

A Year Later, Lebanon Still Won't Stand Up to Hezbollah

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Although Washington should keep pressing the Lebanese government to seize weapons and prosecute political assassins, the chances of Beirut actually confronting the militia appear increasingly slim.

Just days before the one-year anniversary of the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire, the government of Lebanon announced that it would provide official disability cards and full benefits to thousands of Hezbollah members injured in Israel's now-famous September 2024 covert operation detonating pagers belonging to the Lebanese militia group. The Trump administration criticized Beirut's decision to extend a social safety net for some Hezbollah members, and the initiative was hurriedly rolled back. But that aborted decision highlights a troubling dynamic in Lebanon more than a year after Israel smashed Hezbollah and decapitated its leadership.

The Lebanese government's continued extreme deference to Hezbollah suggests a Beirut-based variant of the Stockholm Syndrome. On November 27, one year after the ceasefire, few will celebrate the faltering truce. On Sunday, Israel said it had killed Hezbollah's chief of staff in an airstrike outside Beirut. That strike was yet another reminder that Lebanon has fallen well short of its own promises to disarm Hezbollah and enforce the rule of law—and isn't likely to do much better.

Lebanon felt far more hopeful in January 2025, when its newly elected president, Joseph Aoun, pledged in his inaugural speech to take away Hezbollah's guns and ensure that his government's writ extended to the whole country. Scant progress has been made on either front. Efforts by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to disarm the battered but still-dangerous militia have stalled. Hezbollah has threatened to reignite Lebanon's civil war should the army persist in collecting its weapons. The intimidated LAF now studiously avoids searching so-called "private property" where Hezbollah stashes most of its arsenal. Meanwhile, both the Lebanese government and military protest Israel's repeated strikes targeting these Hezbollah arms caches.

Ten months into its mandate, Aoun's government has also proved reticent to pursue justice and accountability for militias and common criminals alike. Most prominently, no discernable progress has been made on the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the 2020 Beirut port explosion, which killed more than 200 people, injured more than 6,000, and displaced some 300,000.

Ultimately, a host of former government officials should be held responsible for improperly storing nearly 3,000 metric tons of ammonium nitrate in the capital. But Beirut isn't pursuing the case, in part because Hezbollah has been credibly implicated in the blast. Not only did the militia control the harbor, but the organization was widely suspected of diverting some of the ammonium nitrate to Bashar al-Assad's Iran-backed regime in Syria to fuel the barrel bombs that he deployed against his own citizens during Syria's bloody civil war.

Hezbollah's alleged involvement in the port tragedy was first surfaced by Lebanon's most prominent Shiite critic of the militia, the activist and writer Lokman Slim. In January 2021, he gave a television interview implicating Hezbollah in the explosion. Twenty days later, he was assassinated in south Lebanon, Hezbollah's stronghold. The police never adequately investigated the murder, and Lebanon's highly politicized judiciary was disinclined to proceed. The case has recently been reopened due to pressure from his German national widow, but isn't moving forward.

Indeed, since the 2005 murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, Hezbollah is widely believed to have assassinated more than a dozen Lebanese politicians, journalists, and law enforcement officials investigating these crimes. Not a single alleged perpetrator has been held to account in Lebanon. That wasn't surprising during previous Hezbollah-adjacent administrations, but it is more jarring during the nearly year-long tenure of the current government, which calls itself reformist even as it continues the long tradition of state impunity.

Lebanon isn't administering justice to Hezbollah murderers, but Israel is. In November 2024, Israel killed a Hezbollah operative named Selim Ayyash in an airstrike in Syria. Ayyash, a member of Hezbollah's Unit 121 assassination squad, was the sole assailant convicted in 2020 by the independent Special Tribunal for Lebanon for his role in the Hariri bombing. Earlier this month, Israel released information on the social-media platform X (formerly Twitter) detailing Hezbollah's alleged August 2023 killing of the anti-Hezbollah politician Elias Hasrouni, who was abducted and poisoned by Unit 121.

To be sure, disarming Hezbollah is dangerous business—but that's what Lebanon committed to in its ceasefire agreement with Israel. Beirut's primary objective increasingly seems to be avoiding a confrontation with the militia. Threats from the Trump administration to withhold US military assistance or impede postwar construction are unlikely to compel—largely due to the more proximate fear of violence—the Aoun government or the LAF to act. So Israel is doing the job—following through on Aoun's inaugural pledges and the state's ceasefire commitments. Despite official Lebanese complaints about Israeli airstrikes, Lebanon's national security apparatus actually prefers this division of labor.

Following Israel's ferocious fall 2024 assault on Hezbollah, Washington had high hopes for Lebanon. It would be best to lower them. The Trump administration should continue to press the Lebanese government to seize Hezbollah's weapons and empower Lebanon's timorous judiciary to investigate and prosecute the backlog of assassinations allegedly perpetrated by the militia. But if past is prologue, Lebanon—still cowed by Hezbollah—will continue to disappoint.

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