

The Coronavirus Pandemic in Lebanon: Leveraging and Counter-Leveraging

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Brief Analysis

Nassim Taleb used the term “black swan” as a metaphor for unexpected variables that challenge assumptions and approaches. In the span of a short few months, Lebanon has experienced two major “black swan” events, introducing more complexity into an already delicate and difficult political and social climate. **[The militant, pro-Iranian camp \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-temporary-success-of-irans-proxies-in-lebanon-occludes-a-deeper-shift-i\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-temporary-success-of-irans-proxies-in-lebanon-occludes-a-deeper-shift-i)** may feel confident that it has well managed severe challenges to its stranglehold on Lebanese politics and society. With major unknowns surrounding the country, the region, and the world, the satisfaction of prevailing will in all probability be ephemeral.

In Lebanon—the “precarious republic”—the endurance of aberrant levels of upheaval had been normalized into the rhythm of political life. The Lebanese have processed with a quasi-fatalistic acceptance of events like the forced resignation of the Prime Minister after his effective captivity during a visit abroad, and a local private army, already a stand-in for foreign occupation, dispatching its units beyond national borders for a regional war.

Yet even Hezbollah—the private army in question—was disarmed and confused by Lebanon’s first Black Swan of last year, the **[‘revolutionary’ protests beginning on October 17, 2019](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-lebanon-poll-despite-protests-most-shiites-still-back-hezbollah-and-ira)**

[\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-lebanon-poll-despite-protests-most-shiites-still-back-hezbollah-and-ira\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-lebanon-poll-despite-protests-most-shiites-still-back-hezbollah-and-ira). Its leader, Hasan Nasrallah, has deployed Hezbollah’s unmatched coercive power and political clout to thwart and contain a movement that has even expanded to his own base, alternatively praising the protestors and accusing them of complicity with foreign powers.

[The Iran-aligned camp \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-decline-and-fall-of-the-fourth-persian-empire\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-decline-and-fall-of-the-fourth-persian-empire) has benefited from the weak and inconsistent position of Prime Minister Sa’d Hariri. While Hariri resigned in compliance with the protestors’ demands, he seemed unable to concretely re-align himself and his political faction to meet their call for structural reform, or to leverage their movement to regain the prime ministership with a better allocation of executive power over the government positions controlled by allies of Hezbollah.

[The political class suffered from long weeks of confusion.](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/bigoted-populism-may-spell-the-end-of-lebanon-as-a)

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modern-state) Nasrallah strove to find a suitable approach to maintain and regain control within his community and restore gravitas at the national level, while Hariri seemed to await an organic alignment in his favor to self-materialize. Hezbollah's allies in government also displayed confusion in addressing the protests. The president's son-in-law Gebran Bassil, leader of the mostly-Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) that is symbiotically allied with and acts as vassal to Hezbollah, lived in denial at the unraveling of his image of a capable leader able to secure Christian privileges during the protests and the floundering of his own presidential ambition.

Yet the protest movement is responding to this very context of political elites' deepening clientelism and short-sighted, depleting kleptocracy, which had denied Lebanon its chance to evolve actual representative governance. The longstanding abject mismanagement in economic, fiscal, and monetary policies has doomed Lebanon to likely bankruptcy in the near future. The protests demanded immediate action to avoid the slide into the abyss, but also offered a convenient opportunity for the authorities to pin blame on the protestors for the looming economic collapse that called them to the streets in the first place. In a feat of circular logic, protestors were declared responsible for the economic crisis, for their demands to get access to their own funds sequestered in banks.

In practicing public denial, and doubling down on its own internecine disputes, Lebanon's ruling class seemed set on actions that would hasten its ultimate demise. Breaking with the tradition that the Hezbollah-led camp had itself imposed, of cabinets of "National Unity" in which all factions are represented, a "lukewarm" new Prime Minister was selected—officially independent, but blatantly following the Hezbollah-FPM diktat in his statements and actions.

The immediate net outcome of the October 17 movement was thus to enhance the position of the Iran-aligned camp in Lebanon. But this momentary boost had a clear expiration date due to the country's unavoidable looming crises, notably the expected defaulting on government debts in the coming months. The approach of the streamlined ruling class was to use the augmented power, even if temporary, to diffuse the protest movement—while engaging in further voracious kleptocratic actions.

Yet with Lebanon's wet and cold winter dampening the spread of the mass protests, the general expectation was that activists's plans to prepare for a resumption of protests, en force, in the spring would be a strong resumption of the movement. Several intersecting factors were influencing the movement's direction: rising organization, networking, and coordination between groups of protestors that would contribute to building a national strategy transcending communitarianism and class barriers; the containment plans devised by security forces to forbid protest actions disruptive of the public order; and the attempts, both benign and malign, of some activist groups to redirect the protests in line with their ideological orientation.

The ruling class may have wanted to wish the protest movement away. In fact, while originally spontaneous, the protests, spanning the country's fragmented geography, provided a novel opportunity for Lebanon, at its centennial year, to display its society's readiness to transcend communitarianism and achieve a modern citizen-centered state.

A defining confrontation was expected between the ruling class, emboldened by its success in converting the challenge of the protests into an additional and unapologetic power grab, and the protest movement heartened by its success at maintaining, even improving, its presence and integrity in spite of adverse conditions. This expected confrontation was upended by the emergence of another "black swan"—the coronavirus pandemic.

The true extent of the penetration of the novel coronavirus in Lebanese society remains unknown. The few hundred cases and the handful of deaths officially reported are certainly a poor estimate of the true spread of the pandemic and an artifact of the limited testing available to an already dilapidated and further strained health system. What is evident is that numerous social settings—such as refugee camps and high-density low income neighborhoods—are particularly vulnerable to outbreaks, and ill-equipped to practice social distancing and other prescribed guidance to slow the spread. While promises and apparent preparations of additional facilities saturate the media, only one

hospital in Beirut has a proven track record of managing COVID-19 cases.

The initially dismissed threat influenced by socio-cultural traits of complacency and nonchalance became highly elevated with the disaster in Italy, where many Lebanese study and work. A messaging feud pitting Hezbollah and FPM, about the “country of origin” of the “imported” affliction. Having been accused of preventing a swift travel ban from Iran to maintain Iran’s image control and due to Hezbollah’s own logistical needs, Hezbollah promoted through its proxy media the notion that the virus’s vector of penetration is through Catholic clerics returning from Italy. The geography of the spread of the virus was certainly more complex, with cases traced to Egypt and Syria, in addition to Iran and Italy. Still, by claiming communitarian spread, the mutual accusations aroused factional skirmishes in social media—officially denounced, but effectively serving the interests of Hezbollah, the FPM, and others in reinforcing the vertical divisions that the protests had eroded.

In line with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, the Lebanese government adopted and sought to implement a range of measures to negotiate the COVID-19 pandemic. For the country’s ruling class, these measures could not be better designed or timed to seek to achieve what was previously unattainable until now: the total obliteration of the protests. Politically-motivated curfews, designed to free the public space of protests, are no longer needed since a public health mandated lockdown is in order. Forcefully dispersing protestors while facing accusations of infringement on the freedom of speech are no longer risks that the authorities have to take, with the established awareness that social distancing is imperative.

Hezbollah’s initial short-term strategy for the protests has already been proven successful as COVID-19 has reshuffled the elements of power and engagement. Hezbollah’s still unproven claim of an anti-pandemic war strategy can be understood as a hopeful attempt at consolidating their windfall gains. The Hezbollah-controlled government is following suit by physically dismantling the tents and other temporary structures that protestors had erected in many public squares. COVID-19 is now also advanced as an “argument” by Hezbollah and its supporters to justify replacing the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the governor of the Central Bank with more compliant and docile personalities, along lines of the appointment of the current Prime Minister.

Yet the conviction that the second “black swan” will be a strategic victory for the Iran-aligned camp may be premature. The ability of this camp to deliver actions that may save Lebanon from disaster is severely curtailed by the overwhelming accumulated economic problems that the ruling class has caused and ignored, by the set of priorities adopted and pursued by Hezbollah as an agent of Iranian policy, and by the inability of the political elite to abstain from further corruption and pursuit of narrow interests. Hezbollah’s “strategic victory” may be another media illusion serving merely to postpone the inevitable.

The nascent, even if battered, national protest movement in Lebanon is showing meaningful signs of adaptation to the new COVID-19 restrictions and realities. Mutual aid coordination has taken precedence over more systemic demands. Initiatives providing support for the needy through crowd-sourcing or its low-tech antecedents have popped up along with information campaigns to empower citizens with knowledge to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The movement has also provided an alternative voice to the grandstanding political figures on the issue, who through a record of kleptocracy have usurped a substantial portion of the national wealth only to recycle a mediocre fraction as acts of benevolence.

This ability to adapt, even as political leaders take advantage of new ways to frustrate the movement’s efforts, speaks to the dynamism of the October 17 protests. They were not an incidental departure from the reality of a Lebanon burdened by communitarianism and dominated by kleptocratic neo-feudalism and subservience to Iran. The movement’s continued efforts are instead the expression, even if still in need of growth, of a society that can no longer afford the bleeding to which it has been subjected. ❖

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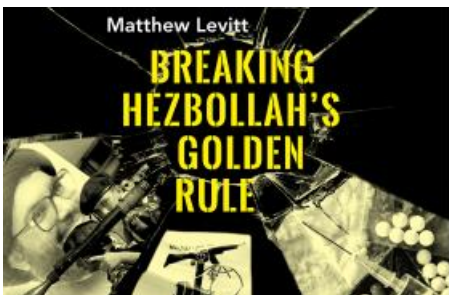
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