

Hezbollah and the Politics of Vaccine Delays in Lebanon

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Hezbollah is profiting from the pandemic.

In Lebanon, a new joke has appeared to make sense of the country's disastrous experience with the pandemic. In the joke, an American doctor asks his Lebanese counterpart why Lebanon hasn't acquired the Covid-19 vaccine. He replies: "First we need to convince the Lebanese people that Covid-19 exists."

Lebanon has [entered \(https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-lebanon/lebanon-tightens-lockdown-imposes-24-hour-curfew-as-hospitals-buckle-idUSL1N2JM1XH\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-lebanon/lebanon-tightens-lockdown-imposes-24-hour-curfew-as-hospitals-buckle-idUSL1N2JM1XH) its third lockdown since the start of the pandemic—the end of which has just been extended into February—and access to the vaccine seems well out of sight as the Lebanese government has yet to acquire any doses of any vaccine available. The Lebanese government has [promised \(https://www.arabnews.com/node/1778441/middle-east\)](https://www.arabnews.com/node/1778441/middle-east) to buy the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by February, with World Bank money now reallocated for vaccine purchase as well.

However, these deals highlight just how delayed Lebanon has been in providing any vaccines to its population. The horrendous manner in which the Lebanese government has responded to the spread of Covid-19 in the country hasn't been limited to a lack of foresight; these failures are also driven by the politics of Hezbollah and the ruling establishment, who are using the pandemic and a delayed rollout of the vaccine to keep up their hold over the status quo and prevent the return of normalcy.

Through its weapons but more importantly its alliance with Maronite President Michael Aoun, Hezbollah controls or influences all aspects of Lebanon's archaic political system. Hezbollah has also established a pact with Lebanon's so-called political elite—even those who openly criticize Hezbollah—whereby Iran's influence is not openly challenged. In exchange, the Lebanese political establishment is allowed to run its corruption schemes, which Hezbollah also profits from, similarly unchallenged.

This dysfunction has had a major impact on the country's ability to fight the virus. Until recently, Lebanon was ineligible to receive either the [Pfizer or Moderna](#) vaccine because these companies requested that countries

planning to use the two products pass a **law (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1778441/middle-east>)** exempting the companies from any legal liabilities for at least one year, at least until the vaccines receive final non-emergency U.S. FDA approval. Naturally, for this life-saving law to pass, it required the Lebanese parliament to convene and vote on it. It finally met on Friday, after over a month of waffling on this matter, and wasting valuable time in the process.

This reluctance to acquire the vaccines also stems from economic considerations; all sides involved have profited from the huge number of daily PCR tests used to detect Covid-19, with 2,283,225 tested to date. A huge industry of laboratories and equipment have grown around the pandemic, allowing political parties and Hezbollah to secure steady incomes at a time when Lebanon's overall economy is headed towards collapse. These PCR tests are mainly subsidized by the state and Lebanese taxpayers. According to the logic of these profiteers, rolling out vaccines would put them out of business. Hezbollah-operated labs have secured large contracts from the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health (MOH)—a portfolio controlled by Hezbollah supporters—which will not change even if the vaccine is acquired.

Another major impediment to acquiring the western-developed vaccine is simply that Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and his Lebanese proxy Hassan Nasrallah won't accept Pfizer or Moderna because they are 'American' vaccines—though both companies are German—**and would instead likely prefer to deal with the Russian or Chinese government and their versions of the vaccine.** **Q**

In this respect, the stalling of the government formation is also connected to Hezbollah maintaining its grasp over the Ministry of Public Health until after it has been able to profit off of the vaccine, including doses that will almost certainly make their way across the border into Syria to inoculate those in the affluent circle around Bashar al-Assad.

Despite finally **signing (<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/coronavirus/2021/01/17/Coronavirus-Coronavirus-Lebanon-finalizes-deal-for-2-1-mln-doses-of-Pfizer-COVID-19-vaccine>)** a deal with Pfizer on January 17 to provide 2 million doses to Lebanon, the Lebanese state and the MOH are under lot of pressure and suspicion from the general public, who doubt their ability to see through the nation-wide vaccination process. Though the Lebanese government has claimed that they can provide the special conditions and thermal storage units to prevent the vaccines from expiring, past performance of the MOH sheds significant doubt on such claims: scandal broke recently when it emerged that the MOH had been storing respirators at one of their facilities while Lebanese hospitals scrambled to provide rooms and medical equipment for Covid patients. Some patients had to be given oxygen in the hospital parking lots after their emergency rooms and intensive care units reached capacity.

The lack of foresight and proper state planning is also clearly visible in PM designee Saad Hariri's recent announcement that he had acquired 500,000 doses of the Chinese vaccine from the UAE. Despite this noble deed, it would have been more empowering for the Lebanese state if it had been able to obtain vaccines through the proper channels rather than relying on the goodwill of other countries.

In Lebanon, the pandemic is only part of the overall gloomy reality. The country's challenges and political debacles are certainly not easy to fix, though not impossible to cure. Isolating the ruling establishment—and especially Hezbollah—is essential for this reality to change.

The successes of Israel, Jordan, and other neighboring countries in vaccinating their populations only further highlights how spectacularly Lebanon is failing at protecting its people. The country needs to find a way to exit the club of failed nations and its current path of blundering from one crisis to another. Until Lebanon conquers its demons, the international community, and chiefly the Biden administration, should refrain from politically or financially bailing out the Lebanese political elite and Hezbollah, and they should ensure that any form of aid or relief goes straight to the needy Lebanese, while continuing to impose further sanctions on their corrupt political

class.

Until then, if the Lebanese are wondering why they haven't been given the vaccine, they can blame themselves as well for remaining dormant while foreign and domestic enemies maintain control of the country. ❖

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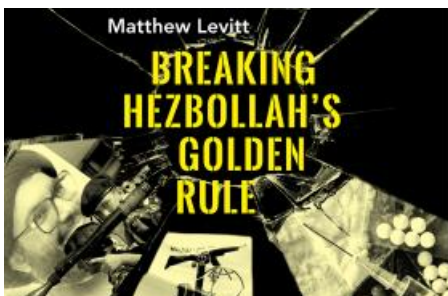
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