

Lebanon Is a Global Sanctuary for Criminals

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Articles & Testimony

Even if much-needed prosecutions against Hezbollah members are deemed too dangerous at present, donors must still pressure Beirut to extradite other individuals charged with crimes abroad, starting with banking official Riad Salameh.

Three years ago this month, the Netherlands-based Special Tribunal for Lebanon convicted Hezbollah member Salim Ayyash in absentia for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Ayyash, a senior official in the Iran-backed terrorist organization's Unit 121 assassination squad, still has not been apprehended and is currently believed to be in Lebanon under the protection of Hezbollah. It's unlikely he will ever face justice.

An even more memorable anniversary is that of the August 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut, which killed over 200 people, injured more than 6,000, and displaced some 300,000. Here, too, no [headway](#) (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/01/lebanon-judiciary-farce-in-beirut-blast-investigation-must-end/>) has been made on the investigation into who was responsible for the blast, which occurred when nearly 3,000 metric tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate detonated in the capital. In addition to various government officials, Hezbollah has also been implicated in the disaster. Not only did the organization control the port, but it is widely suspected of having [diverted](#) ([https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/fbi-probe-shows-amount-chemicals-beirut-blast-was-fraction-original-shipment-2021-07-30/#:~:text=July%2030%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20The,the%20cargo%20had%20gone%20missing.](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/fbi-probe-shows-amount-chemicals-beirut-blast-was-fraction-original-shipment-2021-07-30/#:~:text=July%2030%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20The,the%20cargo%20had%20gone%20missing.)) some of the ammonium nitrate to the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad to [fuel the barrel bombs](#) (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state/04-influence->

through-land-border-control-and) deployed against its own citizens during Syria's civil war. Par for Lebanon's course, legal proceedings are stalled.

Taken together, the anniversaries of the fruitless conviction of a political assassin and a catastrophic explosion with a murky genesis highlight Lebanon's continued culture of impunity, including the country's role as a sanctuary for prominent and not-so-prominent criminals and suspects wanted abroad. This is part of a long-established problem to which the Lebanese government actively contributes. Three years into a deep economic crisis, Lebanon is **a failing state** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/economic-and-security-conditions-lebanon>) that depends on international support. That support is now threatened by Beirut's contempt for accountability.

Treatment of suspects and convicted criminals who flee from abroad to Lebanon is a particular problem. Lebanese law prohibits the extradition of its nationals, yet there have been extraditions in the past. In 2019, Beirut **rendered** (<https://www.ibanet.org/article/22AF1681-37A0-487A-A660-3ACA32938540>) to the United States a dual Lebanese American citizen accused of abducting his 4-year-old son. While the country seldom extradites its alleged felons, Lebanon could prosecute and convict these individuals at home if a foreign country requests it and provides the case files. This rarely occurs, however, and the lackadaisical approach to lawbreakers has essentially established Lebanon as a premier sanctuary state.

The latest embarrassment concerns Rami Adwan, the Lebanese ambassador to France accused in June of raping two female employees of his embassy. After investigating these and other claims of abuse, Paris requested that Beirut lift the diplomat's **immunity** (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2023/06/08/lebanon-recalls-ambassador-to-france/>) to allow his prosecution to proceed in France. Instead of compelling the ambassador to face the allegations, however, the Lebanese foreign ministry recalled him to Beirut, thereby protecting the envoy from prosecution.

Like Adwan, Riad Salameh, the longtime governor of Lebanon's central bank, is also being shielded from legal jeopardy abroad. In May, both France and Germany issued international arrest **warrants** (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/07/04/French-judiciary-transfers-seized-assets-of-Central-Bank-head-Riad-Salameh-to-Lebanon>) for Salameh on corruption charges. Salameh, who stepped down this week after serving for 30 years, stands accused of pilfering some \$300 million from the central bank during his tenure, a term that culminated with Lebanon's financial collapse. Given the perennial endemic and massive graft that has bankrupted the state, Salameh's alleged crimes barely stand out. But for many in Lebanon and abroad, he has become a symbol of official misconduct.

The Lebanese **judiciary** (<https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-salameh-corruption-central-bank-2d608e1fe41df574016b4d99ba239a12>) ordered the confiscation of Salameh's passport, ostensibly to prevent him from going on the lam. It's more likely, however, that Beirut wants to prevent him from traveling abroad and testifying in Europe, perhaps turning state's evidence and potentially implicating dozens of Lebanon's top politicians and bankers. After serving in this key financial role for so long, Salameh knows where the Lebanese power elite's bodies are buried. It's difficult to imagine he will venture abroad again.

Perhaps the most famous recipient of safe haven in Lebanon is Carlos Ghosn, the erstwhile CEO of Renault and Nissan. The businessman, who holds Lebanese, Brazilian, and French citizenship, was arrested in Japan in 2018 for financial **misconduct** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/business/france-arrest-warrant-carlos-ghosn.html>) and misuse of corporate assets. While on bail in 2019, Ghosn was smuggled out of Japan in a large audio equipment box, eventually finding safe haven in Lebanon. Despite being wanted by Tokyo and Paris, the tycoon resides comfortably in Beirut with his wife and estimated \$70 million fortune.

Lebanon's lack of accountability isn't restricted to foreign cases and extradition requests. Dozens of political

assassinations in Lebanon—most believed to have been carried out by Hezbollah—remain domestically unprosecuted. The Hariri verdict was unusual in that a perpetrator was convicted at all, even if he continues to escape punishment. Most high-profile killings are not even investigated. In February 2021, for example, the prominent Hezbollah critic Lokman Slim was assassinated by a hit team in the Shiite militia's heartland. No progress (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/lebanon-killers-of-activist-lokman-slim-must-be-brought-to-justice/>) has been made on the case. More recently, in December 2022, an Irish United Nations peacekeeper in southern Lebanon was lynched by a group of self-identified Hezbollah members. Five individuals were charged (<https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-hezbollah-unifil-ireland-peacekeeper-5945749323553d7a697316530cb45b39>) in the attack, but only one has been taken into custody.

The reticence of successive governments in Beirut to hold Hezbollah accountable for its crimes is regrettable but understandable. Hezbollah is suspected of killing, in 2008 (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-jan-26-fg-lebanon26-story.html>) and 2012 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2012/10/19/why-wissam-al-hassan-security-official-killed-in-beirut-blast-matters-for-the-middle-east/>), two officers in the state's Internal Security Forces investigating the militia's role in the Hariri assassination. But Hezbollah's penchant for dispatching its adversaries is no reason for Lebanon's laxity with respect to other criminals.

Beirut's erratic approach to justice could become an irritant for donor states. Three years into a financial crisis (<https://www.axios.com/2023/03/22/lebanon-economic-crisis-lira-pound-sinks>) that has seen a 98 percent devaluation of the Lebanese lira and a default on the country's sovereign debt, Lebanon is increasingly reliant on foreign humanitarian and financial assistance. Lebanon's protection of Adwan, Salameh, and Ghosn is a direct snub—without consequence so far—to the country's two largest European donors, France and Germany.

If accountability is not a priority in European capitals, it is a significant concern in Washington, which provides even more aid to Beirut than Paris or Berlin. In recent years, the U.S. Treasury Department has designated a **handful** (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1177>) of Lebanese elites for corruption under the Global Magnitsky Act and the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. There has been bipartisan support for these sanctions in Congress but also rising frustration with the lack of progress in Beirut. Some U.S. legislators, most notably Sen. Ted Cruz, have **called** (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1712256/middle-east>) for an end to U.S. aid to the country for its corruption and **tolerance** (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116shrg40801/html/CHRG-116shrg40801.htm>) of Hezbollah.

While sanctions are a useful tool, they ultimately cannot solve the problem of impunity in Lebanon. Indeed, consecutive Lebanese governments—whether oriented toward Washington or Damascus or Tehran—have repeatedly ignored U.S. and European pressure. That leaves little hope that electing a new Lebanese president or installing a new government, by itself, would lead to a change in policy.

Washington should nonetheless persist in the promotion of rule of law. Last month, the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt—the so-called Quintet—met in Doha to press Lebanon to hold presidential elections and to encourage economic reform. The Quintet threatened sanctions against individuals blocking the election but specified no repercussions for those obstructing reforms and implementation of rule of law. However, while the coordinated initiative is helpful, the emphasis on a presidential election is misplaced.

Instead of focusing on the election of what will undoubtedly be another weak chief executive, Washington and its partners should focus on accountability, starting with Salameh. The central bank governor should have his day in a European court, where, if so inclined, he can come clean about the policies and people who precipitated Lebanon's financial crisis. The Quintet should consider conditioning the Lebanese delegation's travel to the U.N. General Assembly in September on the extradition of Salameh to France.

For too long, the Lebanese people have suffered from their international partners' low expectations for the country. The problem here is not the anti-extradition law but an abiding disinclination toward reform and accountability. Even if prosecuting Hezbollah members in Lebanon seems too dangerous at present, extraditing other alleged criminals is something even the current caretaker government in Beirut can and should do. It would be a small yet important first step on Lebanon's road to accountability.

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ZANRAS-IQ	Zain	Link Shortener	Telegram	DOWN	0%	
HULLMTELLE_IQ	Eurofiber	Webchat	Telegram	DOWN	0%	
ZANRAS-IQ	Zain	Webchat	Telegram	DOWN	0%	
ZANRAS-IQ	Zain	Web interface	Telegram	DOWN	0%	
HULLMTELLE_IQ	Eurofiber	Web interface	Telegram	DOWN	0%	
KNET-IQ	Kudisan Net	Webchat	Telegram	UP	100%	
KORNETTEL_IQ	Korek Telecom	Link Shortener	Telegram	UP	100%	
KNET-IQ	Kudisan Net	Web interface	Telegram	UP	100%	
KORNETTEL_IQ	Korek Telecom	Web interface	Telegram	UP	100%	
KNET-IQ	Kudisan Net	Link Shortener	Telegram	UP	100%	
KORNETTEL_IQ	Korek Telecom	Webchat	Telegram	UP	100%	

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