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Lebanon Needs Transformation, Not Another Corrupt Unity Government

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Articles & Testimony

If the United States lets France take the lead, the Lebanese people will get more political paralysis, cosmetic reforms, and Hezbollah control of state institutions.

The massive explosion in Beirut last Tuesday, killing at least 160 people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless, triggered a political moment as another explosion did 15 years ago: the targeted blast that killed then-Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Then, as now, grief quickly turned to anger. In 2005, the outraged Lebanese rose up to demand fundamental political change, not cosmetic reforms, and they are taking to the streets once again today. But there is a key difference. In 2005, the White House was willing and able to play a nimble and ultimately effective role helping local activists translate raw emotion into new elections and a new government. Yet today Washington is content with taking a back seat to an energetic but ambivalent French president—an arrangement that will almost certainly not produce the change most Lebanese yearn for.

The French are pushing for a reconciliation among all parties, with some kind of national unity government that would only maintain the status quo and offer a scapegoat—such as Hassan Diab's government, which **resigned** en masse yesterday—to calm the streets. Yet the Lebanese need a more drastic solution. The government's resignation will not change the system as long as the same political elites maintain their power and control over other institutions.

Lebanon was already in the middle of an unprecedented economic and political crisis when the twin blasts hit. It's a crisis so severe that it has already begun to trigger hyperinflation and hunger in a country that weathered 15 years of civil war without experiencing such economic devastation. And it is being kept alive by the greed of a political class that refuses even the most modest reforms demanded by an International Monetary Fund that actually wants to give the country money.

France seems to be taking the lead for now, as illustrated by French President Emmanuel Macron's symbolic visit to Beirut last week followed by his quick move to kick off Sunday's international donor meeting. Countries have already pledged over 250 million euros (approximately \$300 million).

As other countries follow in France's footsteps, it is worth keeping two things in mind: First, the Beirut port explosion was not a natural disaster, and it should not be treated as such. Therefore, as much as humanitarian aid is vital to help the Lebanese stand back on their feet, accountability is much more significant in the long term, and this is exactly what Lebanese protesters in the streets are calling for.

Second, the Lebanese people no longer trust their government, whose incompetence was one of the possible causes of the explosion. Therefore, assistance should not by any means go through government institutions or political organizations and charities.

The deeply corrupt political system will prevent aid from reaching the people who need it. A number of local and international nongovernment organizations—such as the Lebanese Red Cross—have already been offering relief and assistance on the ground from day one. They were the first responders and have a good infrastructure and knowledge of the situation on the ground. If aid goes through these organizations, the likelihood that it will reach the right beneficiaries is much higher.

If Lebanon's government is asking for international assistance, then it should accept an international investigation. The United States could take the lead on these two policy questions while coordinating with the French on a humanitarian initiative.

France has been trying to strike a difficult balance: mobilize the international community to support Lebanon while exerting pressure on Lebanese political leaders to implement reforms to allow more aid to be sent. But Macron made clear in his press statement at the end of his Beirut visit that he would not craft a political solution for Lebanon and that it was up to the Lebanese to construct it, giving an opportunity for both the political elite to compromise and for the protest movement to reorganize and prepare for the next elections.

But the Lebanese elite won't budge without pressure, and the authorities won't hesitate to use violence to suppress the protests. For many Lebanese, this is a Catch-22 situation that can only be overcome if the authorities are pressured as they were in 2005—by a robust U.S. presence in the region and a very clear message from the United States to the Lebanese authorities—when the government was forced to resign and early elections were organized. Unfortunately, there's no sign of an international initiative in this direction.

Only an international investigation would achieve real accountability and justice. Lebanese President Michel Aoun has already refused this suggestion, as expected. Not only could an international investigative team hold many in the political establishment accountable, but it could also reveal Hezbollah's control, presence, and storage facilities at the city's port—even if the group had nothing to do with the 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate stockpiled at the port.

Although it is too early to tell if the ammonium nitrate belonged to Hezbollah, there are many factors suggesting the group is responsible. It has control over a major part of the port, including the area where the explosion took place and where Hezbollah had temporarily stored its missiles since approximately 2008.

Not much has changed in the last four decades. According to a 1987 CIA [report](#), “Most operations in Lebanon’s ports are illegal and beyond the reach of the government.” Although the report was focused on Palestinian factions during the Lebanese Civil War and the role of the Syrian regime, the dynamics of control have benefitted Hezbollah, which seems to have inherited both the Syrian regime’s and the Palestinian factions’ control of Lebanon’s ports.

It’s not a secret that Hezbollah has access and control over all of Lebanon’s points of entry: the Syrian-Lebanese borders, the airport, and the port. Nor is it a secret that Hezbollah has been [smuggling](#) weapons through the port to store in Lebanon and transfer to Syria.

And it’s no secret that Hezbollah and its allies have put their people in many of the port’s sensitive positions. Indeed, in July 2019, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Hezbollah security official Wafiq Safa for acting on behalf of the group. The Treasury [said](#) Safa, as the head of Hezbollah’s security apparatus, “has exploited Lebanon’s ports and border crossings to smuggle contraband and facilitate travel” on behalf of the group. According to the report, Hezbollah “leveraged Safa to facilitate the passage of items, including illegal drugs and weapons, into the port of Beirut, Lebanon” and “specifically routed certain shipments through Safa to avoid scrutiny.”

There are many questions an impartial investigation could answer: Why were Dutch and French rescue teams kept away from the port for hours the second day after the explosion? Why was the ammonium nitrate stored at the port? Who left it there for six years, despite warnings of the risk? What exactly caused the explosion? The Lebanese authorities will not be able to answer these questions on their own.

In 2005, many Lebanese opposition parties rushed to accuse the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah for Hariri’s assassination. Back then, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah accused Israel and didn’t hesitate to thank the Syrian regime after its army withdrew from Lebanon, in a gesture that was understood as an act of defiance against the international community and local opposition.

Fifteen years later, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is ready to announce its verdict on Aug. 18 against four Hezbollah members. Hariri’s accused killers [will almost certainly be convicted](#) in a few days, and that was only possible because the international community pushed for an international investigation and helped establish the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. As the events in Beirut develop, a similar opportunity presents itself today.

Hezbollah is clearly worried. The party has accused state institutions and state employees rather than Israel this time. Accordingly, Hezbollah and the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese government appear to have decided that to survive this, some employees will have to be sacrificed, including the country’s customs chief, Badri Daher, who was appointed by Gebran Bassil, Hezbollah’s main ally in Parliament.

The Trump administration should take advantage of this situation. Washington has lately been focused on applying maximum pressure on Iran; therefore, it would make sense to recognize that the horror and tragedy of the Beirut blast presents an opportunity to trim the sails of Iran’s most effective regional proxy, Hezbollah.

There are many hard-power reasons for Washington to get more deeply involved in Lebanon right now: to burnish its regional leadership credentials, to beat the Chinese and Russians to it, and to ensure supply lines into Syria. But taking advantage of the moment to give the Lebanese a chance to create a new political system in which Hezbollah is cut down to size is certainly high on the list.

There are several things the U.S. government can do to achieve that objective. First, it must grasp that this is a 2005 moment. The old anti-Hezbollah March 14 coalition is not an alternative because corruption exists across both coalitions and the Lebanese protesters’ demands—with their main slogan, “All of you means all of you”—target every sectarian and corrupt politician no matter their political position on Hezbollah.

Lebanon’s people are demanding a total replacement of the system—a new kind of Taif Agreement, the accord

negotiated in Saudi Arabia in September 1989 to provide “the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon.” Today, the tragedy in Lebanon requires a new agreement that would lead to real change and an end of the sectarian system.

Second, Washington should make sure that humanitarian aid does not go through any state institutions, including the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The United States has been assisting the LAF since 2006 for clear security objectives, but the LAF in turn has used brutal force against protesters during the recent demonstrations. Security assistance could continue, as long as the LAF does not use it to suppress protesters, but humanitarian assistance should go through local and international NGOs that are doing a much better job at relief efforts.

Third, the United States and its allies must push for an independent and transparent investigation of Lebanon’s port explosion. If the U.S. policy is to contain Iran and its proxies, then this is a golden opportunity. Holding Hezbollah accountable for perhaps killing hundreds of Lebanese and injuring thousands could push the Lebanese people—and Western public opinion in general—to reject Hezbollah’s grip on the country.

Fourth, there must be an investigation into the LAF’s use of violence against protesters. The 2005 Cedar Revolution happened because the army’s leadership took a decision to protect the protesters, who were peaceful. The army today seems to have decided to protect the authorities and punish the victims. The U.S. government needs to send a clear message to the LAF that if it does not protect the protesters as they did in 2005, assistance will stop.

Finally, the U.S. government should take the lead in pushing for genuine change rather than following Macron’s lead. The French president might be satisfied with a national unity government. However, this idea reminds the Lebanese people of the first national unity government that was forced on the Lebanese after the events of May 2008.

At the time, Hezbollah took over Beirut and the Druze mountains, used its weapons against the Lebanese people, and pushed the March 14 coalition to effectively give up power to Hezbollah through the national unity government—launching a process that allowed the group to take over most political, military, and security institutions. Another national unity government today would maintain Hezbollah’s power over state institutions.

What Lebanon needs instead is a new beginning—a new political and social contract that eliminates sectarianism and establishes accountability through judicial reforms. This can only happen through a new electoral law that entails proper representation and an end to the confessional system, as well as early elections, which would produce a new parliament, a new government, and a new president. Lebanon also needs the truth—and the accountability that follows—to overcome this tragedy.

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