

Lebanon's Predicament: Political Stagnation and Economic Collapse in a Hezbollah-Dominated State

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Brief Analysis

Three Lebanese experts explore Beirut's precarious politics, Hezbollah's continued ability to

evade accountability, and the Biden administration's options.

On March 3, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Makram Rabah, Ali al-Amin, and Alia Mansour. Rabah is a lecturer of history with the American University of Beirut and author of the book *Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites and Collective Memory*. Amin is a columnist and editor-in-chief for *Janoubia*, a Lebanese news website that focuses on the Shia community and Hezbollah. Mansour is a columnist at *al-Majalla*, a leading Arabic-language news magazine, where she covers developments in Lebanon. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Makram Rabah

The real enemy of Hezbollah is not the Lebanese political establishment or Israel, but the October Revolution. Lokman Slim supported this revolution and was proud of his public connections with the United States and the wider international community. Most important, he was an outspoken critic of Hezbollah, arguing that the group's destruction of Lebanon should not be normalized. Like him, I am a firm believer in the phrase, "Let justice be done though the heavens fall."

The people who killed Lokman on February 4 are the same people who hijacked the Lebanese state years ago. Hezbollah's forces kill because they know they can get away with it, and the government is incapable of holding them accountable. Furthermore, the group tries to incite fear within us and our families through cyberbullying and threats. The government says it is investigating his murder, but we already know who killed him: the same people who killed Rafiq Hariri.

Some people believe that elections can be a means of change in Lebanon. Yet we cannot win an election that is rigged due to gerrymandering. Hezbollah restricts people from voting unless they are loyal supporters.

The Biden administration has been clear that it will not replicate the Obama administration's policies. Indeed, the United States cannot allow people like Lokman to be executed with impunity. The Biden administration should urge policymakers to adopt sanctions against Lebanon, targeting the political elite as a whole since Hezbollah is a nonstate actor and therefore difficult to target individually. Applying the Magnitsky Act would be a good approach. The United States should also continue using soft power and offering safety nets for the people of Lebanon.

Ali al-Amin

Lebanon is facing the near-collapse of its economic, educational, medical, and other essential sectors. Yet despite these conditions and the ongoing tensions between religious and political parties, there is consensus on avoiding a relapse into civil war, which most Lebanese understand is ineffective at solving conflict and too costly for all those involved.

One of the main goals behind Lokman's assassination was to communicate a message to the Shia community: namely, that even individuals who have international acclaim and connections can be killed without any severe consequences for Hezbollah. This message created enough fear to suppress social discontent momentarily, as a lot of people became more scared about expressing their opinions. Yet the group's use of violence ultimately implies weakness, since it shows that Hezbollah members sense their decline in popularity and influence.

Historically, Shia in Lebanon were not a homogeneous group and were never unified under the same leader. Their belief system is based on *ijtihad*, which encompasses diversity and individual differences. From this perspective, the current era—in which Iranian ideology has wrested control over disparate Shia religious platforms—is an anomaly. Tehran has used money and military power to become the sole ruler of the Shia community in Lebanon.

The main turning point for Hezbollah was its interference in the Syria war and other regional conflicts. The group convinced much of the Shia community that the war in Syria was a war against Sunnis. It also fed them the idea that they are surrounded by enemies—not just Sunnis in Syria, but also Israelis and even some of their own countrymen inside Lebanon. By using propaganda to build up this state of fear, Hezbollah has convinced many Shia that they would be in danger without the group's protection, especially given the absence of a strong state in Lebanon.

This misinformation campaign is relentless inside the Shia community, at the religious, ideological, and political levels. Hezbollah censors or otherwise controls all of the community's leading institutions (e.g., the Supreme Islamic Shia Council and Dar al-Ifta al-Jaafari), and it exploits media outlets to get its message across.

Alia Mansour

Lebanon's problem can be characterized as a regional problem. All of the countries under Iran's influence are suffering, and Lebanon's collapse is similar to what has happened in Iraq and Syria. Tehran believes that its control extends to Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, so no answer can be found to Hezbollah or similar militias without resolving the interconnected problems in Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, arms and militias lie at the root of Lebanon's problems, so any proposed solution that fails to focus on those two issues will be partial at best. Iran's agenda is to destroy the principle of a state in favor of proxy militia control. An absent or weak state cannot fight corruption or hold individual violators accountable. Yet simply strengthening state authority is not a solution in of itself in Lebanon, where the sectarian

dimension often produces gridlock due to recriminatory narratives like “Why should we fight Sunni corruption if we can’t fight Shia corruption? Why should we hold our officials accountable if we can’t do the same to Christian officials?”

Many believe that Hezbollah is silent on other officials’ corruption in exchange for their silence on the group’s illegal weapons. Yet this narrative is false and dangerous because it implies that hoarding weapons is the only way in which Hezbollah has corrupted the Lebanese system. In reality, the group stands accused of rampant tax evasion, money laundering, and racketeering, among other offenses. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to find a way of holding Hezbollah accountable for these crimes, and I am not optimistic that this will change under the Biden administration. But I hope I am wrong.

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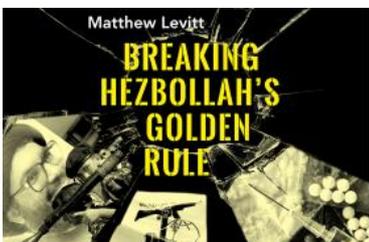
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