

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Saleh Machnoug is a columnist at the Lebanese daily "An-Nahar" and a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Cambridge, focusing on state-building and third-party interventions in ethnically divided countries.



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Brief Analysis

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

**O**n August 13, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Saleh Machnoug, Hanin Ghaddar, and Matthew Levitt. Machnoug 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 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/lebanese-hezbollah-select-worldwide-activities-interactive-map-and-timeline\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/lebanese-hezbollah-select-worldwide-activities-interactive-map-and-timeline). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Saleh Machnoug

**T**he 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**

**T**he 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

**T**he 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.

*This summary was prepared by Elise Burr. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖*

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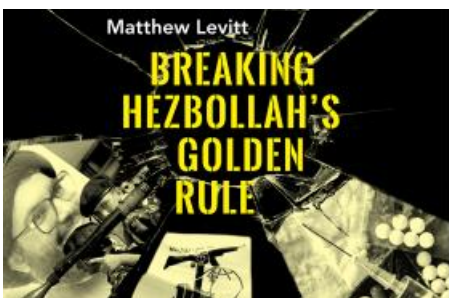
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