

Lebanon's Latest Moves Show the Effectiveness of Targeted International Pressure

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Brief Analysis

By uniting behind the message that financial aid and punishment will be tied to specific courses of action, the United States, France, and the UN may finally be able to push Beirut into establishing a reform-minded government.

Since caretaker prime minister Saad Hariri resigned in October, the process of forming a new Lebanese government has become more complicated. Street protests continue amid increased violence by security institutions, while the country's dominant political actor—the widely designated terrorist organization Hezbollah—is still insisting on a government headed by Hariri and favorable to its interests. Yet three important events took place last week that could change that plan and break the deadlock.

First, the International Support Group for Lebanon (ISGL), co-chaired by France and the United Nations, met in Paris and **explicitly stated (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/final-statement-international-support-group-for-lebanon-paris-11-dec-2019>)** that the international community will not help Lebanon financially until a new government is formed—specifically, one “that will have the capacity and credibility to deliver the necessary substantive policy package of economic reforms, and that will be committed to dissociate the country from regional tensions and crisis.” Although there was no mention of who should—or should not—head this government, the consensus on reform was clear. The international community had already pledged to help Lebanon at the CEDRE conference in April 2018 on condition of reforms that never materialized. That is why a simple bailout will not happen until a credible government forms.

Second, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned three more Hezbollah financiers: Lebanon-based Nazem Said Ahmad and his companies, accused of laundering large sums of money for the group; Congo-based Saleh Assi, accused of laundering money through Ahmad's diamond business and supporting another sanctioned financier; and

Lebanon-based accountant Tony Saab, accused of providing support to Assi. Notably, Saab is a Christian who recently told Lebanese media that he admires Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, head of the Hezbollah-allied Christian-majority party the Free Patriotic Movement.

Third, U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs David Hale announced that he will visit Lebanon this week. The trip is the highest-level U.S. visit since protests broke out on October 17 and forced the government to resign.

These developments have pushed Lebanon's political class toward several important realizations that may alter their actions going forward:

- The international community has firmly sided with the protestors and will not provide financial assistance if the establishment refuses reform.
- U.S. sanctions may expand to include Christian allies of Hezbollah, a prospect that Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker confirmed in interviews last week with *Al-Arabiya* and *An-Nahar*.
- The United States will not endorse Bassil's role in any new government—a message that was unmistakably conveyed to both him and Hezbollah when Hale indicated he would meet with most Lebanese decisionmakers except Bassil.

THE HARIRI QUESTION

Although international rejection of Bassil's presence in the next government is now clear to Lebanese officials, they are still uncertain about Hariri's status. In negotiating his nomination to succeed himself as prime minister, Hariri has insisted that he is the only one who can save the economy from collapse. He has also promised two key Hezbollah opponents—the Christian party “Lebanese Forces” and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt—that he will form a government composed exclusively of independent technocrats.

Yet this formula comes with several complications. First, the international community may not be united in supporting Hariri's candidacy given his repeated kowtowing to Hezbollah.

Second, the protest movement still refuses to accept him as prime minister and promises to continue demonstrating, even if that means toppling the next government. The protestors have proven resilient against violent reprisals by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and Hezbollah thugs, and they are expected to grow in number as the economy deteriorates.

Third, both major Christian parties have refused to nominate Hariri, further delaying negotiations. The Lebanese Forces stated on December 16 that they will not name him as their candidate, and Bassil declared the same last week when he announced he will not join the next government.

Fourth, Hezbollah leaders seemingly favor Hariri's candidacy because they believe he can be used for international cover while remaining vulnerable to pressure from the group and its allies. Accordingly, Hariri will not be able to fulfill his pledge of forming an independent, wholly technocratic government, as Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah made clear in a December 13 speech.

HEZBOLLAH'S DILEMMA

Bassil's decision to stay out of the next government resulted from recent meetings with Hezbollah security chief Wafiq Safa and other officials, who pushed him in that direction. Bassil seemingly realized that he has become a liability, and that Hariri is now more important to the group.

But Hezbollah no doubt approached the decision gingerly. Dropping Bassil will isolate the group from the Christian community—a major compromise that shows it is under tremendous pressure and may be squeezed into further concessions. Indeed, the group's internal and regional challenges are legion:

- Continued U.S. sanctions on Hezbollah's main patron, Iran, have amplified the group's own financial crisis

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-sanctions-are-hurting-hezbollah>).

- The Lebanese state is on the verge of economic collapse and possible bankruptcy, preventing Hezbollah from making full use of that alternative resource.
- Recent protests in Iraq constitute a challenge to Iran and its local proxies there, which could eventually affect Hezbollah.
- The group's violence against protestors and insistence on protecting corrupt politicians have led many citizens to lose faith in its supposed role as the defender of Lebanon and the enemy of injustice. Even Shia citizens are joining the rest of the country in mass protests, threatening the group's ability to win seats in parliament and access state institutions.

Hezbollah realizes that these challenges will only become more difficult if the protests continue, so it has decided to begin compromising (albeit as minimally as possible) instead of losing power involuntarily. In this sense, Bassil's removal shows that consistent, united pressure at home and abroad can produce significant shifts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Lebanon's economic situation is expected to worsen, so last week's Paris meeting was probably the first of many. It is also becoming clear that Hariri cannot lead the next government. Even if he manages to secure Christian votes for his nomination, he will only be able to form a government that has Hezbollah's blessing—and therefore fails to gain the trust of the street or the international community.

Some alternative candidates are being floated by protestors and parliamentary opposition groups, including Nawaf Salam, Lebanon's former representative to the UN and currently a judge at the International Court of Justice.

Another suggested name is IMF economist Rand Ghayad.

Again, Hezbollah prefers Hariri over these and other alternatives. But if the United States and Europe make clear that he is not acceptable, the group might consider another compromise instead of risking total Lebanese bankruptcy and the resultant loss of influence over state institutions.

Washington should therefore prepare sanctions against additional Hezbollah allies and corrupt politicians. At the moment, President Michel Aoun and Speaker Nabil Berri hold the keys to real change in Lebanon, in terms of approving the next government and holding early parliamentary elections based on a new electoral law. Yet they do not feel pressured enough to change their behavior or let go of power—on the contrary, Berri has been using his supporters to crack down on protestors with no consequences. Now is the perfect time for sanctions against his party, Amal, as well as members and businessmen associated with Bassil's Free Patriotic Movement.

Meanwhile, Washington should keep pushing the Lebanese Armed Forces to protect protestors and sack all units and officers committing violations against them. Europe has significant leverage on this front as well, particularly France. The ISF units attacking protestors in downtown Beirut have long received training and equipment from European countries—including the same French-made tear gas grenades used against demonstrators. Paris and other capitals should make clear that their equipment must not be used against peaceful protestors.

Finally, many Lebanese politicians hold dual nationality and bank accounts in Europe, leaving them vulnerable to warnings that their personal interests may be targeted. Without the threat of such personal consequences, the current political class will not yield power.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Visiting Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics. ❖

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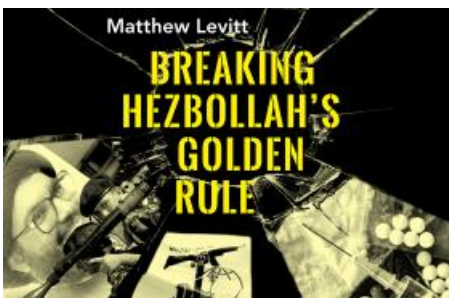
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