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The Beirut Disaster: Implications for Lebanon and U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

Four experts discuss the deadly Beirut explosion as it relates to the Lebanese political system, Hezbollah hegemony, and foreign aid.

On August 13, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Saleh Machnouk, Hanin Ghaddar, Matthew Levitt, and Charles Thepaut. Machnouk is a columnist at the Lebanese daily an-Nahar and a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Cambridge. Ghaddar is the Institute's Friedmann Fellow and a former journalist with the Lebanese media. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow, director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and creator of its newly released [Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activity Interactive Map and Timeline](#). Thepaut, a French career diplomat, is a resident visiting fellow at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Saleh Machnouk

The explosion in Beirut appears to have marked a turning point in the Lebanese psyche. There is no desire in Lebanon to return to business as usual, particularly following the “October revolution” of 2019 and the financial meltdown brought about by a dysfunctional political system. Lebanon is run by a mafia-militia nexus, wherein the mafia provides political cover for the militias and the militias protect the mafia. The explosion in Beirut represents the culmination of a gradual accumulation of power by the mafia-militia nexus.

Three Hezbollah-led events in recent history characterize the rise of the mafia-militia nexus in Lebanese politics: (1) the group's 2008 invasion of Beirut; (2) its 2011 overthrow of the government using military force; and (3) its two-year interference in the country's presidential contest, preventing a vote until the 2016 election of Michel Aoun. Now comes the Beirut explosion.

During his post-disaster visit, France's President Emmanuel Macron was welcomed in Lebanon as a folk hero. Indeed, a wide range of Lebanese actors are willing to engage with France as a mediator. France has additionally been steadfast in calling for an end to Lebanese corruption. But France is also increasingly viewed as failing to recognize the mafia's role in Lebanon's mafia-militia nexus, instead treating the mafia as a legitimate representative of the people. Epitomizing this perception, President Macron has a personal relationship with former prime minister Saad Hariri and he liberally uses terms such as “National Pact,” referring to the tripartite grounding of the modern Lebanese state. Additionally, most Lebanese do not view France as a neutral party but rather as a major stakeholder in the country. Therefore, the French role needs to be complemented by a strong U.S. hand. Likewise preventing Lebanese neutrality is the destabilizing role of Hezbollah, calling for a balance of foreign influence.

The United States, for its part, should stop engaging with Lebanon's former foreign minister Gebran Bassil, a member of the Free Patriotic Movement who is despised by everyone in the country. The domestic perception is that Bassil enjoys U.S. ties while also using his Hezbollah connections to negotiate on topics such as maritime borders. Washington can pursue its shared interests with Lebanon through other avenues.

Hanin Ghaddar

The mafia-militia nexus in Lebanon responded to the Beirut explosion in two ways. First, it brought about the government's resignation, expecting this to quell anger on the street and earn international approval. But this strategy failed because the international community and the Lebanese street alike recognize that the current government is a scapegoat, and that today's power brokers will endure absent wider changes. Still, the resignation does signal that Hezbollah recognizes that its government failed and the people know it. The second mafia-militia response was to impose a state of emergency, putting the army in charge and allowing it to target the media and protestors.

Hezbollah cannot meaningfully change because it is intrinsically tied to Iran's regional project. In the past, changes made by the group were born of pragmatism, with an eye to gaining long-term control. But the group's base is shifting. Its legitimacy is based on three pillars: resistance, provision of services, and Shia identity. The resistance element has crumbled in recent years, particularly since Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah announced the

group's priority as Syria, and a defense of the Assad regime, as opposed to responding to Israeli attacks. The second pillar is faltering due to Hezbollah's financial crisis, with the group no longer considered the protector and provider. Therefore, much of its legitimacy now rests on the third pillar.

The year 2005, the last instance of true political change in Lebanon, differs from the situation today in three fundamental ways. First, street anger in 2005 was successfully translated into international diplomacy with clear goals, with both internal and external initiatives converging on the same objectives. Second, a political opposition existed in 2005, embodied in the March 14 camp. Today, by contrast, demonstrators chant, "All of them means all of them," a call for a wholesale dethroning of elites, with no established opposition recognized as an acceptable alternative. Third, in 2005 the army protected the protestors, whereas today it has turned on them, emboldened by the state of emergency. The United States should urge the Lebanese army to protect the protestors.

Members of the Lebanese street have a vision for the future, but they still lack a clear way to implement it, even as their demands are moving in the right direction. Last year, the emphasis was on getting the government to resign; now, it is on removing the president. Domestic protestors must now achieve coordination with the international community, as occurred in 2005.

The international community, meanwhile, has to push for real change in Lebanon, which means refusing to support the formation of another national unity government. Lebanon needs an election, but how a new election law can be passed under the state of emergency is unclear. A first step would be implementing a transitional government headed by an independent candidate. Nawaf Salam has been suggested for this role. The international community must also push for an independent investigation into the explosion and, when sending humanitarian assistance, avoid working through government channels.

In the long term, Lebanon needs to figure out what kind of system it really wants. The confessional system is failing, and it must be replaced through either proper enforcement of the 1989 Taif Accord or creation of a new agreement.

Matthew Levitt

The current challenge to the corrupt Lebanese political system threatens Hezbollah more than it does any of the other mafioso parties. It also represents an uncomfortable situation for the group. Typically, Hezbollah is challenged on its militancy. Today, it is being challenged on its politics.

Hezbollah is the only sectarian party that is both part of and above the system, and it has used this unique position in ways other mafia-militia players have not. For example, the group has intimidated banks to prevent the implementation of basic international anti-money laundering mechanisms—notably, by bombing Lebanon's Blom Bank. Moreover, according to the U.S. Treasury, parliamentarian Amin Sherri intimidated bankers and their family members to ensure that Hezbollah continued to receive domestic financing. And in the wake of the Jammal Trust Bank case, senior U.S. officials noted that the same type of bullying and abuse happened at other institutions, including the Central Bank.

It bears noting here that there is no distinction between Hezbollah's wings. This fluidity is exemplified in the case of parliamentarian Muhammad Hassan Raad engaging with Wafiq Safa, the head of Hezbollah's security organization, to identify individuals who could obtain dual nationality in order to conduct operations abroad. Hezbollah is also the only party willing and able to turn its arms against fellow Lebanese when challenged. It has an arsenal that is larger, better funded, and more sophisticated than that of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

Regarding the Beirut explosion, it is a mistake to focus exclusively on specific activities Hezbollah may have been conducting at the port prior to the disaster. Interested parties should wait for a credible international investigation before speculating on such matters. What is clear from declassified U.S. Treasury documents is that Wafiq Safa ran things out of the port. More broadly, Hezbollah often makes life-or-death decisions for the Lebanese people in

service of its own interests and at Iran's behest, independent of the LAF and the central government. Even before the port explosion, the group was known to use construction facilities to hide its precision-guided missiles in civilian areas of Beirut, effectively using Lebanese citizens as human shields.

Charles Thepaut

France is leading the international response to the Beirut explosion due to its historic and societal proximity to Lebanon. Not only did France hold the post-World War I mandate in Lebanon, but a large number of binational Lebanese live in France, strengthening ties. Recently, a video went viral of a French farmer with no connection to Lebanon offering to donate a ton of wheat to the country.

The goal of President Macron's recent visit, in addition to showing solidarity, was to find solutions for Lebanon in the immediate, medium, and long term. The medium-term focus was laid out earlier at the 2018 Cedar Conference, hosted by France, with an emphasis on macroeconomics and a clear framework for international financial assistance delivery. Macron's visit also serves as a reminder to Lebanon about the reforms necessary for attracting international aid and cooperation.

These reforms cannot happen without a political revolution, and change must come from a Lebanese-led process in order to be effective and legitimate. Outside forces are indeed limited in the extent to which they can seek change in the Lebanese political framework. France, specifically, cannot be too prescriptive. But the visits to Lebanon by international leaders following the explosion send the message that change is very much needed.

The mindset of international donors has likewise changed. They now want more conditions attached to their money, and the types of big-money donations to Lebanon prevalent after the civil war and in 2006 are no longer possible. Many countries have called for transparency and accountability in international assistance. In a further change from previous years, donors have shared a willingness to bypass the Lebanese government and give directly to Lebanese NGOs. The associated challenge will be figuring out how to combine different types of international assistance, ranging from big, broad donations from entities such as the IMF to the smaller work done by NGOs.

Stakeholders also recognize a need to rethink the entire way aid is delivered, moving from the previous state-to-state model toward a society-to-society framework. This trend is already apparent in the donations by private companies to Lebanon. The pandemic will undoubtedly limit the ability of many countries to donate. Meanwhile, Macron has scheduled another visit to Lebanon for early September, signaling that a larger process has just begun.

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