

# To Push Past Hezbollah Stonewalling, Leverage the LAF

by [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow at The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



Brief Analysis

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**The political fallout from a recent speech by the Lebanese Armed Forces commander gives Washington and its partners a golden opportunity to prod the country from crisis management toward actual solutions.**

**A**s Lebanon's economy continues its freefall and government formation stalls, protestors have responded to the resultant humanitarian crisis by returning to the streets. Although the movement does not seem as well-organized as it was in 2019, it is certainly more heated. And this time around, the economic meltdown has reached the army.

In a March 8 speech, Lebanese Armed Forces commander Gen. Joseph Aoun lamented the dire situation facing the institution and its soldiers. His words also carried weighty political messages against the ruling elites, whom he accused of cutting the LAF's budget to a dangerous degree. Currency devaluation has left most soldiers earning around \$60 per month, and many of them are requesting leaves of absence or no longer reporting to their jobs, while senior commanders are asking for early retirement.

Of course, the LAF's financial situation is no different from that of other state institutions, and simply giving raises to the troops (as suggested by the minister of finance) would be unfair to others and could increase inflation. Yet by publicizing and politicizing his unprecedented speech, General Aoun has sparked an open discussion about the LAF's role and created an opportunity to translate Lebanon's institutional distress into a practical roadmap for true reform.

## The LAF's New Rationale

**T**he army's track record on supporting reform and state sovereignty is spotty at best—LAF personnel have [coordinated with Hezbollah for years \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unifils-yearly-](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unifils-yearly-coordinated-with-hezbollah-for-years)

**mandate-renewal-maintain-ends-change-ways-and-means**), backed the militia's crackdowns on certain groups in Saida and Tripoli, and sidestepped responsibility for arresting convicted terrorists and criminals **protected by the Hezbollah leadership (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/other-khashoggis-dissidents-danger-across-middle-east)**. Yet the LAF has managed to maintain some independence, in part because of the U.S. assistance program that provides it with training and equipment.

Due to various circumstances, the LAF-Hezbollah dynamic has shifted somewhat in recent months. In November, the U.S. Treasury Department levied sanctions against Hezbollah-allied parliamentarian Gebran Bassil, thereby complicating his chances of becoming president next year and increasing General Aoun's prospects. In response, Hezbollah escalated its efforts to discredit the general and the LAF, for instance blaming the army for obstructing the investigation of **the Beirut port blast (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/beirut-disaster-implications-lebanon-and-us-policy)**.

Yet as Hezbollah's media attacks continued, it became clear that the officials truly losing legitimacy were Bassil and current president Michel Aoun (who is Bassil's father-in-law but no relation to the general). Most significantly, both of these Maronite Christian politicians know they no longer have the support of the Christian street.

On February 27, Maronite Patriarch Bechara al-Rai called for a new international conference to resolve Lebanon's political crisis, following up on the Paris meetings of 2019 and 2020, which conditioned an economic bailout on reforms. He also implied that the country's main source of crisis is Hezbollah's insistence on keeping its vast arsenal of weapons and intervening in regional affairs on Iran's behalf, concluding, "We want the state to extend its authority over the entire Lebanese territory. We want to provide support to the Lebanese army, making it Lebanon's sole defender." His speech attracted a large audience, many of whom marched to Bkerki (the patriarch's seat) to listen in person. It also garnered major plaudits from Lebanese Christian institutions and leaders, effectively shifting the bulk of influence over the Maronite community from Baabda (the presidential palace) to Bkerki.

The last time this type of rift opened between Bkerki and Baabda was right before the 2005 Cedar Revolution, which led to the Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon. This fact was surely not lost on General Aoun, who has seemingly concluded that he can no longer back the president and Bassil now that the Christian street is rejecting them. Hezbollah is aware of the implications as well, lashing out at Rai after his speech in a bid to retain the Christian cover it has invested in for decades via allied politicians like Michel Aoun and Bassil (who affirmed a joint memorandum of understanding with the group in 2006). If Hezbollah loses this cover, it could face major losses in the next parliamentary election, due in May 2022.

## **The LAF and the Caesar Act**

**A**lthough the commander's speech was important symbolically and politically, it will not mean much in the long run unless it is translated into practical steps. With the banking sector collapsing, many expect Lebanon's internal security situation to worsen, so the LAF will likely have to shoulder the load of maintaining stability and containing street chaos. Yet its ability to fulfill that mission is uncertain now that it faces greater political and budgetary pressure.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's hopes for a quick increase in Iranian funding have been dashed by the Biden administration's cautious approach to lifting nuclear sanctions, so the group has apparently decided that managing Lebanon's crisis is better than resolving it. Despite its mounting internal challenges, it is more capable than other Lebanese factions of exploiting the status quo to achieve some measure of stability, at least within its core Shia Muslim areas. The group **still controls numerous state institutions (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-has-created-parallel-financial-and-welfare-systems-manage-current-crisis)** (the presidency, the parliament, most ministries) in addition to all border crossings. Accordingly, it can continue

profiting from smuggled goods, currency, and weapons for some time, while using state security institutions to control protests and directing [its media organs \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-irans-vast-media-network-arab-countries\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-irans-vast-media-network-arab-countries) to steer the narrative against its opponents.

The smuggling of state-subsidized goods has had an especially pernicious effect on the crisis. When Washington's Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act [came into force last year \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/caesar-act-comes-force-part-2-pressuring-hezbollah-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/caesar-act-comes-force-part-2-pressuring-hezbollah-lebanon), it had the unintended effect of boosting Hezbollah efforts to steal or otherwise acquire such goods (e.g., fuel and flour) and smuggle them to Syria and other countries at a hefty profit. In addition to Lebanon's legal border crossings, Hezbollah controls many of the country's estimated 129 illegal crossings with Syria, including the two most important ones: Housh al-Sayyed in Hermel, and Qousiya in the Beqa Valley. Rampant smuggling reportedly costs the state over \$4 billion annually, but the Hezbollah-controlled caretaker government will not allow the Central Bank to lift subsidies as long as they feed the group's coffers so consistently.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese people can no longer find subsidized goods in supermarkets, so simply sending more food is not the answer—authorities also need to prevent Hezbollah from smuggling food and [draining the Central Bank's reserves \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-takes-aim-lebanons-central-bank-and-telecom-sector\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-takes-aim-lebanons-central-bank-and-telecom-sector). Washington and its partners should push the LAF to take the lead on this effort, which would have the added benefit of enforcing the Caesar Act and increasing pressure on the Assad regime and Tehran.

## Lebanon's Crisis Is Not Just Humanitarian

**T**reating the crisis as a purely humanitarian or economic problem will only delay the imminent social explosion.

What Lebanon needs most is political action that tackles deep-rooted corruption and financial problems.

Accordingly, Washington and the wider international community should supplement their short-term humanitarian plans with a long-term political roadmap. Most of their first steps should focus on the LAF:

- Help the LAF contain cross-border smuggling operations. This needs to be prioritized because it has immediate effects on the economy and directly benefits Hezbollah and the Assad regime. The LAF has never tackled smuggling in the past for fear of provoking Hezbollah, but doing so is the only way to ensure that future humanitarian aid to Lebanon actually reaches the Lebanese people. Additional aid should therefore be conditioned on visible, effective anti-smuggling efforts.
- Make sure the LAF does not target protestors or otherwise try to impede freedom of speech.
- Help the LAF translate General Aoun's speech into a formal National Defense Strategy, emphasizing Lebanon's neutrality and independence while enshrining the state's responsibility over all military decisionmaking and weapons (though acknowledging that the latter principle will take a long time to implement in practice).
- Help the LAF provide soldiers with greater access to medical care and educational benefits, while making sure that this assistance is directed only toward trustworthy institutions such as the American University and its hospital. Pro-Hezbollah elements in the army and corrupt elites should not be allowed to exploit these benefits.

As for other moves and longer-term policy issues, Washington and its allies should do the following:

- Sanction anyone who violates the Caesar Act, including institutions that assist smuggling operations with official documentation (e.g., certain authorities on the higher committee responsible for customs and the port of Tripoli).
- Focus on the upcoming parliamentary election, making sure that it will take place on time (May 2022), in a democratic fashion, and under international supervision. That is the only way to achieve viable political change in Lebanon and implement required reforms.
- Continue using the Global Magnitsky Act against corrupt politicians and any actors who try to delay or interfere with

the election process.

- Encourage Lebanese actors to shape a new opposition front based on three rising power centers: the street, the Maronite patriarch, and the LAF commander. Alone, none of them is strong enough to confront the deeply rooted political establishment and Hezbollah. But if they put their differences aside and unite, they may be able to formulate a viable roadmap out of the crisis.

Lebanon's problems will not be solved by simply installing a new government and sending more food stamps. The country needs practical policies that **unite the opposition (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-predicament-political-stagnation-and-economic-collapse-hezbollah-dominated>)**, address Iranian hegemony, and flip the present emergency into an opportunity for pursuing the deep reforms and long-term security changes that Lebanon has always needed.

*Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics and former managing editor of NOW Lebanon. ❖*

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