

# Hezbollah's Lebanese Allies Can Be Contained

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Aug 13, 2019

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The group's local partners complied when U.S. officials warned them to back off a recent political smear campaign, but more should be done to expose and exploit their rifts.**

**O**n August 7, the U.S. embassy in Beirut released a statement calling for “fair and transparent judicial review” in Lebanon, noting that “any attempt to use the tragic June 30 event in [Qabrshmoun] to advance political objectives should be rejected.” Both the statement itself and the incident it referred to—a violent clash in which two Lebanese bodyguards were killed—highlight the manner in which Hezbollah and its political allies have been increasingly weaponizing sectarian tensions against their rivals. With Prime Minister Saad Hariri visiting Washington all this week and U.S. diplomats firing a shot across Beirut's bow, a closer look at this trend and Washington's options for stunting it is warranted.

## BASSIL'S CALCULUS

**A**lthough the U.S. statement did not mention any Lebanese leaders by name, it was seen as a clear message to President Michel Aoun and Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil. Bassil is Aoun's son-in-law and hopes to succeed him in the next presidential election cycle, maneuvering for which has already begun. Yet he has long understood that he cannot fulfill this dream without Hezbollah and Iran's blessing—and that obtaining such approval will require him to become their favorite Maronite leader, since Lebanon's presidency is automatically allotted to that Christian sect.

Bassil has been delivering on that prerequisite so far. As foreign minister, he has not diverted once from Iran's foreign policy preferences in Lebanon, such as supporting Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war and echoing Tehran's stance on international affairs and U.S. policy in the region. On domestic policy, he allied with Hezbollah

during the 2018 parliamentary elections and has subsequently followed the group's legislative lead.

Bassil is also keen to boost his political strength against rival Joseph Aoun, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) commander whose own candidacy became more serious following his recent visit to Washington. Knowing that the Trump administration will remain lukewarm toward him given his association with Hezbollah, Bassil decided to focus his efforts locally by going after Lebanese figures who could hamper his goals. The U.S. embassy warning has temporarily thwarted his pressure campaign, but he has not been weakened. More needs to be done to expose his alliance with Hezbollah, limit his sway in Lebanon, and protect Hezbollah's local political rivals. The United States still has enough leverage with key Lebanese figures to do just that, especially while Prime Minister Hariri is in Washington.

## THE UNITED STATES BACKS JUMBLATT

**T**he main target of Bassil's ire has been Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who was subjected to a vicious political and legal assault for over a month leading up to the U.S. statement. On June 30, Jumblatt's supporters clashed with rival Druze in Qabrshmoun, and two bodyguards working for a visiting Hezbollah-backed minister were killed under circumstances that are still under investigation. Bassil jumped at the opportunity, launching a targeted campaign to implicate Jumblatt in the deaths and accuse him of attempting to assassinate the minister.

Hezbollah supported Bassil's effort because weakening Jumblatt would greatly serve its own interests and those of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. In a recent television interview, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah accused Jumblatt and other critics of conspiring against the so-called "axis of resistance." Indeed, Jumblatt has been a staunch critic of the group and its Syrian regime ally since 2005, a stance he maintained when Hezbollah joined the war next door. This May, Jumblatt further incensed the group by arguing that the disputed Shebaa Farms area was Syrian territory, not Lebanese—a direct contradiction to one of Hezbollah's main justifications for keeping its weapons. Jumblatt is also widely seen as a champion of Syrian refugees, whom both Nasrallah and Bassil are eager to deport.

The campaign against Jumblatt resembled previous Iranian and Syrian attempts to brand their critics as traitors, thereby justifying their persecution. The strategy almost worked again. At the time of the June 30 incident, the government could not convene to address the matter immediately, but Bassil would have been satisfied with simply referring the case to the Judicial Council, a body controlled by Hezbollah and its allies. There, Hezbollah may have been able to use its influence to frame, convict, and sentence Jumblatt, perhaps destroying him politically and personally.

Yet the firm U.S. embassy statement turned things around—it conveyed "in clear terms to Lebanese authorities our expectation that they will handle this matter in a way that achieves justice without politically motivated inflammation of sectarian or communal tensions." Aoun and Bassil immediately backed down and agreed to reconciliation with Jumblatt's camp, without any further mention of the Judicial Council. Political sources in Beirut have said that Washington also threatened to issue sanctions against figures within Bassil's party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).

## CONTAINING HEZBOLLAH

**T**he U.S. statement has put Bassil, Aoun, and Hezbollah's camp in a difficult position while strengthening Jumblatt's posture as a Druze leader and a national political figure. Hariri should hear the same clear and firm message in Washington this week.

After all, it was Hariri's political agreement with Bassil that brought Aoun to the presidency, cost Lebanon international support, and dragged it further under Iran's influence. Since then, the prime minister has repeatedly compromised with Hezbollah's camp, unconvincingly justifying his appeasement in the name of ensuring Lebanon's

security and boosting its ailing economy. Although the Sunni community punished him for this stance during the 2018 parliamentary elections, where he lost one-third of his parliamentary bloc, not even this setback has made him reconsider his alliances—he continues to work as the perfect cover for a government in which Hezbollah and its proxies hold majority control. Yet if Jumblatt keeps refusing to compromise with the group, and if Washington keeps backing this stance, Hariri may finally see that there are other options, and that he does not have to surrender Lebanon to Iran.

The anti-Jumblatt campaign has been contained for now, but the June 30 investigation is now in the hands of the military courts, where Hezbollah has enough influence to buy time and resume its threats against Jumblatt. To help ensure that the case is handled fairly and transparently, the United States should use its aid to the LAF—around \$2.29 billion since 2005—as leverage, since the military courts are part of the army.

Meanwhile, the FPM and other Hezbollah allies should no longer be permitted to implement Iran’s agenda in Lebanon without consequences. When Bassil meets with U.S. officials or visits Washington, he often downplays his relationship with Hezbollah as a temporary alliance aimed at bettering his chances for the presidency, thereby avoiding U.S. sanctions. Back in Lebanon, however, FPM officials and media constantly denigrate U.S. policy and defend the legitimacy of Hezbollah’s weapons.

To be sure, even if the threat of sanctions stops Aoun and Bassil from overstretching their power in Lebanon, it may not be enough to break their alliance with Hezbollah. Yet the same message may be more effectual with other Christian figures, including Aoun’s political camp and business community, who might reconsider supporting Bassil’s bid for presidency. Sanctions could also help limit Hariri’s acquiescence to Hezbollah and push him away from Bassil. More important, they could sway businesspeople from Amal and other Shia parties, who are already considering options to distance themselves from Hezbollah’s business community.

If sanctions are implemented as part of a comprehensive U.S. policy aimed at exploring ways to restore political balance in Lebanon, then Hezbollah’s alliances and financial support base may truly be shaken. The best place to start is by exerting more pressure on Bassil’s partnership with Hezbollah, and not hesitating to levy sanctions when diplomatic attempts fall short.

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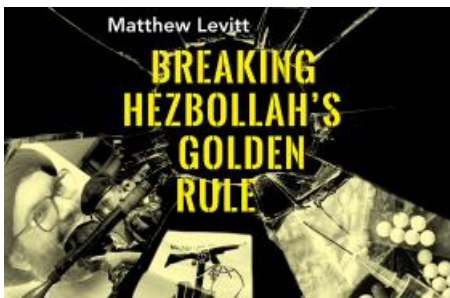
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