.[28] Iran and Saudi Arabia are longstanding power brokers in Lebanon, exercising significant influence over March 8 and March 14, respectively.

Government Formation Process

The resignation of Lebanon's prime minister triggers the resignation of the Lebanese government (the cabinet). Until a new cabinet is formed, the outgoing government remains in a caretaker status, with reduced authorities. Lebanon's constitution describes the government formation process:

Required Steps. To appoint a new prime minister, the president must schedule binding consultations with parliamentary blocs, which cast votes for a candidate (must be a Sunni per Lebanon's confessional system). The candidate with the most votes is appointed prime minister-designate. The president then charges the prime minister-designate with forming a government (selecting ministers to form a new cabinet). The prime minister holds nonbinding consultations with parliamentary blocs to negotiate the distribution of ministerial portfolios. The prime minister-designate presents his cabinet line-up to the president; if the cabinet is approved, the two leaders issue a joint decree forming the new government. The new cabinet then submits a statement of general policy to the parliament for a vote of confidence.

Delays. Numerous factors can delay government formation. Reaching consensus between the president and prime minister can be a lengthy process; Lebanon's confessional requirement that the president be a Christian and the Prime Minister be a Sunni can result in the two leaders representing rival political coalitions (the largest Christian and Sunni political parties—the FPM and the Future Movement—are affiliated with March 8 and March 14, respectively). Government formation in Lebanon has often been stalled by issues including

- **The blocking third**. Parties have at times sought a blocking one-third plus one of cabinet seats, in order to obtain a de-facto veto over cabinet decisions that require a two-thirds majority.[29] Whoever holds the blocking third can paralyze the work of government—by ordering ministers to boycott cabinet sessions, thus denying the quorum needed to convene, or by withdrawing ministers entirely and triggering the collapse of the government (which is considered resigned if it loses more than one-third of its members).[30]
- **The president's share**. There is precedent for granting a share of cabinet seats to the president, who in some cases may lack an independent power base, particularly if he is a military officer rather than a career politician.[31] President Aoun is a military officer but also the founder of the FPM, now headed by his son-in-law, Gibran Bassil.

Protest Movement

In October 2019, a proposed government tax on internet-enabled voice calls (through services such as WhatsApp) triggered a nationwide mass protest movement that resulted in the resignation of then-prime minister Hariri and the collapse of the Lebanese government. The protests, described as some of the largest in Lebanon's history, reflected broader dissatisfaction with what protestors described as government corruption, ineptitude, and economic mismanagement.[32] Demonstrators, who represented a broad economic, political, and sectarian cross-section of Lebanese society, emphasized that the protests were primarily driven by the state's failure to

formation," *L'Orient Today*, March 23, 2021.

[28] Marc Daou, "Lebanon's political class 'squabbling over a field of ruins' as economic crisis rages," *France 24*, March 18, 2021.

[29] Decisions that require a two-thirds vote are listed in the Lebanese constitution and include the declaration of a state of emergency, issues of war and peace, general mobilization, international agreements and treaties, the state's general budget, long-term development plans, dissolving parliament, and laws pertaining to elections, citizenship, and personal status.

[30] For example, Hezbollah and its allies forced the collapse of the Lebanese government in 2011, by withdrawing their ministers from the cabinet.

[31] Hassan Al-Qishawi, "Lebanon on the edge," *Al Ahram Weekly*, September 5, 2018.

[32] Helen Sullivan, "The Making of Lebanon's October Revolution," *New Yorker*, October 29, 2019.

provide sufficient access to basic goods and services, including jobs, education, water, electricity, and garbage disposal.[33]

The movement targeted Lebanon's political elites—including unprecedented public criticism of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah—and called for political leaders to be replaced by technocrats. Hassan Diab, who replaced Hariri as prime minister in December 2019, appointed a new government of noncareer politicians, but these ministers were largely seen as affiliated with traditional political parties and lacking independence.[34] The prospect of forming a government of ministers that would significantly sideline Lebanon's traditional political elite—many of whom have been in power since the end of the country's civil war—remains controversial and appears to be one of several factors that have delayed government formation.

Protests—although diminished by COVID-related restrictions on public gatherings—continued throughout 2020, exacerbated by deteriorating economic conditions. In some cases, protests targeted financial institutions, reflecting popular frustration with restrictive financial measures that critics saw as disproportionately affecting the country's middle and working classes.[35] The August 2020 blast at the port of Beirut, popularly widely seen as resulting from gross government negligence, also reinvigorated protests; a subsequent declaration of a state of emergency granted the Lebanese Armed Forces and other security services enhanced powers to restore and maintain order.[36]

It remains to be seen whether the protest movement can overcome internal divisions and evolve into an organized political force capable of challenging the country's long-entrenched political elites. Lebanon is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections in 2022, but it is unclear whether the protest movement, which remains leaderless, can effectively compete within Lebanon's patronage-based political system.

As of 2021, Lebanon has seen renewed political protests over economic conditions. The city of Tripoli emerged as a flashpoint (see below), but protestors have blocked major highways throughout Lebanon, including areas of Beirut.

Protests in Tripoli

In early 2021, violent protests broke out in the northern port city of Tripoli—Lebanon's second largest city and its most impoverished. Protests appeared to reflect popular discontent with deteriorating economic conditions and with perceived state neglect.[37] They also seem to have reflected frustration with lockdowns related to COVID-19, which have left many unable to financially support their families. In February 2021, a military court charged 35 protestors with terrorism—the first time protestors have been indicted on terrorism charges since the beginning of the protest movement in October 2019.[38]

[33] "Lebanon scraps WhatsApp fee amid violent protests," Reuters, October 17, 2019; Kareem Chehayeb and Abby Sewell, "Why Protesters in Lebanon Are Taking to the Streets," *Foreign Policy*, November 2, 2019.

[34] Paul Salem, "Lebanese oligarchs approve technocratic shadow government," Middle East Institute, January 21, 2020.

[35] Timour Azhari, "Banks targeted in Lebanon's 'night of the Molotov'," *Al Jazeera*, April 29, 2020.

[36] Kareem Chehayeb and Megan Specia, "Lebanon's Parliament Confirms State of Emergency, Extending Army Power," *New York Times*, August 13, 2020.

[37] Aya Iskandarani, "Lebanon: Why are people in Tripoli protesting?" *The National*, February 1, 2021.

[38] Juliette Jabra, "Lebanon charges 35 Tripoli protesters with terrorism: lawyer," *Daily Star*, February 22, 2021.

Security

Lebanon faces numerous security challenges from a combination of internal and external sources. Some of these stem from the conflict in neighboring Syria, while others are rooted in long-standing social divisions and the marginalization of some sectors of Lebanese society.

Domestic Security

Beirut Port Explosion

On August 4, 2020, a massive explosion at the port of Beirut killed over 190 people, and injured and displaced thousands more. Preliminary reports suggested that the blast may have been caused by a welding accident at a warehouse, resulting in a fire and the detonation of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, which had been stored alongside fireworks and kerosene.[39] In December, caretaker Prime Minister Diab stated that an American FBI investigation into the blast had found that "only 500 tons" of ammonium nitrate had exploded at the port, and suggested that the remaining 2,200 tons may be missing.[40]

The blast, which has been described as one of the largest nonnuclear explosions ever recorded, destroyed thousands of homes in surrounding residential areas in addition to large sectors of the port.[41] A Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment issued by the World Bank in cooperation with the United Nations and the European Union estimated that the blast caused $3.8-$4.6 billion in physical damages, as well as $2.9-$3.5 billion in economic losses.[42] The blast triggered widespread outrage among Lebanese, some of whom blamed the explosion on "gross criminal negligence" on the part of government leaders.[43] The ammonium nitrate had languished in a warehouse at the port since 2014, when it was confiscated from a Russian cargo ship, and multiple customs and security officials had warned successive governments of the risks posed by the stockpile.[44]

Corruption at the Port of Beirut. The blast focused attention on the Port of Beirut, which some Lebanese analysts have described as among the most corrupt of Lebanon's state institutions.[45] Illicit activity at the port flourished during Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990), when the collapse of central government authority led to the takeover of Lebanon's state-run ports by various militia groups, which used the ports to move weapons, fighters, and narcotics.[46]

[39] Liz Sly, Loveday Morris, and Suzan Haidamous, "Fears Beirut port chemicals would be stolen may have contributed to blast," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2020; Ben Hubbard et al., "How a massive bomb came together in Beirut's port," *New York Times*, September 9, 2020.

[40] "FBI found Beirut blast caused by 500 tonnes of fertilizer: Diab," *Daily Star*, December 29, 2020.

[41] "How powerful was the Beirut blast?" *Reuters*, August 14, 2020.

[42] World Bank, "Beirut Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA)—August 2020," August 31, 2020.

[43] "Special report on anti-corruption in Lebanon," *Executive Magazine*, August 20, 2020.

[44] Sly, "Fears Beirut port chemicals would be stolen may have contributed to blast;" Hubbard et al., "How a massive bomb came together in Beirut's port."

[45] "Dockside dealings: smuggling, bribery and tax evasion at Beirut's port," *AFP*, September 16, 2020.

[46] For details see Central Intelligence Agency, "Lebanon's Ports: Gateways for Instability and Terrorism," declassified research paper, GI 87-10013, February 1987, available at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87T01127R001201150001-7.pdf.

Figure 3. **Beirut Port Explosion**
August 4, 2020

Source: Gaby Salem/Esn, via Agence France-Presse—Getty Images.

Note: A screenshot from video shot at the moment of the explosion, @SalemGaby, posted August 8, 2020.

After the war, Lebanon's militias (with the exception of Hezbollah) mostly demobilized, and former militia leaders transitioned into politics, becoming political party leaders. Management of the port was handed over to a temporary committee representing Lebanon's major political parties, which continues to manage port operations.[47] Media reports describe a system whereby political party leaders install loyalists in key jobs at the port as part of a broader patronage network that allows them to bypass customs inspections and import taxes.[48] Customs tax evasion is a major issue at the port, with some experts estimating that the state loses up to $1.5 billion each year due to the evasion of customs duties.[49] All major parties—including the FPM, the Future Movement, the Amal Movement, and Hezbollah—reportedly profit from corrupt networks within the port.[50]

Blast Investigation. Lebanese authorities appointed military judge Fadi Sawwan to lead the investigation into the cause of the blast.[51] After charging mostly low-level port, customs, and security officials, Sawwan in December 2020 charged caretaker Prime Minister Diab with

[47] Hubbard et al., "How a massive bomb came together in Beirut's port."

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] "Dockside dealings: smuggling, bribery and tax evasion at Beirut's port," *AFP*, September 16, 2020.

[51] "Fadi Sawan: the man leading the Beirut explosion investigation," *Al Jazeera*, August 21, 2020.

criminal negligence in the blast, along with three former ministers.[52] In December, Sawwan suspended his investigation after two of the ministers charged requested that the case be transferred to another judge.[53] In late February, Lebanon's Court of Cassation removed Sawwan from the case. Lebanon's Higher Judicial Council named the head of Beirut's criminal court, Tarek Bitar, to replace Sawwan.

Special Tribunal for Lebanon[54]

In 2005, former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al Hariri was killed in a car bombing in Beirut. In 2007, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1757 established the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) as an independent judicial organization to conduct independent investigations and criminal proceedings into the killing of Hariri and related attacks. The STL has worked from its headquarters in the Netherlands since 2009, and reportedly has cost nearly $970 million.[55] It is funded jointly by Lebanon (49%) and voluntary international contributions (51%).[56]

The trial started in January 2014 and closing arguments concluded in September 2018. The trial drew on evidence from 297 witnesses; its transcript amounted to more than 93,900 pages. The case was built primarily using geolocation from cell phone records, and the evidence for conviction was almost exclusively circumstantial, making it difficult for the Chamber to prove guilt of the accused beyond a reasonable doubt.[57]

The STL indicted four Hezbollah members (Salim Jamil Ayyash, Hassan Habib Merhi, Hussein Hassan Oneissi and Assad Hassan Sabra), all of whom were tried in absentia. Warrants for their arrest remain outstanding; their whereabouts are unknown. A fifth and higher-ranking member of Hezbollah, Mustafa Badreddine, was dropped from the indictment after he was allegedly killed in Syria in 2016. The Lebanese government has never attempted to arrest the individuals; Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah vowed never to turn over the individuals, and threatened to "cut off the hands" of anyone who attempted to arrest them.[58]

In a judgement delivered on August 18, 2020, the Trial Chamber unanimously found Salim Jamil Ayyash guilty beyond reasonable doubt as a co-perpetrator of: "conspiracy aimed at committing a terrorist act; committing a terrorist act by means of an explosive device; intentional homicide of Mr Rafik Hariri with premeditation by using explosive materials; intentional homicide of additional 21 persons with premeditation by using explosive materials; and attempted intentional homicide of 226 persons with premeditation by using explosive materials." The Chamber found the three other defendants not guilty. In December 2020, Ayyash was sentenced in absentia to five terms of life imprisonment.

The Chamber also found that while "Syria and Hezbollah may have had motives to eliminate Mr Hariri, and some of his political allies; There is no evidence that the Hezbollah leadership had any

[52] Aside from Diab, the ministers charged were: former finance minister Ali Hassan Khalil, former minister of transportation and public works Ghazi Zaitar, and former minister of transportation and public works Youssef Finianos. Khalil and Zaitar are members of Amal, and Finianos is a member of the Marada Movement.

[53] "Lead judge suspends Beirut blast probe," *Daily Star*, December 17, 2020.

[54] Prepared by CRS Research Assistant Sarah Collins.

[55] Liz Sly, "Lebanon Tribunal Implicates Hezbollah in 2005 Killing of Rafiq al-Hariri," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2020.

[56] Special Tribunal for Lebanon, *Eleventh Annual Report (2019-2020)*, March 2020.

[57] Special Tribunal for Lebanon, "Summary of Judgment," STL-11-01/T/TC, August 18, 2020.

[58] Ronen Bergman, "The Hezbollah Connection," *New York Times Magazine*, February 15, 2015.

involvement in Mr Hariri's murder and there is no direct evidence of Syrian involvement in it."[59] U.S. officials welcomed Ayyash's conviction, but also stated that, "Hizballah operatives do not freelance."[60]

The United Nations has extended the mandate of the STL through March 2023, while the tribunal processes the appeal filed on behalf of Ayyash on 12 January 2021, as well as the "Connected Case" (STL-18-10) in which Ayyash has been indicted on charges relating to three attacks against three other Lebanese politicians in October 2004, June 2005, and July 2005 respectively.[61]

Domestic Sunni Extremism

Since the start of the Syria conflict in 2011, some existing Sunni extremist groups in Lebanon who had previously targeted Israel refocused on Hezbollah and Shi'a communities, presumably in response to Hezbollah's support for the Asad government. The Al Qaeda-linked Abdallah Azzam Brigades (AAB), formed in 2009, initially targeted Israel with rocket attacks. The group began targeting Hezbollah in 2013 and is believed to be responsible for a series of bombings in Hezbollah-controlled areas of Beirut, including a November 2013 attack against the Iranian Embassy that killed 23 and wounded more than 140.[62]

In addition to the AAB, U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) operating in Lebanon include Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (PFLP-GC), Asbat al-Ansar, Fatah al-Islam, Fatah al-Intifada, Jund al-Sham, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).[63] These groups operate primarily out of Lebanon's 12 Palestinian refugee camps. Due to an agreement between the Lebanese government and the late Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat, Lebanese forces generally do not enter Palestinian camps in Lebanon, instead maintaining checkpoints outside them. These camps operate as self-governed entities, and maintain their own security and militia forces outside of government control.[64]

Border Challenges

United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

Since 1978, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been deployed in the Lebanon-Israel-Syria triborder area.[65] The United States has supported UNIFIL financially and diplomatically, with the aim of bolstering and expanding the authority of the LAF in areas of Lebanon historically dominated by Hezbollah.

UNIFIL's initial mandate was to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, restore peace and security, and assist the Lebanese government in restoring its authority in southern Lebanon (a traditionally Shi'a area that became a Hezbollah stronghold in the 1980s). In

[59] Special Tribunal for Lebanon, "Summary of Judgment," STL-11-01/T/TC, August 18, 2020, p.15.

[60] Press Statement by U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, "Special Tribunal for Lebanon Verdict," August 18, 2020.

[61] Special Tribunal for Lebanon, *Twelfth Annual Report (2020-2021)*, March 8, 2021.

[62] U.S. Department of State, "Chapter 5. Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017*, September 19, 2018.

[63] U.S. Department of State, "Chapter 5. Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, June 24, 2020.

[64] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019: Lebanon*.

[65] The formal boundaries dividing the three countries remain disputed.

May 2000, Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon. The following month, the United Nations identified a 120 km interim boundary line between Lebanon and Israel to use as a reference for the purpose of confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces. The Line of Withdrawal, commonly known as the Blue Line, is not an international border demarcation between the two states.

Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, UNIFIL's mandate was expanded via UNSCR 1701 (2006) to include monitoring the cessation of hostilities between the two sides, accompanying and supporting the LAF as they deployed throughout southern Lebanon, and helping to ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations. UNSCR 1701 authorized UNIFIL to assist the Lebanese government in the establishment of "an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL" between the Blue Line and the Litani River, which UNIFIL defines as its area of operations (See UNIFIL Zone, **Figure 1**).[66] UNSCR 1701 also calls upon the government of Lebanon to secure its borders and requests UNIFIL "to assist the Government of Lebanon at its request."

UNIFIL is headquartered in the Lebanese town of Naqoura. Its leadership rotates among troop-contributing states; since 2018 UNIFIL has been led by Major General Stefano Del Col (Italy). As of March 2021, UNIFIL maintains 10,535 troops drawn from 45 countries.[67] It also has a civilian staff of roughly 900. U.S. personnel do not participate in UNIFIL, although U.S. funding contributions to U.N. peacekeeping programs support the mission. The United States also provides security assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces that is aimed at supporting Lebanese government efforts to implement UNSCR 1701. UNIFIL's mandate falls under Chapter VI of the U.N. Charter, which allows for the use of force primarily in self-defense, rather than Chapter VII, which would enable enforcement by military means.[68]

According to UNIFIL, "Any unauthorized crossing of the Blue Line by land or by air from any side constitutes a violation of Security Council resolution 1701."[69] Since 2007, UNIFIL has worked with Lebanese and Israeli authorities to mark the Blue Line on the ground via 272 blue barrels, a contested process that remains unfinished.[70] UNIFIL continues to monitor violations of UNSCR 1701, and the U.N. Secretary-General reports regularly to the U.N. Security Council on the implementation of UNSCR 1701.[71] These reports have listed violations by Hezbollah—such as the construction of underground tunnels that cross the Blue Line—as well as violations by Israel—such as regular incursions into Lebanese airspace.

Maritime Task Force. Since the discovery in 2009 of large offshore gas fields in the Mediterranean, unresolved issues over the demarcation of Lebanon's land border with Israel have translated into disputes over maritime boundaries, and in 2011 Lebanese authorities called on the U.N. to establish a maritime equivalent of the Blue Line. U.N. officials stated that UNIFIL does not have the authority to establish a maritime boundary.[72] However, UNIFIL has maintained a

[66] UNIFIL, "FAQs," last updated September 6, 2019, available at http://unifil.unmissions.org/faqs.

[67] UNIFIL, "UNIFIL Troop-Contributing Countries," March 24, 2021, available at https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-troop-contributing-countries

[68] UNIFIL, "FAQs," last updated September 6, 2019, available at http://unifil.unmissions.org/faqs.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Maj. Gen. Stefano Del Col, "It's time to talk about the Blue Line: Constructive re-engagement is key to stability," *Daily Star*, March 5, 2021.

[71] See United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006)*, issued every four months, available at https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/reports-secretary-general.

[72] United Nations Security Council, *Fifteenth report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006)*, S/2011/91, February 28, 2011.

Maritime Task Force (MTF) since 2006, which operates along the entire length of the Lebanese coastline and assists the Lebanese Navy in preventing the entry of unauthorized arms or other materials to Lebanon. The MTF was initially composed of six ships, one each from Bangladesh, Brazil, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, and Turkey, and was commanded by Brazil from 2011 to 2020. In December 2020, Brazil withdrew from the MTF; Germany subsequently assumed command of the force.

Debates Over UNIFIL's Mandate

Beginning in 2017, the Security Council's annual reauthorization of UNIFIL's mandate grew increasingly contentious, as the United States and Israel sought changes to the organization's mandate that were opposed by the Lebanese government and by countries that contribute troops to UNIFIL.

Most countries—including the United States—have described UNIFIL as a stabilizing presence in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah strikes across the Blue Line have significantly decreased since UNSCR 1701 (2006) increased UNIFIL's troop ceiling from 2,000 to 15,000.[73] A former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon has noted that "UNIFIL's value in constraining Hezbollah comes down to its size. Through sheer numbers, it essentially saturates the south. Even if it can evade UNIFIL scrutiny at times, as the tunnels show, Hezbollah does not have the almost complete freedom of movement in the south that it enjoyed under "old" UNIFIL.[74] Currently, UNIFIL deploys approximately 10,535 troops in a 1060 square km zone (roughly a third the size of Rhode Island).

Trump Administration officials argued that UNIFIL "patrols and checkpoints are of plainly limited use when offending parties can simply hide weapons and tunnel entrances on so-called 'private property.'"[75] The United States and Israel have accused Hezbollah of hiding weapons in violation of UNSCR 1701, and have pushed for the addition of language to UNIFIL's mandate that would allow UNIFIL to access and search private property for illicit Hezbollah weapons stockpiles. Trump Administration officials criticized the government of Lebanon for not facilitating UNIFIL access to key sites, such as the Lebanese origin points of Hezbollah underground tunnels that cross into Israel.[76]

Lebanon, as well as some countries that contribute troops to UNIFIL, have called for UNIFIL's mandate to be renewed without modification.[77] French officials have emphasized that UNIFIL "is not a chapter VII operation" under the U.N. Charter, and thus is limited in its ability to use military force to implement its mandate. Other former U.S. officials have noted that states contributing troops to UNIFIL may seek to avoid a scenario that would require them to disarm Hezbollah by force.[78] Since 1978, 321 UNIFIL personnel have been killed by various parties, the most of any U.N. peacekeeping mission.[79]

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[73] Jeffrey Feltman, "Debating UN peacekeeping in Lebanon," Brookings Institution, June 20, 2020.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ambassador Kelly Craft, Permanent Representative of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Lebanon (via VTC)," May 4, 2020.

[76] Ibid.

[77] "US to face off with France over peacekeeper mission to Lebanon," *The National*, March 4, 2020.

[78] Jeffrey Feltman, "Debating UN peacekeeping in Lebanon," Brookings Institution, June 20, 2020.

[79] United Nations Peacekeeping, "Fatalities," last updated February 28, 2021, available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities.

In response to U.S. pressure, some additional provisions have been added to annual resolutions reauthorizing UNIFIL's mandate. In 2017, U.S. officials successfully advocated for language requiring UNIFIL to notify the Security Council whenever it encountered roadblocks or other obstacles; these incidents are now noted in regular U.N. Secretary General reports on the implementation of UNSCR 1701. In 2019, the Security Council approved U.S.-proposed language calling for the U.N. Secretary General to assess the effectiveness of UNIFIL; the resulting report highlighted several structural weaknesses. In August 2020 the Security Council voted to reauthorize UNIFIL via UNSCR 2530 (2020) but also reduced UNIFIL's maximum force strength from 15,000 to 13,000 troops. U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Kelly Craft stated, "The reduction of the ceiling from 15,000 troops to 13,000 is an important step toward right-sizing a mission that has for years been over-resourced given the limits on its freedom of movement and access."[80]

The Trump Administration's approach to UNIFIL differed from that of the Obama Administration, which, while recognizing UNIFIL's flaws, generally did not seek to change the force's mandate. In 2009, Susan Rice, then-U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, testified that

> UNIFIL is currently limited to a Chapter 6 mandate [...] The strengthening of the mandate is an interest that I understand many good people on the Hill share. We certainly are sympathetic to it, but I don't think as a practical matter than we will be able to muster the support in the Security Council that would be necessary to substantially strengthen the mandate [...] We, frankly, think that all of the problems you have described and that others have described notwithstanding, on balance the role that UNIFIL is playing adds value rather than the opposite, even as we with it would be able to do more.[81]

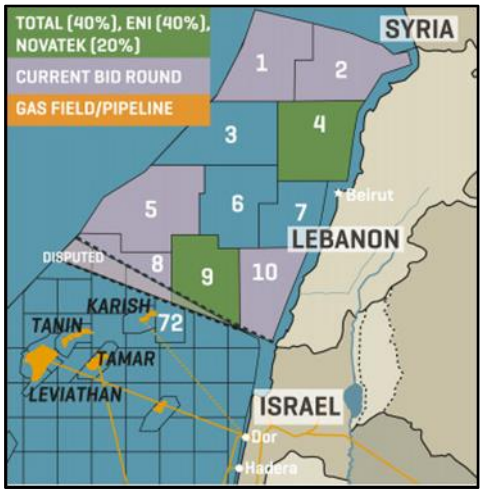
[80] Ambassador Kelly Craft, Permanent Representative of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, " Explanation of Vote on the Resolution to Renew UNIFIL," August 28, 2020.

[81] Testimony of Ambassador Susan Rice, Permanent Representative of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, U.S. Congress, House Foreign Relations Committee, *New Challenges for International Peacekeeping Operations*, hearing 11th Congress, 1st sess., July 29, 2009, H. Hrg. 111-49 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2009).

Eastern Mediterranean Energy Resources and Disputed Boundaries

In 2010, the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that there are considerable undiscovered oil and gas resources in the Levant Basin, an area that encompasses coastal areas of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Gaza Strip, Egypt and adjacent offshore waters.[82] A 2018 report by Lebanon's Bank Audi estimated that Lebanon could generate over $200 billion in revenues from offshore gas exploration, with the potential to significantly reduce the country's debt to GDP ratio.[83]

Figure 4. Lebanon-Israel Offshore Blocks



Source: *Middle East Economic Survey (MEES).*

Note: Boundaries and locations are approximate and not necessarily authoritative.

Despite Lebanon's significant need for additional revenue, long-standing border disputes between Lebanon and Israel have slowed exploration of offshore gas fields. The two states hold differing views of the correct delineation points for their joint maritime boundary relative to the Israel-Lebanon 1949 Armistice Line that serves as the de facto land border between the two countries.[84] Lebanon, objecting to a 2011 Israeli-Cypriot agreement that draws a specific maritime border delineation point relative to the 1949 Israel-Lebanon Armistice Line, claims roughly 330 square miles of waters that overlap with areas claimed by Israel.

In February 2018, Lebanon signed its first offshore oil and gas exploration agreement for two blocks, including one disputed in part by Israel. A consortium of Total (France), Eni (Italy), and Novatek (Russia) was awarded two licenses to explore blocks 4 and 9. Israel has disputed part of Block 9. Total completed a drilling exploration in April 2020, but found no evidence of a gas reservoir in Block 4.[85] A second round of offshore licensing originally scheduled for January 2020 was postponed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and collapse of oil and gas prices worldwide. A June 2020 announcement that Israel would begin developing Block 72 (which partially overlaps with Lebanon's Block 9) caused backlash among Lebanese politicians, with President Aoun decrying it as an "extremely dangerous" decision.[86]

[82] U.S. Geological Survey, "Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of the Levant Basin Province, Eastern Mediterranean," Fact Sheet 2010-3014, March 2010.

[83] "Audi: Lebanon's share from gas over $200B," *Daily Star*, February 8, 2018.

[84] The Armistice Line is not the final agreed border between Lebanon and Israel, but coastal points on the line appear likely to be incorporated into any future Lebanon-Israel border agreement. For additional details see Frederic Hof, "Lebanon and Israel: Blue line tensions," Atlantic Council, April 16, 2020.

[85] "Drilling failed to verify commercial quantities of gas in Block 4: Ghajar," *Daily Star*, April 27, 2020.

[86] Ed Reed, "Lebanon issues warning on Israeli licence plans," Energy Voice, June 30, 2020; Daniel Markind, "Does Natural Gas Hold the Key to Peace in the Middle East?" *Forbes*, August 20, 2020.

U.S.-Mediated Lebanon-Israel Talks Over Maritime Dispute Deadlocked

Successive U.S. administrations have sought to mediate between Lebanon and Israel on this issue, which would allow both states to move forward with offshore oil and gas exploration in areas currently disputed. Until 2020, the main issue was confined to the 860 square kilometers (330 square miles) of disputed territory claimed by both sides. In 2012, the United States proposed what became known as the Hof Line, which would have divided the disputed area between Lebanon and Israel in an approximate 55/45 respective split.[87] However, the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati in early 2013 and the subsequent collapse of Lebanese government forestalled additional talks.

In October 2020, Lebanon and Israel agreed to begin U.S.-mediated indirect negotiations regarding their disputed maritime boundaries. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo welcomed the initiation of talks between the two countries—which have remained in a formal state of war since the 1948-49 Arab Israeli conflict—stating that the United States had worked to launch these discussions for nearly three years.[88] Shortly after the announcement of U.S.-brokered indirect negotiations, President Aoun stated that Lebanon's maritime boundary should be "based on the line that departs on land from the point of Raq Naqoura."[89] Analysts note this would place an additional 552 square miles of sea into dispute, including part of Israel's Karish gas field.[90]

Hezbollah

Lebanese Hezbollah, a Shi'a Islamist movement, is Iran's most significant nonstate ally. Iran's support for Hezbollah, including providing thousands of rockets and short-range missiles, helps Iran acquire leverage against key regional adversaries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. It also facilitates Iran's intervention on behalf of a key mutual ally, the Asad regime in Syria. The Asad regime has been pivotal to Iran and Hezbollah by providing Iran a secure route to deliver weapons to Hezbollah. Iran has supported Hezbollah by providing "hundreds of millions of dollars" to the group and training "thousands" of Hezbollah fighters inside Iran.[91] In 2018, Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Sigal Mandelker estimated that Iran was providing Hezbollah with more than $700 million per year.[92] Since then, U.S. sanctions reportedly have forced Iran to reduce payments to allied militia forces, including Hezbollah.[93]

Clashes with Israel

Historical Background

Hezbollah emerged in the early 1980s during the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982, with the goal of pushing back (in 1978) or expelling

[87] Frederic Hof, "Lebanon-Israel maritime talks need not start in a vacuum," *Financial Times*, October 22, 2020.

[88] U.S. Department of State, "Framework Agreement for Israel-Lebanon Maritime Discussions," Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, press statement, October 1, 2020.

[89] "Aoun rejects Israeli accusations over maritime border," *Daily Star*, November 20, 2020.

[90] "US regrets Lebanon-Israel stalemate, offers mediation," *Daily Star*, December 22, 2020.

[91] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, "Iran," June 24, 2020.

[92] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Under Secretary Sigal Mandelker Speech before the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies," press release, June 5, 2018.

[93] Ben Hubbard, "Iran's Allies Feel the Pain of American Sanctions," *New York Times*, March 28, 2019.

(in 1982) the leadership and fighters of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—which used Lebanon as a base to wage a guerrilla war against Israel until the PLO relocated to Tunisia in 1982.[94] In 1985 Israel withdrew from Beirut and its environs to southern Lebanon—a predominantly Shi'a area. Shi'a leaders disagreed about how to respond to the Israeli occupation, and many of those favoring a military response gradually coalesced into what would become Hezbollah.[95] The group launched attacks against Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and U.S. military and diplomatic targets, portraying itself as the leaders of resistance to foreign military occupation.

In May 2000, Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon, but Hezbollah has used the remaining Israeli presence in the Sheb'a Farms (see below) and other disputed areas in the Lebanon-Syria-Israel triborder region to justify its ongoing conflict with Israel—and its continued existence as an armed militia alongside the Lebanese Armed Forces.

The Sheb'a Farms Dispute

When Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, several small but sensitive territorial issues were left unresolved, notably, a roughly 10-square-mile enclave at the southern edge of the Lebanese-Syrian border known as the Sheb'a Farms. Israel did not evacuate this enclave, arguing that it is not Lebanese territory but rather is part of the Syrian Golan Heights, which Israel occupied in 1967. Lebanon, supported by Syria, asserts that this territory is part of Lebanon and should have been evacuated by Israel when the latter abandoned its self-declared security zone in May 2000.

Ambiguity surrounding the demarcation of the Lebanese-Syria border has complicated the task of determining ownership over the area. France, which held mandates for both Lebanon and Syria, did not define a formal boundary between the two, although it did separate them by administrative divisions. Nor did Lebanon and Syria establish a formal boundary after gaining independence from France in the aftermath of World War II—in part due to the influence of some factions in both Syria and Lebanon who regarded the two as properly constituting a single country.

Advocates of a "Greater Syria" in particular were reluctant to establish diplomatic relations and boundaries, fearing that such steps would imply formal recognition of the separate status of the two states. The U.N. Secretary-General noted in May 2000 that "there seems to be no official record of a formal international boundary agreement between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic."[96] Syria and Lebanon did not establish full diplomatic relations until 2008.[97]

2006 Hezbollah-Israel War

Hezbollah's last major clash with Israel occurred in 2006—a 34-day war that resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,190 Lebanese and 163 Israelis,[98] and the destruction of large parts of Lebanon's civilian infrastructure. The war began in July 2006, when Hezbollah captured two members of the IDF along the Lebanese-Israeli border. Israel responded by carrying out air strikes against suspected Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, and Hezbollah countered with rocket attacks against cities and towns in northern Israel. Israel subsequently launched a full-scale ground operation in Lebanon with the stated goal of establishing a security zone free of

[94] According to various accounts, Israel's 1982 invasion included additional goals of countering Syrian influence in Lebanon and helping establish an Israel-friendly Maronite government there.

[95] The Shi'a group Amal took a more nuanced view of the Israeli occupation, which it saw as breaking the dominance of Palestinian militia groups operating in southern Lebanon.

[96] United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 425 (1978) and 426 (1978)*, S/2000/460, May 22, 2000.

[97] Syrian Government, Presidential Decree No. 358, October 14, 2008.

[98] See Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 2007—Lebanon," May 23, 2007 and Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Israel-Hizbullah conflict: Victims of rocket attacks and IDF casualties," July 12, 2006.

Hezbollah militants. Hostilities ended following the issuance of U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, which imposed a cease-fire.

In the years since the 2006 war, Israeli officials have sought to draw attention to Hezbollah's weapons buildup—including reported upgrades to the range and precision of its projectiles—and its alleged use of Lebanese civilian areas as strongholds.[99] Various sources have referenced possible Iran-backed Hezbollah initiatives to build precision-weapons factories in Lebanon.[100]

Domestic Politics

Hezbollah was widely credited with forcing the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in 2000, and this elevated the group into the primary political party among Lebanese Shi'a.[101] In addition, Hezbollah—like other Lebanese confessional groups—vies for the loyalties of its constituents by operating a vast network of schools, clinics, youth programs, private business, and local security. These services contribute significantly to the group's popular support base, and compounds the challenges of limiting Hezbollah's influence.

Hezbollah has participated in elections since 1992, and it has achieved a modest but steady degree of electoral success. Hezbollah entered the cabinet for the first time in 2005, and has held one to three seats in each Lebanese government formed since then. Hezbollah candidates have also fared well in municipal elections, winning seats in conjunction with allied Amal party representatives in many areas of southern and eastern Lebanon.

In 2018, Lebanon held its first legislative elections in nine years in which parties allied with Hezbollah increased their share of seats from roughly 44% to 53%. The political coalition known as March 8 (see **Figure 2**), which includes Hezbollah, Amal, the FPM, and allied parties, won 68 seats.[102] This is enough to secure a simple majority (65 out of 128 seats) in parliament, but falls short of the two-thirds majority needed to push through major initiatives such as a revision to the constitution. Hezbollah itself did not gain any additional seats.

Hezbollah has at times served as a destabilizing political force, despite its willingness to engage in electoral politics. In 2008, Hezbollah-led fighters took over areas of Beirut after the March 14 government attempted to shut down the group's private telecommunications network—which Hezbollah leaders described as key to the group's operations against Israel.[103] Hezbollah has also withdrawn its ministers from the cabinet to protest steps taken by the government (in 2008 when the government sought to debate the issue of Hezbollah's weapons, and in 2011 to protest the expected indictments of Hezbollah members for the Hariri assassination). On both occasions, the withdrawal of Hezbollah and its political allies from the cabinet caused the government to collapse. Hezbollah involvement has been suspected in various political assassinations—notably that of former prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 (see "Special Tribunal for Lebanon"), and more recently in the death of Hezbollah critic Lokman Slim in early 2021.[104] At other times,

[99] See, for example, Ben Hubbard and Ronen Bergman, "Who Warns Hezbollah That Israeli Strikes Are Coming? Israel," *New York Times*, April 23, 2020; Seth Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019; Jonathan Spyer and Nicholas Blanford, "Update: Israel raises alarm over advances by Hizbullah and Iran," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 11, 2018.

[100] Ben Caspit, "Hezbollah, Israel losing red lines," *Al-Monitor*, September 4, 2019; Katherine Bauer et al., "Iran's Precision Missile Project Moves to Lebanon," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2018.

[101] Lina Khatib and Maxwell Gardiner, "Lebanon: Situation Report," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 17, 2015.

[102] "Official election results—How Lebanon's next parliament will look," *Daily Star*, May 8, 2018.

[103] "Row over Hezbollah phone network," *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2008.

[104] Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, "Prominent Lebanese Critic of Hezbollah Is Killed," *New York Times*, February 4,

Hezbollah leaders have avoided conflict with other domestic actors, possibly in order to focus its resources elsewhere—such as on activities in Syria.

Top Lebanese leaders have acknowledged that despite their differences with Hezbollah, they do confer with the group on issues deemed to be critical to Lebanon's security. Prime Minister Hariri said in 2017 that although he disagrees with Hezbollah on politics, he saw it as necessary to maintain "some kind of understanding" with the group in order to avoid civil conflict.[105]

Intervention in Syria

Syria is important to Hezbollah because it serves as a key transshipment point for Iranian weapons. Following Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel, the group worked to rebuild its weapons cache with Iranian assistance, a process facilitated or at minimum tolerated by the Syrian regime. While Hezbollah's relationship with Syria is more pragmatic than ideological, it is likely that Hezbollah views the prospect of regime change in Damascus as a fundamental threat to its interests—particularly if the change empowers Sunni groups allied with Saudi Arabia.

Hezbollah played a key role in helping to suppress the Syrian uprising, in part by "advising the Syrian Government and training its personnel in how to prosecute a counter insurgency."[106] Hezbollah fighters in Syria worked with the Syrian military to protect regime supply lines, and to monitor and target rebel positions. They also facilitated the training of Syrian forces by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard CorpsQuds Force (IRGC-QF).[107] The involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict evolved since 2011 from an advisory to an operational role, with forces fighting alongside Syrian troops.[108] In 2017, Nasrallah declared that "we have won the war (in Syria)" and described the remaining fighting as "scattered battles."[109] According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an estimated 1,705 Hezbollah fighters have been killed in Syria between March 2011 and March 2021.[110]

Public Health and COVID-19[111]

Lebanon reported its first case of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on February 21, 2020, and total reported cases exceeded 1,000 on May 21, 2020 (see **Figure 5**). The first COVID-19-related death was reported on March 11, 2020. COVID-19-related deaths surpassed 100 on August 17. After December, cases rose sharply, with more cases reported in the first two months of 2021 (194,779) than in all of 2020 (177,996); more people in Lebanon died from COVID-19 in January 2021 (1,588) than in all of 2020 (1,443). In February 2021, Lebanon received its first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines, funded in part by a $34 million financing arrangement with the World Bank. After reports surfaced that members of parliament received the vaccine before priority groups (health care workers and the elderly), the World Bank threatened to suspend

2021.

[105] Susan Glasser, "Saad Hariri: The Full Transcript," *Politico*, July 31, 2017.

[106] U.S. Department of State, "Briefing on the designation of Hezbollah for supporting the Syrian regime," press release, August 10, 2012.

[107] Ibid.

[108] "In Syria's Aleppo, Shiite militias point to Iran's unparalleled influence," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2016.

[109] "Hezbollah declares Syria victory, Russia says much of country won back," Reuters, September 12, 2017.

[110] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Syrian Revolution 120 months on: 594,000 persons killed and millions of Syrians displaced and injured," March 14, 2021.

[111] This section was prepared by Research Assistant Sarah Collins.

support to the vaccination program; however, the rollout appears to have continued apace.[112] As of mid-April 2021, Lebanon had administered approximately 322,000 doses of the vaccine, covering about 3% of the population.[113]

Lebanon was facing a health care challenges even before the outbreak of COVID-19. The government, by not reimbursing public and private hospital expenditures in recent years, has reportedly made it difficult for hospitals to purchase medical supplies and equipment, pay salaries, and obtain sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE). Sleiman Haroun, the head of the Syndicate of Private Hospitals, reports that private hospitals have not been reimbursed $1.3 billion in dues since 2011.[114] Hospitals and medical suppliers have also struggled to procure supplies due to the collapse of the exchange rate (see "Economy and Fiscal Issues"). A "warning strike" by private hospitals in November 2019 over the shortages led the government to agree to provide 50% of the dollars needed to import medical supplies at the official exchange rate.[115]

Healthcare workers have raised concerns that the lack of PPE and ventilators, as well as layoffs of hospital staff due to the economic crisis, has created unsafe working conditions for those treating COVID-19 cases.[116] The August 4 Beirut Port explosion exacerbated these underlying challenges: 6 major hospitals and 20 clinics sustained partial or heavy structural damage as a result of the blast, placing additional burdens on remaining hospitals.[117]

The United States does not provide aid to Lebanon's Health Ministry, which U.S. officials have described as "run by Hezbollah."[118] (Hezbollah held the Health Ministry in both the outgoing Diab government and in the Hariri government that preceded it). USAID has funded some U.S.-affiliated medical institutions in Lebanon; following the Beirut Port blast, U.S. officials announced that these institutions would receive an additional $4 million in U.S. funding.[119]

[112] Ellen Francis and Laila Bassam, "World Bank threatens to cut Lebanon's vaccine aid over line-jumping," Reuters, February 23, 2021.

[113] "Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World," *The New York Times,* accessed April 18, 2021.

[114] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Hospital Crisis Endangering Health," December 10, 2019.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: COVID-19 Worsens Medical Supply Crisis," March 24, 2020.

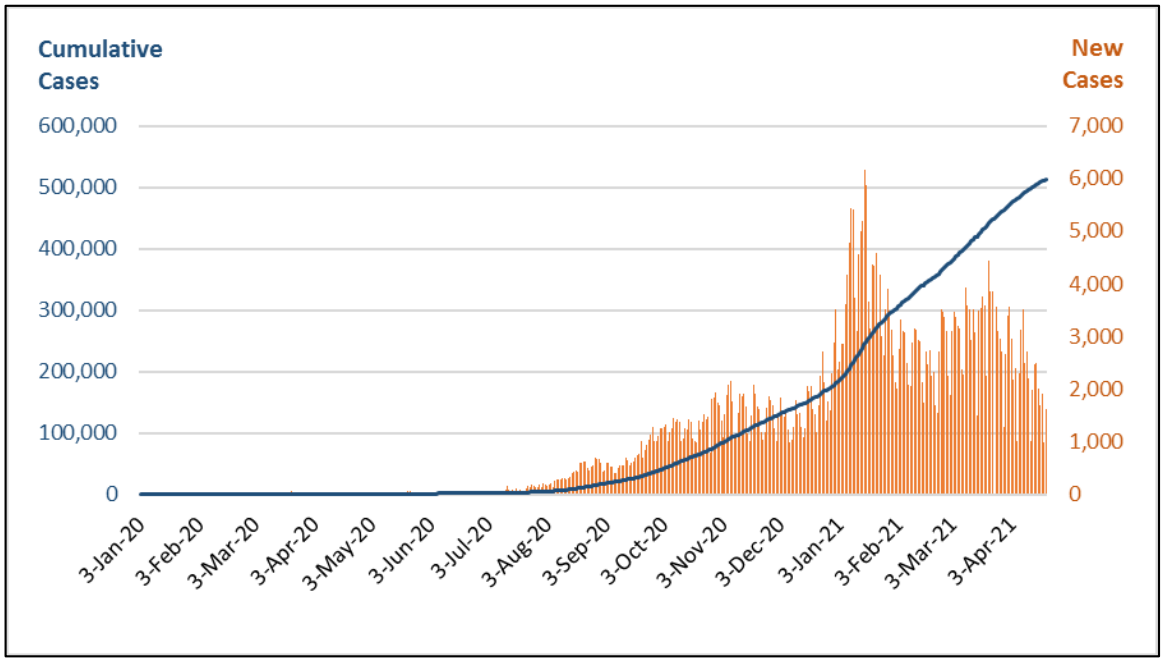
[117] UNOCHA, "Beirut Port Explosions Situation Report No. 4," August 13, 2020.

[118] "Schenker: No US aid to Health Ministry due to Hezbollah role," *The Daily Star,* May 7, 2020.

[119] USAID, "United States Provides Humanitarian Assistance in Response to Explosions in Lebanon," Press Release, August 7, 2020; USAID, "Acting USAID Administrator John Barsa's Travel to Beirut, Lebanon," Press Release, August 12, 2020.

Figure 5. COVID-19 Cases in Lebanon

Confirmed cases as of April 21, 2021



Source: Created by CRS with data from World Health Organization, *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*, April 21, 2021.

Refugees and Lebanese Policy

Refugees from Syria

The outbreak of conflict in Syria in 2011 led to a surge of Syrian refugee arrivals in Lebanon. Initially, Lebanon maintained an open-border policy, permitting refugees to enter without a visa and to renew their residency for a nominal fee. By 2014, Lebanon had the highest per capita refugee population in the world, with refugees equaling one-quarter of the resident population.[120] UNHCR suspended new registration of refugees in 2015, in response to the government's request, reducing visibility into Lebanon's total refugee population. In late 2020, UNHCR reported that about 865,500 Syrian refugees were registered in Lebanon but estimated that 1.5 million were present in the country.[121]

Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS). The Syria conflict displaced not only Syrian nationals, but also an estimated 27,700 Palestinian refugees from twelve Palestinian refugee camps inside Syria. PRS are not eligible for services provided by UNHCR, and must instead register with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to receive continued emergency support.

[120] UNHCR, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon surpass 1 million," April 3, 2014.

[121] UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Lebanon," Operational Portal, August 2020.

Palestinian Refugees from Lebanon (PRL)

Palestinian refugees have been present in Lebanon for over 70 years, as a result of displacements stemming from various Arab-Israeli wars. Like Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees and their Lebanese-born children cannot obtain Lebanese citizenship, even though many are the second or third generation to be born inside Lebanon.[122] In addition, the State Department notes that

> A 2010 law expanding employment rights and removing some restrictions on Palestinian refugees was not fully implemented, and Palestinians remained barred from working in most skilled professions, including medicine, law and engineering that require membership in a professional association. Informal restrictions on work in other industries left many refugees dependent upon UNRWA for education, health care and social services.[123]

In 2018, the United States discontinued its voluntary contributions to UNRWA. The United States previously had been the largest donor, providing funding equal to roughly a third of UNRWA's annual budget in 2017.[124] In April 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the Biden Administration's plan to resume various forms of aid to the Palestinians that had been discontinued under the Trump Administration, including $150 million in humanitarian assistance for UNRWA.[125] For additional details, see CRS Insight IN11649, *U.S. Resumption of Foreign Aid to the Palestinians*, by Jim Zanotti and Rhoda Margesson.

Lebanon's Policy Towards Syrian Refugees

The long-standing presence of Palestinians in Lebanon arguably shaped the approach of Lebanese authorities to the arrival of Syrian refugees. The Lebanese government has been unwilling to take steps that could potentially enable Syrians to become a permanent refugee population akin to the Palestinians—whose militarization in the 1970s was one of the drivers of Lebanon's 15-year civil war. Lebanon is not a party to the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, which outline the rights of refugees, as well as the legal obligations of states to protect them. Lebanese officials have been critical of UNHCR financial assistance to refugees, arguing that such assistance incentivizes Syrian refugees to remain in Lebanon.[126]

Since 2011, Lebanon has imposed numerous restrictions on Syrian refugees. These include

Entry Restrictions. In 2014, the government enacted entry restrictions effectively closing the border to PRS.[127] In 2015, the Lebanese government began to implement new visa requirements for all Syrians entering Lebanon. Under the new requirements, Syrians can only be admitted if they are able to provide documentation proving that they fit into one of the seven approved categories for entry, which do not specifically list fleeing political persecution or threats to their life.[128]

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[122] Citizenship in Lebanon is derived exclusively through the father. Thus, a child born to a Palestinian refugee mother and a Lebanese father could obtain Lebanese citizenship. However, a Palestinian refugee father would transmit his stateless status to his children, even if the mother was a Lebanese citizen.

[123] U.S. Department of State, "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Lebanon," March 2021.

[124] For additional details, see CRS Insight IN10964, *Decision to Stop U.S. Funding of UNRWA (for Palestinian Refugees)*, by Jim Zanotti and Rhoda Margesson.

[125] U.S. Department of State press release, "The United States Restores Assistance for the Palestinians," April 7, 2021.

[126] Patrick Wintour, "Thousands of Syrian refugees could be sent back, says Lebanese minister," *Guardian*, June 15, 2019.

[127] Amnesty International, *Lebanon: Denied refuge: Palestinians from Syria seeking safety in Lebanon*, July 1, 2014.

[128] According to Amnesty International, "Category one is for tourism, shopping, business, landlords, and tenants;

Legal Residency. By 2020, only 20% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon above the age of 15 had legal residency,[129]despite a 2017 decision by the government of Lebanon to institute a waiver for the annual residency renewal fee. The waiver, which reportedly has been unevenly implemented, only applies to Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR prior to January 2015 and who had not previously renewed their residency based on tourism, sponsorship, property ownership, or tenancy.[130] Lack of legal residency makes refugees subject to arrest, restricting their movement and ability to work, which in turn exacerbates poverty levels.

Work Permits. Competition over lower-skilled jobs has been among the most-cited tension factors in Lebanese-Syrian relations.[131] In 2017, the Lebanese government agreed to grant Syrian refugees work permits in three sectors (agriculture, construction, and cleaning). However, recipients of work permits would become ineligible to receive UNHCR assistance.

Housing. The government has blocked the construction of refugee camps like those built to house Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey, presumably to prevent Syrian refugees from remaining in Lebanon permanently. As a result, most Syrian refugees in Lebanon have settled in urban areas, including existing Palestinian refugee camps.[132] In 2019, Lebanese authorities cracked down on the use of concrete and hardened materials in refugee shelters, demolishing at least 20 shelters and threatening the demolition of several thousand additional semi-permanent structures, allegedly for noncompliance with housing codes.[133]

Deportation. In 2019, Lebanon's Higher Defense Council issued a decision requiring the deportation of anyone found to have entered Lebanon illegally after April 24, 2019. Lebanon's Directorate for General Security (DGS) reported that it had deported 2,731 individuals as of September 2019.[134] Deportations ceased in March 2020 due to COVID-related border closures, and resumed in September 2020.[135]

In addition, humanitarian agencies organizations in early 2021 expressed concern about a new policy issued by Lebanon's Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, which requires humanitarian organizations to submit the personal details of aid beneficiaries.[136] The request was particularly concerning because roughly 80 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lack legal residency (see above). The requirement was subsequently lifted for U.N. agencies, but remains in place for local NGOs.

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category two is for studying, category three is for transiting to a third country, category four is for those displaced; category five for medical treatment; category six for an embassy appointment; and category seven for those entering with a pledge of responsibility (a Lebanese sponsor)." See Amnesty International, *Pushed to the Edge: Syrian Refugees Face Increased Restrictions in Lebanon*, June 2015.

[129] WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF, "Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon: Key Findings of the 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," February 16, 2021.

[130] UNHCR, *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, Annual Report 2019*, January 26, 2021, p. 15.

[131] UNDP and ARK, *Regular Perception Surveys Throughout Lebanon: Wave VI*, July 2019.

[132] UNHCR, "Key Findings of the 2019 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," July 2020; UNOCHA, "Humanitarian Bulletin: Lebanon," Issue 30, (November 1, 2017 - January 31, 2018).

[133] U.S. Department of State, "2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Lebanon," March 2020; Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Syrian Refugee Shelters Demolished," July 5, 2019.

[134] U.S. Department of State, "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Lebanon," March 2021.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Abby Sewell, "Ministry's demand for aid recipients' personal details halts some humanitarian assistance programs during lockdown,' *L'Orient Today*, February 17, 2021.

Implications of Economic Collapse and COVID-19 for Refugees

Despite monthly cash and food assistance provided by UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP), most Syrian refugees live below the poverty line, a situation exacerbated by the rise in cost of basic goods stemming from Lebanon's economic crisis. In late 2020, UNHCR estimated that 89% of Syrians in Lebanon lived below the extreme poverty line, up from 55% in 2019.[137]

As of 2021, refugees constitute a relatively small percentage of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Lebanon. As of February 2021, a total of 7,068 Palestinian refugees and 3,626 Syrian refugees had tested positive for COVID-19, out of a total of 375,033 cases nationwide.[138] However, refugee access to health care and testing has been limited by curfews, restrictions on freedom of movement that apply to refugees but not citizens,[139] and uneven access to free testing for symptomatic individuals.[140] Syrian refugees lacking appropriate legal documentation may be less likely to seek testing or treatment for COVID-19 symptoms out of fear of deportation.[141]

The country's economic collapse and the impact of COVID-19 on jobs has severely limited income-generating possibilities for refugees. UNHCR estimated that "nearly 90% of Syrians and almost 80% of Palestinians either have lost their income-generating possibilities or have had their salaries reduced since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak or even before."[142] More than two thirds of Syrian refugee families reported having no working family members in May 2020, compared to 44% in February 2020.[143] Evictions are on the rise as families are increasingly unable to make rent payments.

Return of Refugees to Syria

Since 2017, the LAF and the Directorate for General Security (DGS) have facilitated the return of refugees to Syria. The State Department reported that the DGS coordinated with Syrian officials to facilitate the return of roughly 16,000 Syrian refugees between 2017 and September 2019, adding that UNHCR did not coordinate these returns but was present at departure points and found no evidence that returns were involuntary among refugees they interviewed.[144] Various human rights groups questioned whether the returns were fully voluntary, citing a coercive environment in Lebanon, with crackdowns on refugee housing, legal permits, and rising tensions with host communities.[145] DGS-facilitated returns were suspended following the closure of Lebanon's borders in March 2020, but UNHCR expected returns to resume in 2021.[146]

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[137] WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF, "Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon: Key Findings of the 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," February 16, 2021.

[138] UNOCHA, "COVID-19 response—Lebanon bi-monthly situation report," March 19, 2021.

[139] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in COVID-19 Response," April 2, 2020.

[140] Diana Rayes and Kareem Chehayeb, "No funding and policy: Lebanon's refugee population amid COVID-19 and an economic crisis," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, July 23, 2020.

[141] Alice Fordham, "Syrian Refugees In Lebanon Fear Deportation For Seeking Coronavirus Test Or Care," NPR, April 6, 2020.

[142] UNHCR, "In Focus: Rise in Evictions Due to Increased Economic Vulnerability," July 2020.

[143] Ibid.

[144] U.S. Department of State, *2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Lebanon*.

[145] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Refugees in Border Zone at Risk," News Release, September 20, 2017; Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Wave of hostility exposes hollowness of claims that Syrian refugee returns are voluntary," June 12, 2019.

[146] UNHCR, "Lebanon," Factsheet, January 2021.

Some Lebanese officials have called for the return of refugees to areas under Syrian government control, without waiting for a political settlement to end the conflict. In March 2021, caretaker Prime Minister Diab called for the international community to support the Lebanese government's plan for the gradual return of Syrian refugees. Diab stated that the plan respects the principle of non-refoulment, but also de-links refugee return from a political solution to the Syria conflict.[147] President Aoun also has emphasized that Lebanon "doesn't have the luxury to wait for a political solution as a pre-condition for the return of the displaced."[148] UNHCR has not organized voluntary repatriation of refugees to Syria, however they have provided support to refugees who wish to return.[149]

The main barriers to return cited by Syrian refugees included "the lack of sustainable safety and security in Syria, housing, land and property issues, lack of access to services and livelihood opportunities in areas of return."[150] A February 2020 International Crisis Group report found that the thousands of individual returns since 2017 "are not indicative of any shift in conditions that would make it safe for the majority of refugees to return anytime soon."[151]

Economy and Fiscal Issues

Lebanon's economy is service oriented (83% of GDP); primary growth sectors include banking and tourism.[152] The country faces a number of economic challenges, including high unemployment and a debt to GDP ratio that is among the highest in the world (171%, 2019 est).[153] Significant wealth and income inequality rooted in state politics have fueled popular discontent.[154]

The war in neighboring Syria significantly affected Lebanon's traditional growth sectors, and cut off a primary market and transport corridor for export. Economic growth slowed from an average of 8% between 2007 and 2009 to 1% to 2% since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and the resulting refugee influx.[155]

Lebanon's largest expenditures include servicing its debts, public sector salaries, and subsidies (notably transfers to the state-run electricity sector). This significantly constrains government spending on urgently needed infrastructure projects. The Lebanese government is unable to consistently provide basic services such as electricity, water, and waste treatment, and the World Bank noted in 2015 that the quality and availability of basic public services was significantly worse in Lebanon than both regional and world averages.[156] As a result, citizens rely on private

[147] Statement of Caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab at the 5th Brussels Conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region," *National News Agency*, March 30, 2021.

[148] "Aoun to UNHCR Representative: Lebanon has reached stage of exhaustion due to the negative repercussions of displacement," *National News Agency*, March 30, 2021.

[149] UNHCR, "Lebanon," Factsheet, January 2021.

[150] Government of Lebanon and the United Nations, "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020 (2020 update)," March 2020.

[151] International Crisis Group, "Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon," Middle East Report #211, February 2020.

[152] "Lebanon," CIA World Factbook, March 3, 2021.

[153] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2020: The Deliberate Depression*, November 1, 2020.

[154] Nisreen Salti, "No Country for Poor Men: How Lebanon's Debt Has Exacerbated Inequality," Carnegie Middle East Center, September 17, 2019.

[155] "Lebanon," CIA World Factbook, December 20, 2016.

[156] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2015: The Great Capture*, November 17, 2015, pp. 24-29.

providers, many of whom are affiliated with political parties. The retreat of the state from these basic functions has enabled a patronage network whereby citizens support political parties—including Hezbollah—in return for basic services.

Economic Crisis

Lebanon in 2021 faces overlapping currency, debt, fiscal, and banking crises. The Lebanese lira (also known as the pound), pegged to the dollar, has lost more than 90% of its value in black-market trading since October 2019. Officially pegged at 1,507 to the dollar, the lira reached a historic low of over 15,000 to the dollar on the black market in March 2021.[157]

In March 2020, Lebanon defaulted on its foreign debt for the first time in its history; the country's public debt (which the World Bank projected to reach 194% GDP by the end of 2020) is among the highest in the world.[158] The World Bank estimated that inflation increased from 10% in January 2020 to 120% in August 2020.[159] Food prices rose 402% between December 2019 and December 2020, according to the Central Administration of Statistics.[160] The World Bank projected that real economic growth would decelerate to -19.2% in 2020, and that more than half of the population would live in poverty by 2021.[161]

In May 2020, the Lebanese government formally requested a $10 billion loan from the IMF. However, talks between the government and the IMF stalled over questions regarding the exchange rate, government finances, and banking reforms. U.S. and European officials have conditioned their support for an IMF program for Lebanon on the implementation of structural reforms. Many of the reforms sought by outside donors require the formation of a new government, as a government in caretaker status lacks the authority to pass reform legislation.

In particular, donors have called for an external forensic audit of Banque du Liban (BDL), Lebanon's central bank, which would allow analysts to accurately assess Lebanon's economic and financial losses, and potentially reveal instances of corruption and/or mismanagement of public funds.[162] BDL declined to provide the documents required for the audit, citing banking secrecy laws.[163] In December 2020, parliament voted to lift banking secrecy on BDL accounts for one year to allow for the forensic audit, which former government officials described as "passing laws allowing the enforcement of already existing laws."[164]

The World Bank has been critical of Lebanon's response to the economic crisis, stating in late 2020 that, "policy inaction is sowing the seeds of an economic and social catastrophe for Lebanon."[165] In March 2021, Lebanese officials stated that Lebanon has begun scaling back food subsidies, and also planned to reduce subsidies on gasoline, measures likely to increase political instability.[166]

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[157] "Lebanese pound sets new record low past 15,000 mark against dollar," *Daily Star*, March 16, 2021.

[158] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2020: The Deliberate Depression*, November 1, 2020, p. 7.

[159] Ibid., p. 8.

[160] Chloe Cornish, "Currency crisis leaves Lebanese cupboards bare," *Financial Times*, February 21, 2021.

[161] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2020: The Deliberate Depression*, November 1, 2020, p. 25, p. 22.

[162] Kareem Chehayeb, "Why Does the International Community Want Lebanon to Audit its Central Bank?" Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, January 28, 2021.

[163] Laurice Constantine, "Forbes Middle East Reveals The Questions From Alvarez & Marsal, Which The Central Bank Of Lebanon Refused To Answer," *Forbes*, October 28, 2020.

[164] Alain Bifani, "BDL's audit: The last card up the system's sleeve," *L'Orient Today*, February 12, 2021.

[165] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2020: The Deliberate Depression*, November 1, 2020, p. 27.

[166] "Lebanon to reduce subsidies as cash runs out: Wazni," *Daily Star*, March 16, 2021.

For additional background on Lebanon's economic crisis, see CRS In Focus IF11660, *Lebanon's Economic Crisis*, by Carla E. Humud and Rebecca M. Nelson.

U.S. Policy

U.S. policy over the past two decades has focused on bolstering forces that could serve as a counterweight to Syrian, Iranian, and violent extremist influence in Lebanon through a variety of military and economic assistance programs. U.S. security assistance priorities reflect increased concern about the potential for Sunni jihadist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State to target Lebanon, as well as long-standing U.S. concerns about Hezbollah and its rocket arsenal, which poses a threat to Israel. U.S. economic aid to Lebanon is designed to promote democracy, stability, and economic growth, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the ongoing conflict in neighboring Syria. Congress has placed several certification requirements on U.S. assistance funds for Lebanon annually in an effort to prevent their misuse or the transfer of U.S. equipment to Hezbollah or other designated terrorists.

Current Funding

Lebanon has received over $100 million annually in both Economic Support Fund (ESF) monies and Foreign Military Financing (FMF, see **Table 1**). In addition to FMF obligated through the annual State and Foreign Ops appropriations, Lebanon has received roughly $100-200 million in additional security assistance via the annual defense appropriation process.[167]

Table 1. Select U.S. Foreign Assistance Funding for Lebanon-Related Programs

Millions of dollars; fiscal year of appropriation unless noted

	FY2017 Actual	FY2018 Actual	FY2019 Actual	FY2020 Enacted	FY2021 Enacted
ESF	110.00	117.00	112.50	112.50	112.50
FMF	80.00	105.00	105.00	105.00	105.00
IMET	2.65	3.12	2.97	2.97	2.97
INCLE	10	10.00	10.00	10.00	10.00
NADR	5.76	10.82	11.82	11.82	11.82
TOTAL	**208.41**	**245.94**	**242.29**	**242.29**	**242.29**

Source: State Department Budget Justifications (FY2017-FY2021); P.L. 116-94 and accompanying explanatory statement; P.L. 116-260 and accompanying explanatory statement.

Notes: Table does not reflect all funds or programs related to Lebanon. Does not account for all reprogramming actions of prior year funds or obligation notices provided to congressional committees of jurisdiction.

ESF = Economic Support Fund; ESDF = Economic Support and Development Fund; FMF = Foreign Military Financing; IMET = International Military Education and Training; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs.

[167] CRS analysis of Defense Department notifications to Congress.

Conditionality on Aid to Lebanon

Annual appropriations bills have established conditions on ESF and security assistance for Lebanon.

ESF. Successive appropriations bills have made ESF funding for Lebanon available notwithstanding Section 1224 of the FY2003 Foreign Relations Authorization Act (P.L. 107-228), which states that ESF funds for Lebanon may not be obligated until the President certifies to the appropriate congressional committees that the LAF has been deployed to the Israeli-Lebanese border and that the government of Lebanon is effectively asserting its authority in the area in which the LAF is deployed.

FMF. Successive appropriation bills have stated that funding for the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the LAF may not be appropriated if either body is controlled by a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. FMF assistance to the LAF may not be obligated until the Secretary of State submits to the appropriations committees a spend plan, including actions to be taken to ensure equipment provided to the LAF is used only for intended purposes.

FY2021 Appropriations

Lebanon provisions in the FY2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260, Section 7041(e) of Division K) reflect the approach taken by successive Congresses to ESF and FMF aid to Lebanon.

The stated purposes of FMF funding for Lebanon have remained largely consistent since 2009 and include

- to professionalize the LAF,
- to strengthen border security and combat terrorism, and
- to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

In FY2020, new language was added to include a specific reference to countering Hezbollah as a stated purpose of FMF assistance to Lebanon. This addition, which was carried over into the FY2021 act, states that FMF aid to Lebanon aims to "professionalize the LAF to mitigate internal and external threats from non-state actors, including Hizballah."

The FY2021 Defense Appropriations Act (Division C of P.L. 116-260) states that of the funds appropriated for "Operations and Maintenance, Defense-Wide," for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, $100 million shall be made available to reimburse Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Oman for enhanced border security. The FY2021 NDAA (P.L. 116-283) does not specify a specific amount for Lebanon.

Economic Aid

The influx of over 1 million Syrian refugees into Lebanon has strained the country's already weak infrastructure. Slow economic growth and high levels of public debt have limited government spending on basic public services, and this gap has been filled by various confessional groups affiliated with local politicians. In light of these challenges, U.S. programs are aimed at increasing the capacity of the public sector to provide basic services to both refugees and Lebanese host communities. This includes reliable access to potable water, sanitation, and health services. It also involves increasing the capacity of the public education system to cope with the refugee influx. Other U.S. programs are designed to foster inclusive economic growth, particularly among impoverished and underserved communities. This includes efforts to extend

financial lending to small firms, create more jobs, and increase incomes. Taken together, these programs also aim to make communities less vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups.[168]

The State Department has reported that ESF to Lebanon since 2010 has totaled nearly $1 billion, stating that U.S. funding has supported programs that

> promote economic growth, workforce employability and productivity, good governance, and social cohesion. This assistance has also supported access to clean water and improved education services to Lebanese communities, especially those deeply affected by the influx of Syrian refugees. Included in this amount is nearly $210 million in basic education programs and over $150 million in higher education programs in Lebanon, supporting access for over 1,170 Lebanese and refugee students from disadvantaged backgrounds to top ranking Lebanese universities, including the American University of Beirut and Lebanese American University.[169]

Congress has appropriated funds for Lebanon scholarships ($12 million in ESF for FY2021) as well as for refugee scholarships in Lebanon ($8 million in development assistance for FY2021), mostly in support of U.S. educational institutions in Lebanon.

Military Aid

The State Department has stated that U.S. security assistance for the LAF "aims to strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty, secure its borders, counter internal threats, disrupt terrorist facilitation, and build up the country's legitimate state institutions."[170] The department also stated that the U.S.-LAF partnership "builds the LAF's capacity as the sole legitimate defender of Lebanon's sovereignty," in a reference to Lebanese Hezbollah, which also has sought to portray itself as a "defender of Lebanon."[171] Since 2006, the United States has provided more than $2 billion to LAF, in the form of military vehicles, weapons, equipment, and training.[172]

Background. In 2006, the United States resumed FMF grants to the LAF—suspended since 1984, when the LAF fractured during Lebanon's civil war.[173] The resumption of FMF was facilitated by the end of Syria's military occupation of Lebanon in 2005, and reflected U.S. concern over the weakness of the LAF and its inability to confront threats that could also undermine U.S. regional security interests. Hezbollah's 34-day war with Israel in 2006 highlighted the strength of Hezbollah relative to the LAF, which largely stood on the sidelines. In 2007, the LAF fought a three-month battle against militants in the Nahr al Bared camp in northern Lebanon. While ultimately successful, the operation killed 163 LAF soldiers and demonstrated persistent LAF weaknesses. In 2008, Hezbollah temporarily seized control of west Beirut in response to efforts by the Lebanese government to dismantle the group's private telecommunications network. The LAF did not directly challenge Hezbollah, and the dispute was

[168] For more information, see USAID, *USAID/Lebanon Country Development Cooperation Strategy, December 2014-December 2019*, February 9, 2021.

[169] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Lebanon," factsheet, September 2020.

[170] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Lebanon," factsheet, January 20, 2021.

[171] "The Complexity behind Hezbollah's Response to Israel's Attacks," Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University, September 4, 2019.

[172] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Lebanon," factsheet, January 20, 2021.

[173] Some nonlethal U.S. military assistance to Lebanon resumed following the end of the country's civil war in 1990, mostly in the form of DoD Excess Defense Articles (EDA). For additional details on the history of U.S.-LAF relations, see Nicholas Blanford, "The United States-Lebanese Armed Forces Partnership: Challenges, Risks, and Rewards," Atlantic Council, May 7, 2018; "MEI Defense Leadership Series: Episode 7 with LAF Rear Admiral (Ret.) Joseph Sarkis," Middle East Institute, September 8, 2020.

instead mediated by the Arab League and Qatari government, resulting in the 2008 Doha Agreement.[174]

In 2014, militants linked to the Islamic State and Al Qaeda clashed with LAF forces in the Lebanese border town of Arsal. Nineteen LAF personnel were killed, and 29 LAF and Internal Security Forces were taken hostage.[175] U.S. officials described the August 2014 clashes between the Islamic State and the LAF in Arsal as a watershed moment for U.S. policy towards Lebanon, accelerating the provision of equipment and training to the LAF.[176] Since 2014, the United States has provided the LAF with aircraft, vehicles, weapons, and other equipment to secure Lebanon's borders and conduct counterterrorism operations.[177] This has included items such as A-29 Super Tucano aircraft, MD-530G light attack helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, and communications and electronic equipment.[178] Since 2014, the United States (in some cases using grants from Saudi Arabia) has also delivered Hellfire air-to-ground missiles, precision artillery, TOW-II missiles, M198 howitzers, small arms, and ammunition to Lebanon. Related U.S. training and advisory support is ongoing.

U.S. Military Presence in Lebanon. In August 2017, a Pentagon spokesperson confirmed the presence of U.S. Special Operations Forces in Lebanon, which he described as providing training and support to the LAF.[179] While he would not comment on the size of the contingent, some observers have estimated that more than 70 Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) trainers and support personnel operate in Lebanon at any given time.[180] According to a U.S. Army publication, U.S. Special Operations Forces have been deployed to Lebanon since at least 2012.[181] The United States also conducts annual bilateral military exercises with the LAF. Known as Resolute Response, these exercises include participants from the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and Army.

End-Use Concerns

Some Members have raised concerns about the possibility that weapons or equipment provided to the LAF could be captured by or diverted to Hezbollah. U.S. Defense and State Department officials have affirmed that the LAF is fully compliant with end-use reporting and security requirements. In 2016, Defense Department officials testified that, "the Lebanese Armed Forces have consistently had the best end-use monitoring reporting of any military that we work with, meaning that the equipment that we provide to the Lebanese Armed Forces, we can account for it at any given time."[182] In 2018, then-CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel testified that, "Since our security assistance began, Lebanon has maintained an exemplary track-record for

[174] Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, "Hezbollah Seizes Swath of Beirut from U.S.-Backed Lebanon Government," *New York Times*, May 10, 2008.

[175] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015: Lebanon*.

[176] CRS conversation with State Department official, October 2016.

[177] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Lebanon," factsheet, January 20, 2021.

[178] U.S. Embassy Beirut, "CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel's Visit to Lebanon," press release, December 13, 2017.

[179] "US Special Forces operating in Lebanon 'close to Hizballah,'" *The New Arab*, August 6, 2017.

[180] Aram Nerguizian, "The Lebanese Armed Forces, Hezbollah and the Race to Defeat ISIS," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 31, 2017.

[181] Michael Foote, "Operationalizing Strategic Policy in Lebanon," *Special Warfare*, vol. 25, no. 2, (April-June 2012).

[182] Testimony of Andrew Exum, Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary for Middle East Policy, in U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa, *U.S. Policy Toward Lebanon*, hearing, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., April 28, 2016, H.Hrg. 114-229 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2016).

adhering to regular and enhanced end-use monitoring protocols. We are confident the LAF has not transferred equipment to Hizballah."[183] A 2021 State Department factsheet stated that, "Lebanon has been a reliable recipient of [Direct Commercial Sales] as evidenced by their 100 percent favorable rate on Blue Lantern end use monitoring checks, well above the global average of 75 percent."[184]

Humanitarian Aid

U.S. Humanitarian Funding

The United States has provided more than $2.7 billion in humanitarian assistance for Lebanon since FY2012.[185] These funds have supported the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as those of host communities, including access to food, shelter, medical care, clean water and sanitation, education, and psychosocial support. U.S. humanitarian assistance for Lebanon generally is provided through implementing partners, such as U.N. entities and national and international nongovernmental organizations.

The U.S. provided $395 million in humanitarian funding for Lebanon in FY2020, including $54 million in supplemental funding for COVID-19 preparedness and response.[186] U.S. humanitarian assistance was provided primarily through international organizations such as UNHCR, WFP, and the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF).[187]

International Humanitarian Funding

The international community has launched various humanitarian appeals and development frameworks targeting the multiple crises in Lebanon, including Syrian refugee arrivals, the spread of COVID-19, and the August 2020 blast at the port of Beirut.

International Refugee Response

The **Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP)** is nested within the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for Syria, co-led by UNHCR and the U.N. Development Program (UNDP). The LCRP supports Syrian refugees in Lebanon as well as vulnerable Lebanese communities whose economic security has been adversely affected by refugee arrivals. The LCRP also focuses on strengthening the stability of the Lebanese state and civil society. The 2020 LCRP sought $2.67 billion, nearly half of the total 2020 Syria Regional 3RP appeal. As of December 2020, the LCRP was funded at 63%, "leaving major gaps in vulnerable populations' access to basic survival needs and services" according to UNHCR.[188] The 2021 LCRP appeal seeks $2.75 billion.

[183] Testimony of General Joseph Votel, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, *Terrorism and Iran: Defense Challenges in the Middle East*, hearing, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., February 27, 2018, H.Hrg. 115-74 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2019).

[184] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Lebanon," factsheet, January 20, 2021.

[185] USAID, "Lebanon—Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #1, FY2021," December 30, 2020.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Ibid.

[188] UNHCR, "Inter-Agency Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) Situation Update," December 2020.

In March 2021, the European Union, via the **Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syria Crisis**, adopted an assistance package of 130 million euros to support Syrian refugees and local communities in Lebanon and Jordan—98 million of which was earmarked for Lebanon.[189]

COVID-19 Aid

The **Lebanon Intersectoral COVID Response Plan 2020** sought $136.5 million for 2020 and was funded at 73%. The United States was the largest single donor to the plan, providing $52.3 million.[190]

Beirut Port Blast Aid

The **Lebanon Flash Appeal 2020** sought $196 million and was funded at 84%. The United States provided $30 million toward this appeal, with funding provided through WFP, UNHCR, and Caritas Lebanon.[191]

In August 2020, the United Nations launched the **Inter-Agency Humanitarian Appeal for Lebanon**, which sought $565 million for relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts following the port blast.[192]

The **Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (Lebanon 3RF)** was launched in December 2020 by the European Union, United Nations, and the World Bank to address the needs of Lebanese affected by the August 2020 blast at the port of Beirut. The Lebanon 3RF is comprised of two nonsequential tracks, the first focused on vulnerable populations ($584 million) and the second focused on reforms and reconstruction ($2 billion).[193]

Humanitarian Aid and the Lebanese Government

The United States and other donors have expressed concern that any aid provided to the Lebanese government could benefit Hezbollah or be otherwise diverted. U.S. humanitarian assistance has been provided through implementing partners, including U.N. entities and nongovernmental organizations.[194]

In early 2021, the World Bank announced that it would provide assistance to vulnerable families in Lebanon via a loan to the Lebanese government. The **Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net Project (ESSN)** is a $246 million project, mostly aimed at providing emergency cash transfers to 147,000 vulnerable Lebanese households for a period of one year.[195] The project generated controversy within Lebanon, as ESSN funds were to be

[189] European Commission, "EU adopts €130 million support package for Syrian refugees and local communities in Jordan and Lebanon," press release, March 5, 2021.

[190] OCHA, "Lebanon Intersectoral COVID Response Plan 2020," Financial Tracking Service, available at https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/988/summary.

[191] OCHA, "Lebanon Flash Appeal 2020," Financial Tracking Service, available at https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1009/summary.

[192] "UN and partners launch $565 million appeal for Lebanon," *UN News*, August 14, 2020.

[193] World Bank, "Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF)- Frequently Asked Questions," December 4, 2020.

[194] "U.S. Won't Send Aid to Lebanese Government Over Terror-Finance Concerns," *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2020.

[195] World Bank, "US$246 Million to Support Poor and Vulnerable Lebanese Households and Build-Up the Social Safety Net Delivery System," press release, January 12, 2021.

provided to the Lebanese government in dollars but distributed to recipients in Lebanese lira, at a rate more than 30 percent lower than market rate.[196] In light of the collapse of the Lebanese lira, international organization asked that aid money be paid out in dollars or at the market rate, Lebanese officials made a verbal agreement to distribute the aid in dollars.[197]

U.S. Sanctions

U.S. Sanctions on Hezbollah

Hezbollah, as an entity, is listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist (1995); a Foreign Terrorist Organization (1997); and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist or SDGT (2001). Hezbollah was designated again in 2012 under E.O. 13582, for its support to the Syrian government.

The United States has used sanctions as a tool to isolate Hezbollah from the international financial system, although U.S. officials also have stated that, "In many cases, Hezbollah doesn't use the legitimate financial system in order to move money."[198] Nevertheless, the United States has continued to use secondary sanctions to target persons and entities that facilitate financial transactions for Hezbollah (some of whom, unlike Hezbollah, may interact more frequently with the international financial system). These measures include the Hizballah Financial Sanctions Regulations, which implement the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015 (P.L. 114-102, known as HIFPA), as amended by the Hizballah International Prevention Amendments Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-272, sometimes referred to as HIFPA II). However, the primary designation for Hezbollah-linked entities remains that of Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), pursuant to E.O. 13224 (2001).

U.S. Sanctions on Lebanese Politicians

During the Trump Administration, the United States expanded sanctions to include members of parliament. Individuals targeted included both Hezbollah MPs and lawmakers allied with the group.

- In 2019, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated 2 of Hezbollah's 13 members of parliament (Mohammad Raad and Amin Sherri), the first time that sitting Lebanese MPs had been targeted.
- In September 2020, OFAC designated former Minister of Transportation and Public Works Yusuf Finyanus and former Minister of Finance Ali Hassan Khalil for providing material support to Hezbollah.
- In November 2020, OFAC designated former minister Gibran Bassil pursuant to Executive Order 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, for his role in corruption in Lebanon. Bassil heads the FPM,

[196] Abby Sewell, "How a World Bank loan to support Lebanon's most vulnerable will also shore up a crumbling financial system," *L'Orient Today*, January 19, 2021.

[197] Ghada Alsharif and Abby Sewell, "With the lira plummeting, international donors push for aid to be paid out in dollars," *L'Orient Today*, March 17, 2021; Osama Habib, "World Bank's $246 million loan for needy families to be paid in fresh dollars," *Daily Star*, March 17, 2021.

[198] Testimony of Michael Ratney, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State, in U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, *U.S. Policy Towards Lebanon*, hearing, 115th Cong., 1st sess., October 11, 2017, H.Hrg. 115-83 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2017).

the largest Christian party in Lebanon, and the largest bloc in parliament. Bassil also is the son-in-law of President Aoun and a political ally of Hezbollah.

U.S. officials have stated that sanctions could be expanded beyond their traditional focus on Hezbollah, suggesting that Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh could be targeted for sanctions as part of a broader investigation into the alleged embezzlement of public funds.[199]

Outlook

As of 2021, Lebanon faces one of the most serious economic crises in its modern history, while also struggling to manage the spread of COVID-19, widespread damage from the August 2020 explosion at the port of Beirut, and longstanding challenges posed by the presence of over a million refugees. At the same time, the country's inability to form a government has severely constricted its ability to implement reforms, or to negotiate an urgently needed economic relief package with international donors.

The severe deterioration of economic conditions since 2019 risks further undermining stability. Analysts have noted that violent unrest in the northern city of Tripoli, one of Lebanon's most impoverished areas, may be a harbinger of further instability—particularly if economic conditions continue to deteriorate and austerity measures (such as a reduction in government subsidies on food and gasoline) constrain access to basic necessities.[200] In particular, the steep decline in the value of the lira and the resulting inflation has decimated public sector salaries—including among the army and internal security forces—raising concern about whether state institutions will be able to contain growing unrest.[201] Officials from across the political spectrum have warned of an impending security breakdown, if current economic conditions persist.[202]

U.S. policy toward Lebanon traditionally has focused on reducing the influence of U.S. adversaries in the country, but it is unclear to what extent escalating pressure on Hezbollah—which operates a vast social services network that many vulnerable communities depend on in the absence of state services—will be a priority for Lebanese political or military officials in the current economic context. At the same time, U.S. efforts to ameliorate economic conditions in Lebanon may be constrained by what U.S. officials have described as "systemic corruption," a sentiment echoed by some former Lebanese officials.[203] The United States and other donors continue to seek ways of addressing the severe economic hardship faced by Lebanese citizens and refugees—and the resulting threat to political stability—while not inadvertently supporting a political system dominated by entrenched elites that to date have resisted international calls for reform.

[199] Ben Bartenstein and Dana Khraiche, "U.S. said to weigh sanctions on Lebanon central bank chief," *Bloomberg*, March 4, 2020.

[200] "Riots in Lebanon's Tripoli are Harbingers of Collapse," International Crisis Group, February 2, 2021.

[201] Ibid.

[202] "Fears of security risks grow amid worsening economic meltdown," *Daily Star*, March 17, 2021.

[203] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Corruption in Lebanon," press release, November 6, 2020; "The Lebanese conundrum," *Daily Star*, January 12, 2021.

Author Information

Carla E. Humud
Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

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