



# Avoiding Further Polarisation in Lebanon

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**What's new?** In the aftermath of the catastrophic explosion at the Beirut port in August, Hezbollah's domestic opponents and external enemies ramped up political pressure on the movement, polarising a country already roiled by economic breakdown. A French-led initiative to mobilise broad support for a reform agenda has stalled.

**Why does it matter?** Polarisation helped produce a political stalemate that has so far forestalled reform – a key precondition for Lebanon receiving foreign assistance. Absent a solution, Lebanon will continue to slide toward economic collapse, social unrest and disintegration of state institutions.

**What should be done?** For now, domestic and external actors should avoid renewing a contest over Hezbollah's role in Lebanon, which would risk polarising its politics in dangerous ways and likely make urgently needed reforms impossible.

## I. Overview

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The massive explosion at the Beirut port on 4 August marked a new low in Lebanon's political and economic decline. In the aftermath, many inside and outside the country trained their sights on Hezbollah, the Shiite Islamist party and armed faction, blaming it for the failure of a Lebanese system in which it has steadily become more powerful over the past two decades. Hezbollah's critics say it has presided over Lebanon's slide into bankruptcy and protected the country's most corrupt actors. Some have renewed challenges to its having an independent military apparatus and autonomous foreign policy, which they assert has had catastrophic repercussions for the country as a whole.

Now, as Lebanon attempts to pull out of its economic tailspin, domestic and foreign players are divided over Hezbollah's role in the reforms that donors insist the country needs. France has included Hezbollah in its initiative to foster a new government with broad enough support to launch those reforms and unlock foreign assistance. Meanwhile, the U.S. and others have pushed anew to curtail the party's influence. Their attempts to pressure Hezbollah and its allies seem to have contributed to the failure thus far of the French-sponsored effort to produce a reform-focused government.

A prolonged political stalemate is bound to have disastrous consequences, as the country's economy weakens and still more of its residents are driven into poverty and desperation. Hezbollah's domestic opponents and external foes may believe that sav-

ing Lebanon and weakening the party are complementary objectives. It appears far more likely, however, that pushing for both simultaneously will achieve neither. External actors and their Lebanese allies should avoid a new contest over Hizbollah's role that would deepen the country's polarisation, making domestic consensus behind a government and steps to rescue the Lebanese economy impossible.

## II. Port Explosion, Political Implosion

On 4 August 2020, a massive explosion in the port of Beirut killed more than 200 and injured 6,500. An estimated 300,000 were displaced and a large part of the capital wrecked.<sup>1</sup> The World Bank estimates that the disaster left \$6.6-\$8.1 billion in damage and losses.<sup>2</sup> The blast brought down Lebanon's seven-month-old government and marked the lowest point yet in the steady decay of the country's public and political institutions since its civil war ended in 1990.

Lebanon has been beset by a dual political-economic emergency since October 2019, when citizens took to the streets to protest official corruption, the decrepitude of public institutions and their own deteriorating quality of life.<sup>3</sup> The demonstrations also catalysed a long-brewing crisis of confidence in Lebanon's financial system and currency, sending the country's ailing economy into a downward spiral.<sup>4</sup>

The resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on 29 October 2019 and the formation of a new government headed by Hassan Diab on 21 January 2020 did little to arrest the freefall. Economic conditions grew relentlessly worse and, on 9 March, the government defaulted on Lebanon's foreign debt. Talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on an economic rescue package made little headway as competing domestic interests undermined the government's negotiating position.<sup>5</sup> By early July, negotiations had stalled entirely.<sup>6</sup>

Much of what led to the disastrous 4 August explosion predated Diab's tenure, but his government still bore the brunt of the political firestorm that followed. Angry protests the weekend after the blast met with a harsh response by security forces, injuring hundreds and leaving one security officer dead.<sup>7</sup> Faced with a growing list of cabinet ministers stepping down, Diab announced his government's resignation on 10 August.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Beirut port blast death toll rises to 190", Reuters, 30 August 2020. The Lebanese army said the blast damaged almost 61,000 homes and 19,000 businesses. "Compensation for homes damaged by Beirut blast", *The Daily Star*, 24 September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Beirut Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA) – August 2020", World Bank, 31 August 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Heiko Wimmen, "Lebanon's Revolt", Crisis Group Commentary, 21 October 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°214, *Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit*, 8 June 2020; and N°219, *How Europe Can Help Lebanon Overcome Its Economic Implosion*, 30 October 2020.

<sup>5</sup> "It's sabotage' – some fear Lebanon's IMF bailout talks in peril", Al Jazeera, 20 June 2020.

<sup>6</sup> "Lebanon's IMF talks on hold, finance minister says", Reuters, 3 July 2020.

<sup>7</sup> "Lebanon: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters", Human Rights Watch, 26 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Diab blamed the entrenched political elite and "corruption bigger than the state" for the port catastrophe and his own inability to push reforms forward. "Lebanon president accepts gov't resignation after Beirut blast", Al Jazeera, 10 August 2020.

In the wake of the port explosion, France interceded to facilitate a rescue for Lebanon, its former colonial mandate and a historical focus of its foreign policy. President Emmanuel Macron took on the dual task of marshalling international aid for Lebanon and coaching the political elite on executing the reforms that would unlock that assistance. After visiting the blast site and consoling victims, Macron delivered a blunt message to Lebanon's political elites: substantial reforms are a precondition for international support.<sup>9</sup> "If reforms are not made, Lebanon will continue to sink", he reportedly told them.<sup>10</sup>

At first, Macron's high-profile intervention – since known as the "French initiative" – appeared to yield results. On the eve of his return visit to Beirut on 1 September, a broad cross-section of Lebanon's political factions nominated the country's ambassador to Germany, Mustapha Adib, as the next prime minister. The French leader delivered a roadmap for key reforms, complete with an aggressive timetable, and stern warnings of the consequences for non-progress, potentially including sanctions on obstructionist members of the political elite.<sup>11</sup>

Adib's attempt to form a government with broad political support within two weeks, as proposed by Macron's roadmap, quickly ran into trouble. Hizbollah and the allied Amal Movement – together, often called the "Shiite duo" – objected to Adib's attempt to name a cabinet of supposedly apolitical "experts" without consulting them and the country's other parties.<sup>12</sup> On 9 September – midway toward the two-week deadline – new U.S. sanctions targeting, for the first time, senior political allies of Hizbollah added more tension.<sup>13</sup> Negotiations then failed over the two Shiite parties' insistence that they name candidates for finance minister, in particular.<sup>14</sup> On 26 September, Adib resigned, sending the process of government formation, and with it that of reform and economic rescue, back to square one.<sup>15</sup>

At a press conference the next day, Macron harshly criticised what he called a "betrayal" of Lebanon by its political class. He assigned special blame to Hizbollah and Amal, saying they had not honoured the commitments they had made to him. He additionally argued that Hizbollah could not simultaneously play a military role elsewhere in the Middle East on behalf of Iran and be a "respectable party" in Lebanon:

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<sup>9</sup> "Macron hugs distraught woman in Beirut who begs for justice", video, YouTube, 6 August 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Rym Momtaz and Elisa Braun, "Macron delivers stern message to Lebanon's leaders on visit to stricken Beirut", *Politico*, 6 August 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Rym Momtaz, "Macron on Lebanon: 'It's a risky bet I'm making'", *Politico*, 1 September 2020; "Factbox: Key points from draft French programme for Lebanon", Reuters, 8 September 2020. Among other measures, the roadmap included the formation of a government by mid-September; the resumption of IMF talks; capital control legislation and an audit of the Lebanese central bank; reforms of the country's power sector; and legislative elections within a year.

<sup>12</sup> "France 'regrets' Lebanon has not yet formed a government", Al Jazeera, 16 September 2020.

<sup>13</sup> "Treasury Targets Hizballah's Enablers in Lebanon", U.S. Department of the Treasury, 8 September 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "Lebanese cabinet formation hits snags amid disagreements", Associated Press, 14 September 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Zeina Karam, "Lebanese nominated premier resigns, in blow to Macron plan", Associated Press, 26 September 2020.

Is it really a political party or does it proceed just in a logic dictated by Iran and its terrorist forces? I want us to see if in the next few weeks something is possible. I'm not naive.<sup>16</sup>

Days later, Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah responded with his own address, giving an account of the botched government formation that put the blame on Hizbollah's domestic rivals, along with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup>

On 22 October, Saad Hariri was again nominated to form a government.<sup>18</sup> Yet he faces many of the same political headwinds that ultimately overpowered Adib. On 6 November, the U.S. again sanctioned one of Hizbollah's key allies, with uncertain consequences for Lebanon's politics.<sup>19</sup> A Beirut-based Western diplomat took a pessimistic view in the aftermath of Adib's failure:

Everyone is still playing political games. It's clear [Lebanese elites] haven't grasped the collective danger facing them. They're still fighting over things that might be completely destroyed in a few months.<sup>20</sup>

### III. The Hizbollah Conundrum

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The 4 August blast's aftermath and Lebanon's political-economic crisis have reinvigorated controversy over Hizbollah's place in Lebanese politics. Lebanese have long been split over Hizbollah's dual identity, as both a Lebanese party participating in domestic politics and a military force part of the "axis of resistance", an Iran-led region-spanning alliance of state and non-state actors opposed to Israel, its Western backers and U.S.-aligned Arab states. Over the past two decades, what changed is that Hizbollah took an increasingly central role in Lebanon's politics. Now the party's domestic rivals have seized the moment to argue that it bears special responsibility for the country's disastrous state.

#### A. *From the Political Margins to the Centre of Power*

Hizbollah's unique status in Lebanon's political system dates back to the conclusion of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). While other civil war militias were demobilised and disarmed in early 1991, Hizbollah retained its paramilitary apparatus, which it justified in terms of its armed resistance to Israel's continued occupation of parts of southern Lebanon.<sup>21</sup> With political protection from the Syrian regime, which

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<sup>16</sup> John Irish and Matthias Blamont, "Betrayed Macron says will continue Lebanon efforts, eyes Hezbollah", Reuters, 27 September 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Text of al-Sayyid Nasrallah's speech regarding the latest developments that he delivered Tuesday evening", *Al-Manar*, 30 September 2020 (Arabic). An English translation is available at *Alahed News English*. For a rebuttal of Nasrallah's account by the former Lebanese prime minister who backed Adib, see the tweet by Saad Hariri, @saadhariri, 6:06pm, 30 September 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Hwaida Saad and Megan Specia, "Lebanon's former prime minister tapped to lead again despite cries for change", *The New York Times*, 22 October 2020.

<sup>19</sup> "Treasury Targets Corruption in Lebanon", U.S. Department of the Treasury, 6 November 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 1 October 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Picard, *The Demobilisation of the Lebanese Militias* (Oxford, 1999).

dominated Lebanese politics until 2005, and material support from Iran, the party built an increasingly capable military force. In 2006, it withstood open war with Israel, and since then, it has further expanded its arsenal.<sup>22</sup> The UN Security Council has multiple times called for the disarmament of Lebanese militias and the state's consolidation of political authority and military force.<sup>23</sup> But to no avail – Hizbollah has remained an autonomous armed actor. In parallel, it has also built civilian institutions, including hospitals, clinics, schools, and social welfare and credit facilities.<sup>24</sup>

Critics denounced Hizbollah as “a state within a state”.<sup>25</sup> This criticism became prominent in Lebanon's political discourse after Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon and even more so after Syrian forces pulled out of Lebanon in March 2005.<sup>26</sup> The 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel left intense polarisation in its wake. For political rivals, the war served as ultimate proof that the party's military assets were being used to drag the country into costly military confrontation and must come under state control. Hizbollah, for its part, presented such demands as part of a campaign by the U.S., its Arab allies and Israel to eliminate a major challenge to their regional hegemony.<sup>27</sup>

Between 2006 and 2008, Lebanon went through eighteen months of political stalemate and protest, as Hizbollah and its allies demanded a veto stake in government. Then, on 5 May 2008, the government ordered the dismantling of the party's military communications network. Hizbollah and its allies reacted by occupying the western half of Beirut and forcing their opponents to back down, as army and security forces stood by.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hizbollah is said to have up to 45,000 fighters and more than 100,000 missiles. Since 2016, the group has allegedly embarked on an Iranian-supported program to upgrade some of its longer-range missiles (estimated to number 14,000) to precision-guided weapons capable of hitting within a few metres of crucial infrastructure. Shaan Shaikh, “Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 June 2018 (last modified 27 September 2019); “Hezbollah's Precision Missile Project”, Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, October 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Key documents include UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2 September 2004), which called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon; and UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (11 August 2006), which marked the end of the 2006 war.

<sup>24</sup> Shawn Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad, “Hezbollah's Social Jihad: Nonprofits as Resistance Organizations”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (June 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Hussain Abdul-Hussain, “Hezbollah: A State Within a State”, Hudson Institute, May 2009; Waddah Charara, *The State of Hezbollah* (Beirut, 1998) (Arabic).

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°7, *Hezbollah: Rebel Without a Cause?*, 30 July 2003; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69, *Hezbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007; Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, “In Their Own Words: Hezbollah's Strategy in the Current Confrontation”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 January 2007. For Iran, Hizbollah is vital to its forward defence against Israel; without it, Tehran possesses no real force proximate to Israel to deter the latter's attacks. For how Hizbollah fits into Iran's security posture, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°184, *Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East*, 13 April 2018. According to Hizbollah Secretary General Nasrallah, in the event of a war on Iran: “We will not be neutral in the battle between right and wrong. ... With this axis's strength, perseverance, truth, sincerity, determination and sacrifices, such a war will be the end of ‘Israel’ as well as the American hegemony and presence in our region”. “Sayyed Nasrallah's Full Speech on the 10th of Muharram, 2019”, Al-Ahed News, speech originally delivered on 10 September 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hezbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008. Hizbollah has also been accused of involvement in a number of assassinations of Lebanese

In effect, the violence of May 2008 settled the political dispute over Hizbollah's weapons, establishing that neither domestic nor external actors were capable of compelling the party to relinquish them. Throughout the decade that followed, Hizbollah continued to expand and upgrade its military capabilities and evolved into a potent regional actor by intervening, alongside Iran and Russia, in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime.<sup>29</sup>

The 2008 conflict also decisively tilted Lebanon's political balance of power. Up to 2005, Syrian dominance in Lebanese politics had kept discussion of Hizbollah's weapons mostly off limits. With that safeguard gone, the party abandoned its previous reluctance to get involved in day-to-day Lebanese politics and, in 2005, joined the government for the first time. After the 2008 clashes, Hizbollah secured de facto veto power, allowing it to pre-empt attempts at curtailing its activities. The party's influence reached its peak with the 2018 parliamentary elections, in which Hizbollah and its allies won a majority of seats. Afterward, they formed a national unity government with Hizbollah's erstwhile opponent, Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

Together, Hizbollah and its long-time ally, Amal, have mustered political strength by jointly harnessing the electoral weight of Lebanon's Shiites (roughly one third of the population). Amal leader Nabih Berri has been the country's politically formidable speaker of parliament since 1992. Hizbollah also forged a strategic alliance with the country's strongest Christian force, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), whose founder Michel Aoun became president in 2016.

Despite Hizbollah's political rise, domestic opposition to it never went away. Critics accused the party of serving Iranian before Lebanese interests, entangling Lebanon in regional conflicts and provoking confrontation with Israel.<sup>30</sup> After 2008, however, these critiques found little real expression in Lebanese politics and policy. The domestic debate over Hizbollah's status was essentially over.

With the deepening of Lebanon's economic crisis in early 2020, a new criticism of Hizbollah gained traction. Though some Lebanese continued to complain about the party's arms, many more pointed the finger at Hizbollah for the country's economic disintegration and linked the two critiques. These detractors argued that among all factions of the elite, Hizbollah had a hegemonic position in politics as a result of its military dominance, and therefore bore special responsibility for the country's bankruptcy and failure.

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critics and rivals, including the 2005 killing of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. In August 2020, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon adjudicating the Hariri assassination convicted a Hizbollah member in absentia. Marlise Simons and Ben Hubbard, "15 years after an assassination rocked Lebanon, a trial ends on a muted note", *The New York Times*, 18 August 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°153, *Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, 27 May 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Hizbollah argues that its military capabilities deter Israel from launching additional attacks on Lebanon that it otherwise would not think twice about and are therefore not a conflict risk but a factor promoting stability. Crisis Group interviews, senior Hizbollah officials, Beirut, 2017-2019.

## B. *Implicating the Party*

Lebanon's October 2019 protests challenged the country's entire political elite, rallying behind the slogan "all of them' means all of them".<sup>31</sup> Hezbollah initially expressed qualified support for some of the movement's demands, such as rejection of new taxes. As the protests took on a more revolutionary bent, however, the party's attitude changed. One week into the protests, Nasrallah, in a televised speech, called on party supporters to cease participation. He criticised what he referred to as protesters' vulgar attacks on Lebanon's politicians and claimed that foreign powers and domestic rivals had hijacked the movement to change the balance of power in Lebanon.<sup>32</sup> Even before the address, altercations had taken place between party supporters and demonstrators. In the weeks that followed, Hezbollah and Amal supporters from a Shiite neighbourhood bordering the main locus of demonstrations repeatedly confronted protesters, provoking recurring street fights.<sup>33</sup>

Still, the majority of protesters and activists refrained from singling out Hezbollah as they demonstrated against Lebanese elites' collective failure. Political activists interviewed in late 2019 judged the debate over Hezbollah's weapons a distraction from the battle for accountability that mattered to them, given the issue's divisiveness in Lebanese politics, and even within the ranks of the protest movement itself.<sup>34</sup>

Lebanon's discourse changed during Prime Minister Hassan Diab's short tenure. At first, Hezbollah and its allies had aimed for another coalition government led by Hariri or a candidate of his choice. After six weeks of negotiations with the Hariri camp came to naught, however, Hezbollah and its allies gave up on bipartisan agreement and backed Diab. Then, as the economic situation deteriorated further, political rivals increasingly took aim at Hezbollah, blaming it for the Diab government's weakness and the worsening crisis.<sup>35</sup>

Hezbollah faced a newly frontal political challenge in July, when the patriarch of the Maronite Church and spiritual leader of Lebanon's largest Christian sect, Bechara al-Rahi, launched a push for the country to adopt a position of "active neutrality". He argued that the country should rebalance its foreign relations away from what he characterised as a tilt toward Iran, and instead gravitate toward the West and Gulf

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<sup>31</sup> On the events of October 2019, see "Lebanon's Revolt", op. cit.; and Crisis Group Report, *Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> "Speech by Hezbollah Secretary-General His Eminence al-Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah regarding recent developments", *Al-Manar*, 25 October 2019 (Arabic). An English translation is available at *Alahed News English*.

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Dadouch, "Shiite groups' supporters clash with security forces in Beirut, opening a new chapter in Lebanon's crisis", *The Washington Post*, 17 December 2019; Michael Young, "Hezbollah Has Trapped Itself", Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 November 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see former Prime Minister and Future Movement politician Fouad Siniora's remarks in Zuhair Ksibati, "Hezbollah at the core of Lebanon's financial crisis", *The Arab Weekly*, 10 March 2020. See also, "How Hezbollah is pushing Lebanon to the brink of economic collapse", *The National*, 3 May 2020; and "In Lebanon's crises, look for Hezbollah", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 23 April 2020 (Arabic). A member of parliament representing a party allied with Hezbollah said: "Forming a government without Hariri was a grave political mistake. It meant that when the worst of the crisis hit, we alone took the blame, while it was to a large extent Hariri, his late father and their allies who were behind the policies that led us into this situation". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 25 September 2020.

Arab states.<sup>36</sup> Rahi criticised Hezbollah's alleged control of state institutions and named its involvement, alongside Iran, in conflicts in countries such as Syria and Yemen as an obstacle to international assistance.<sup>37</sup> The patriarch has since escalated his rhetoric, even calling upon the state to raid "illegitimate" arms caches in populated areas – an undisguised reference to Hezbollah.<sup>38</sup> Rahi's new line puts Hezbollah's Christian ally, the FPM, in a tight spot, as the Lebanese Forces, its main Christian rival, have endorsed the patriarch's position.<sup>39</sup>

Hezbollah has faced other criticisms since the August port explosion. Although some early theories alleged a direct link between Hezbollah and the blast, these accusations were never substantiated; by all indications, the disaster was instead the result of years of official ineptitude, dysfunction and corruption.<sup>40</sup> More seriously, though, critics argued that Hezbollah bore indirect responsibility for the blast, as the prime beneficiary of the same state failure that led to the port disaster – failure that, they argue, permits the party's illicit financial flows and parallel social, economic

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<sup>36</sup> The patriarch first launched his push for "neutrality" in a sermon at the patriarchal summer residency in Diman. Days after the 4 August blast, he published a memorandum laying out his initiative. See "Maronite Patriarchate", Facebook, 11:41am, 17 August 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Devin Watkins, "Cardinal Rahi: Lebanese paying price of political and economic crisis", *Vatican News*, 15 July 2020. The cardinal's position echoed earlier statements by Gulf officials. "Lebanon paying price for deteriorating Gulf ties, says UAE official", Reuters, 25 June 2020. Lebanon's perceived alignment with Iran and its allies has clearly affected Lebanon's relations with some Gulf countries. In early 2016, Saudi Arabia cancelled a \$4 billion grant for the Lebanese security forces after Lebanon refused to support it in a diplomatic row with Iran. Josh Wood, "Saudi Arabia cancels \$4bn aid package for Lebanon's security forces", *The National*, 19 February 2016. In November 2017, Prime Minister Hariri was apparently summoned to Riyadh and forced to read a televised resignation speech that contained harsh attacks on Hezbollah and Iran; he rescinded the resignation after French mediation brokered his departure from Saudi Arabia and eventual return to Lebanon. Anne Barnard and Maria Abi-Habib, "Why Saad Hariri had that strange sojourn in Saudi Arabia", *The New York Times*, 24 December 2017.

<sup>38</sup> "Maronite Patriarchate", Facebook, 12:02pm, 23 August 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Lebanese Forces head Samir Geagea voiced his support for the patriarch's efforts at a party conclave and memorial for "the martyrs of the Lebanese resistance" on 6 September. "Samir Geagea: It is the Lebanese authorities' responsibility to arrest Salim Ayyash and hand him over to the International [Criminal] Court", video, YouTube, 6 September 2020 (Arabic).

<sup>40</sup> Reinoud Leenders, "Timebomb at the Port: How Institutional Failure, Political Squabbling and Greed Set the Stage for Blowing up Beirut", Arab Reform Initiative, 16 September 2020; Ben Hubbard et al., "How a massive bomb came together in Beirut's port", *The New York Times*, 9 September 2020. Earlier theories posited that an initial, smaller explosion of a weapons cache belonging to the party set off the pile of ammonium nitrate that produced the larger blast, or that Hezbollah was somehow involved in procuring and illegally storing the volatile chemical. See, for instance, Alison Tahmizian Meuse, "Noose tightens on Hezbollah in post-blast Lebanon", *Asia Times*, 13 August 2020; Maximilian Popp et al., "Questions swirl around the cargo that destroyed Beirut", *Der Spiegel*, 21 August 2020. For notes on the latter report's slant, see Twitter thread by Heiko Wimmen, @heiko\_wimmen, 7:25pm, 23 August 2020. Some also claim that Hezbollah effectively controls the port. For example, see Chris Pleasance et al., "It's crystal clear Hezbollah are in charge of the port and warehouse': Leading Lebanese politician blames terrorist group and 'corrupt' government for catastrophic explosion – as aerial images reveal blast even sank a cruise ship", Mail Online, 6 August 2020. Investigative reporting indicates, however, that all major parties in Lebanon seem to have been involved in corrupt dealings at the port; the head of the port authority and the head of customs were FPM and Future Movement appointees, respectively. Rouba El Husseini, "Dockside dealings: smuggling, bribery and tax evasion at Beirut port", AFP, 16 September 2020.

and military structures.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, it has shielded its allies from accountability. Some contended, therefore, that reform in Lebanon had to start by “putting Hezbollah in its place”. Others openly called for efforts to “topple the Hezbollah regime”.<sup>42</sup>

In a speech one month after the explosion, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea encapsulated these arguments:

There will be no change, no real reform and no real elections unless the sovereignty of the state and its institutions is restored, and until the weapons of the state are the only weapons [in the country]. ... I am asking Hezbollah: Where do you want Lebanon to get to? Are you waiting for a famine? Are you waiting for the Lebanese, young and old, to die of hunger, disease or in mysterious explosions? It is time for hard decisions. Hezbollah needs to return to the state and help rebuild it. It needs to hand back the decision over war and peace to the state. It has to stop interfering in the affairs of Arab states across the region. It has to stop being the tip of the spear of Iran’s expansion across the region.<sup>43</sup>

Geagea is among Hezbollah’s most ardent domestic rivals. Yet even some observers favourable to Hezbollah believe that siding with political allies seen as corrupt has implicated the party itself. An analyst close to the party said:

After the 2018 elections, by holding on to [Amal head Nabih] Berri, Hariri, etc. [in government], they became part of the ruling clique. So even a part of the Shi-ite environment blames them: [they say,] you enabled this crowd that has deepened corruption and brought the country to the edge of collapse.<sup>44</sup>

Hezbollah, not surprisingly, rejects the idea that it deserves special blame for a crisis wrought by practices in which all of Lebanon’s political parties partook since the end of the civil war. According to a senior party official:

We’re not the ones who impoverished the Lebanese, or who robbed the money they deposited in the country’s banks. Lebanese put \$120 billion – which they earned, through their hard work – in Lebanon’s banks. Now that has just evaporated. What does that have to do with Hezbollah? ... [The ones responsible] are America’s allies.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Borzou Daragahi, “Hezbollah didn’t invent Lebanon’s corruption, but it’s now the biggest obstacle to reform”, *The Independent*, 9 August 2020. See also twitter thread by Emile Hokayem, @emile\_hokayem, 3:51 pm, 9 August 2020; and “The Beirut Disaster: Implications for Lebanon and U.S. Policy”, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 August 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Firas Maksad, “Reforming Lebanon must start by putting Hezbollah in its place”, *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2020; and Nadim Koteiche, “Toppling the Hezbollah regime”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 11 August 2020 (Arabic).

<sup>43</sup> “Samir Geagea: It is the Lebanese authorities’ responsibility to arrest Salim Ayyash and hand him over to the International [Criminal] Court”, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, analyst close to Hezbollah, August 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2020.

In addition, Hizbollah argues that after foreign countries tolerated their Lebanese friends' corruption for years, the sudden focus on Hizbollah and its allies' alleged malfeasance has less to do with good governance and more to do with foreign policy – namely, the party's stance on Israel.<sup>46</sup> The senior official said:

There is a faction of Lebanese that has worked to present a picture by which economic deterioration, corruption and most recently the explosion of the port are all the responsibility of Hizbollah and Hizbollah's arms. The real problem, of course, is that Hizbollah fights Israel. Being Lebanese, they don't say that part, because they do not want to be seen as siding with Israel. But Netanyahu will finish the sentence for them.<sup>47</sup>

The official stressed that disarmament and abandonment of the party's resistance mission are not up for discussion: "What's being demanded [of us] is that there be no military force that poses a threat to Israeli arrogance. This won't happen".<sup>48</sup>

#### **IV. French-U.S. Divergence**

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While both France and the U.S. have weighed in diplomatically and stressed the need for reforms in crisis-stricken Lebanon, they have diverged sharply on Hizbollah's role in any process of change. Confronted with an array of domestic and external opponents seemingly pushing to tilt the country's balance of power against it, the party has dug in. Government formation stalled as a result, further delaying urgent reform measures.

France has pointedly included Hizbollah in its engagement with Lebanon's political factions, consistent with its past contacts with the party's political officials. Macron's August initiative was premised on midwifing a new government with broad backing from Lebanon's traditional parties; excluding Hizbollah would have run counter to that approach. Thus, on both of Macron's visits, his meetings with key parliamentary blocs included Hizbollah. To keep the focus on a program of reforms, moreover, Macron also chose to set aside divisive and arguably intractable issues such as Hizbollah's arms.<sup>49</sup> On 31 August, parliament backed Mustapha Adib, a Leb-

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<sup>46</sup> Opponents blame Hizbollah even for the corruption of its rivals. Once Hizbollah had commandeered the Lebanese state for its partisan ends, an official in a rival party said, others had little choice but to do the same. "The root cause [of the country's corruption and dysfunction] was that Hizbollah co-opted the Lebanese government and its agencies. When it did, the only way for others to survive was to emulate Hizbollah. ... It was a matter of survival". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2020.

<sup>49</sup> At a press conference concluding his September visit to Beirut, Macron confirmed that Hizbollah's weapons would not be part of the reform program but said the head of its parliamentary group, Mohammad Raad, accepted the proposition that they had to be discussed eventually. Rym Momtaz, "French president's expectations clash with reality as Lebanon commits to reforms", *Politico*, 2 September 2020.

anese diplomat, to form a government. Hizbollah's parliamentary bloc joined others in initially endorsing Adib, advancing the French initiative.<sup>50</sup>

U.S. officials have been sceptical of France's engagement with Hizbollah, which Washington considers a terrorist organisation and a main cause of Lebanon's dysfunction and state failure.<sup>51</sup> Although the U.S. has not explicitly rejected Hizbollah's participation in a new Lebanese government, it disagrees with the French view that Hizbollah is a necessary partner in reform efforts, seeing it as an obstacle to change and therefore unsuited to the task.<sup>52</sup> The U.S. appears convinced that the dire economic situation can compel Hizbollah to acquiesce to reforms that are disadvantageous to the movement, including to its illicit financial interests. Insofar as the U.S. believes that reforms will weaken Hizbollah, then, it sees stabilising Lebanon and diminishing the party's influence as complementary rather than competing objectives.<sup>53</sup>

While the U.S. referenced corruption when announcing sanctions on Hizbollah's political allies on 8 September, the main justification and legal basis for the sanctions remained the party's designation by Washington as a terrorist organisation.<sup>54</sup> The U.S. has since levied sanctions on another key Hizbollah ally based on his alleged corruption, not his relationship with the party.<sup>55</sup> Yet Washington has still remained mostly silent on accusations of corruption among political elites who have been close to the U.S. and its Arab allies.<sup>56</sup> Public statements by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo sharply criticising France for its approach to Iran and Hizbollah highlight

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<sup>50</sup> "Fidelity to the Resistance names Adib", National News Agency, 31 August 2020 (Arabic).

<sup>51</sup> "Special Briefing via Telephone with Assistant Secretary of State David Schenker", U.S. Department of State, 8 September 2020. U.S. officials say "Hizbollah does not seek reform because it lives on corruption and tax evasion". They argue that the party's alleged drug trafficking and money laundering undermine the Lebanese financial sector, and that its involvement in smuggling deprives the Lebanese state of significant customs revenue. "Interview with David Schenker", *Al-Hadeel*, 23 June 2020 (Arabic). By some estimates, smuggling costs the Lebanese state \$600 million or more annually. For example, see "Legalised smuggling: 'Between \$600 million and \$700 million!'", *Al-Jumhuriya*, 14 May 2019 (Arabic).

<sup>52</sup> On Hizbollah's participation in government, see State Department official David Hale's remarks during his visit to Lebanon in the wake of the port disaster: "We have been able to deal with governments in the past with a Hizballah component, but the question is whether it is going to be a government that's truly capable of reforms. Reforms are contrary to the interests of all of the status quo leaders and that very much includes Hizballah, which is today perceived as a big part of the problem". "Briefing with Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale on His Recent Trip to Beirut", U.S. Department of State, 19 August 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, September 2020. A like-minded Western diplomat said he thought pressure could be brought to bear on Hizbollah via its popular base: "We are thinking about the Shiite cab driver who can identify with the anti-Israeli propaganda but who has lost most of his income since last year [and] can't pay school fees. This person has to understand that the reason for his misery is not Israel but Hizbollah itself". Crisis Group telephone interview, August 2020. European countries concerned with supporting Lebanon generally see the U.S. line as unhelpful for advancing the reform agenda. Crisis Group Report, *How Europe Can Help Lebanon Overcome Its Economic Implosion*, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> "Treasury Targets Hizballah's Enablers in Lebanon", op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> "Treasury Targets Corruption in Lebanon", op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> Although some reports have suggested that the U.S. may sanction officials more closely linked to Western allies, they nonetheless characterise U.S. sanctions policy as a means of isolating Hizbollah and, increasingly, penalising its allies. Dion Nissenbaum et al., "U.S. prepares sanctions against Hezbollah's allies in Lebanon", *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 August 2020.

how the U.S. approach to dealing with Hizbollah is integrally linked to its regional confrontation with Iran.<sup>57</sup>

U.S. divergence from the Macron initiative helped spell the end of Adib's efforts to form a government. Along with U.S. external pressure, Hizbollah claimed that it was up against attempts by foreign-backed domestic rivals to shift the balance of power against it, accusing a group of Sunni politicians led by Hariri of having directed Prime Minister-designate Adib to form a cabinet that excluded them and their ally Amal from executive power.<sup>58</sup> In response, the two Shiite parties insisted upon retaining control of the finance ministry, which can wield effective veto power over other ministries' expenditures and will be crucial for carrying out any reform agenda.<sup>59</sup> As the dispute became increasingly heated and public, both sides found it harder to back down, and soon Adib saw no other choice but to step down.

Even as domestic Lebanese reasons thus led to Adib's failure to form a government, actions by the U.S. and others such as Saudi Arabia seem to have contributed, by helping put Hizbollah on the defensive and undercutting Macron's attempt to stage-manage Lebanese political consensus and reform.<sup>60</sup> At the French president's 27 September press conference, a day after Adib's resignation, he stressed that the U.S. had not coordinated its 8 September sanctions with France. For Hizbollah, the natural conclusion was that even though Macron appeared to be acting in good faith, he was unable to moderate a hostile U.S. policy. A senior party official said:

The green light that the French seem to have gotten from the Americans is conditional and limited. The U.S. gave its approval, but with a low ceiling, and in exchange for gains by its local allies, and for weakening Hizbollah. The sanctions showed that the Americans won't wait for the sake of facilitating the French initi-

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<sup>57</sup> Pompeo, while on a visit to Paris, told French media that, "You can't allow Iran to have more money, power and arms and at same time try to disconnect Hezbollah from the disasters it provoked in Lebanon". Quoted in "Pompeo says Hezbollah weapons risk torpedoing French efforts in Lebanon", Reuters, 15 September 2020. On 14 September, Pompeo published an op-ed in *Le Figaro* arguing that "France should stand with freedom, not Tehran", and designate Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organisation. An observer of the Lebanon policy debate in Washington noted that while career State Department diplomats tend to see intrinsic value in keeping Lebanon stable and look at Hezbollah as a problematic but manageable actor, the Trump administration's political appointees prioritise regional and strategic perspectives: "These guys see the Lebanon problem through the prism of Iran. They understand some of the nuances, but they don't have the patience for it. They have an agenda that needs to be pursued: [countering] Iran". Crisis Group telephone interview, August 2020.

<sup>58</sup> "Lebanon's prime minister-designate resigns as political impasse stalls government formation", *Time*, 26 September 2020. The Sunni politicians in question rejected these allegations. Tweet by Saad Hariri, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> Hizbollah and Amal argue that they must participate in naming ministerial candidates if they are to protect their stake in Lebanon's executive authority. A senior official of the Amal movement said: "The finance minister signs all decisions that have financial effect. He can exercise a veto – if there's something he can't go along with, he won't sign. It's the bare minimum of participation we can have. This is about essential decisions". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2020. On the finance minister's capacity to exercise de facto veto power over other ministries' policies, see the interview with the finance ministry's former director-general, Alain Bifani, on *The Lebanese Policy Podcast*, 4 October 2020.

<sup>60</sup> The Saudi king delivered a sharply anti-Hizbollah address to the UN General Assembly on 23 September. "UN General Assembly: Saudi Arabia's King Salman calls for Hezbollah to be disarmed", *Arab News*, 24 September 2020.

ative. They want to apply pressure for the formation of a government that suits them.<sup>61</sup>

In a 30 September speech, Nasrallah made clear that his party's concerns go beyond portfolio distribution. He said the party now believes it must participate in government to have a say in Lebanon's talks with the IMF. That is in addition to its main justification for participation in recent years: precluding an unfriendly government whose actions could lead to a repeat of May 2008. According to Nasrallah:

We need to be in government to protect the back of the resistance, to avoid a repeat of what happened on 5 May 2008. Who were the people in government at that time? The very same people who wanted to form the new government now. On 5 May 2008, a dangerous decision was taken that could have led to a confrontation between the Lebanese Army and the resistance – that was an American-Israeli-Saudi project. ... We have a right to be concerned about political power, political decisions, and we decided to be in the government to protect the back of the resistance.<sup>62</sup>

Though all Lebanon's parties voice continued backing for Macron's initiative, the French-led effort to build cross-factional support for a reform-oriented government has so far remained stalled. Without an empowered Lebanese government, no further negotiations with the IMF can occur. Without an agreement with the IMF, and without the major foreign donor support that is conditioned on an IMF-proposed reform program, Lebanon will continue its economic slide.

## V. Preventing State Collapse

As Lebanon stares down its political-economic crisis, it faces a seemingly existential threat. Attempts at this point to isolate and weaken Hizbollah seem likely to make an already difficult operation to save Lebanon impossible. External actors should prioritise the country's stabilisation over weakening Hizbollah and encourage Lebanese political forces they support to do the same.

### A. *Sliding Toward Chaos*

Lebanon's circumstances were dire even before 4 August. As of May 2020, an estimated 55 per cent of the population had fallen below the poverty line, almost double the rate a year earlier.<sup>63</sup> Consumer prices have skyrocketed, putting basic goods out of reach for many Lebanese, as well as others including Syrian and Palestinian refugees.<sup>64</sup> The central bank has additionally warned policymakers that its foreign cur-

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<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2020.

<sup>62</sup> "Text of al-Sayyid Nasrallah's speech regarding the latest developments that he delivered Tuesday evening", op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> "Poverty in Lebanon: Impact of Multiple Shocks and Call for Solidarity", UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 19 August 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Dana Kraiche, "Lebanon inflation soars past 100% in latest sign of meltdown", Bloomberg, 26 August 2020. Among Syrian refugees, some 90 per cent of households are food-insecure. "Statistical Dashboard", UN Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, June 2020.

rency reserves will decline to critical levels within months, forcing it to halt subsidies for fuel, wheat and medicine.<sup>65</sup> Without an international bailout and an infusion of foreign capital, Lebanon's economic crisis will only deepen.<sup>66</sup>

Worsening economic and humanitarian conditions will inevitably affect the country's security and stability. Already, the security situation seems to be fraying. Just in the past few weeks, Lebanon has witnessed several deadly firefights and other instances of headline-grabbing violence.<sup>67</sup> Weapons are clearly available in abundance, as are idle young men ready to wield them.<sup>68</sup> Frustrated at the lack of prospects for themselves and the country, some may resort to violence or could be recruited for it.<sup>69</sup>

Some U.S. and Western policymakers appear convinced that as a protracted crisis hurts Lebanon's Shiites as it does the country's other communities, Hizbollah will be forced to offer concessions. These expectations seem misplaced, however. Among Lebanon's factions, Hizbollah appears the best able to weather the country's deterioration. The party has alternate, illicit channels of material support, and its security and social welfare institutions can keep its core areas stable. Its constituents would certainly suffer if Lebanon deteriorated further, but the rest of the country would endure far worse. Nor is there any indication that economic hardship will substantially erode Hizbollah's Shiite base.<sup>70</sup> As a Hizbollah official put it:

We don't fear for ourselves. However we are targeted, whatever campaign there is against us, it won't shake us. No, we fear for Lebanon. If things continue to deteriorate, if chaos spreads, then all Lebanese will lose. We're not afraid for Hizbollah – we're ready, we have options; we can endure amid chaos, more than any other faction in Lebanon. If there's chaos in Lebanon, and things break down, who is able to protect themselves, and to manage their surroundings? You know the answer.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Osama Habib, "BDL's subsidy program to end in three months: source", *Daily Star*, 20 August 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group Report, *How Europe Can Help Lebanon Overcome Its Economic Implosion*, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> Mona Alami, "Timeline: Security incidents in Lebanon on the rise as economy worsens", *Al Arabiya*, 9 September 2020.

<sup>68</sup> A Western diplomat worried: "In this economic crisis, it's become so cheap to buy someone. If you want to destabilise things, it's so easy and cheap". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2020.

<sup>69</sup> An activist said many young people were stepping away from Lebanon's protest movement out of frustration and fatigue. But she added, "I am worried that the rest, who were ready to take [the authorities] down with their teeth on [8 August], that these are the ones who are now being armed and prepared for the next phase". She said clashes between protesters and security forces in the wake of the 4 August explosion and events over preceding months had demonstrated the system's readiness to meet opposition with brutality: "I feel it requires a different approach at this point. Just the performance of anger is not going to do anything. So, if I feel more radicalised, I can imagine what people who stand in other places think. There's no way out anymore, other than fighting". Crisis Group telephone interview, August 2020.

<sup>70</sup> All established Lebanese parties appear to have succeeded to some degree in consolidating their respective loyalist bases. Mortada Alamine, "Lebanon's loyalists", *Synaps*, 14 October 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, August 2020.

## B. *All Hands on Deck*

The only seeming way to avert this disaster scenario is a major international bailout for Lebanon. Yet that bailout remains conditioned on meeting the IMF's requirements, and the crisis since the Diab government's 10 August resignation has made clear once more how difficult it will be to muster political will behind forming a new government, negotiating a deal with the IMF and implementing reforms. Any new government requires a parliamentary majority to nominate its head, and then another majority to approve his or her cabinet in a vote of confidence. Reform legislation demanded by the IMF will also have to pass through parliament. Absent some extra-constitutional solution, reform will have to work its way through a system full of potential veto players and spoilers.

Despite many would-be international donors' concerns over Hizbollah, they have little choice but to work with the country's government and its status quo political factions – including Hizbollah. What is more, because of the party and its political allies' parliamentary majority since the 2018 elections, a program of reform simply is not possible without their cooperation. Hizbollah has said it is ready to support a reform agenda, including an agreement with the IMF. A senior party official said that if “external” or “foreign” issues related to regional politics and Hizbollah's resistance project can be set aside, then:

Domestically, we're very flexible, including on issues on the table with international financial institutions. We do take a social view – so we're not on board with comprehensive privatisation or measures that hurt the working class, including new taxes. But we know the IMF is different now [from the way it was in the past]. So, we don't oppose negotiations or discussing these issues with the IMF.<sup>72</sup>

At this moment, it appears crucial that all hands be on deck. Even then, whether Lebanon can escape calamity is far from certain. For reforms to succeed, all political actors who have benefitted from the status quo will have to relinquish some of the networks of patronage they have spun in state institutions; at least some of them will likely demur, as they have done in response to past demands for reform. Nudging them into cooperation will already be a serious challenge for Lebanon's foreign partners and donors. Mutual suspicion among domestic actors makes that challenge even more daunting. If actors inside and outside the country take sides in some new confrontation, and if politics are once again paralysed by partisan rancour, progress will be impossible.

Hizbollah's domestic rivals and foreign enemies are understandably motivated to weaken a movement whose weapons give it a disproportionate role and that has pursued a foreign policy independent of, and yet deeply affecting the state. The notion that rescuing Lebanon and reducing Hizbollah's military power and political influence are complementary objectives has obvious appeal. The reality, though, is more likely that pushing for both at once will mean getting neither. Hizbollah has sufficient political clout to block change, and as Mustapha Adib's failed nomination showed,

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<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2020. Another senior Hizbollah official said: “With the IMF, we have some reservations, in principle, but we have no objection. Our focus is on two ceilings: first, that any arrangement doesn't transgress the country's sovereignty. And second, that it doesn't come at the expense of the poor”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, August 2020.

the party will not hesitate to use that clout if it believes that its core interests are on the line. If Lebanon's politics again seize up, its people will pay the price.

There is still time to prevent additional disaster in Lebanon. Yet it will require Lebanon's factions and foreign sponsors to work together to save the country, and to keep their focus squarely on reform. Macron's approach putting reform and economic rescue over a reckoning with Hizbollah was the correct one, even if it has, for now, hit a wall. Reform in Lebanon already faces a myriad of obstacles.<sup>73</sup> Reopening the issue of Hizbollah's role now will only add new, likely insurmountable ones. Lebanon's factions and international donors should hold to Macron's approach, whether by reviving it or launching a new one that is similarly focused on reform. The seeming alternative would be another state failure in the Mediterranean basin.

## **VI. Conclusion**

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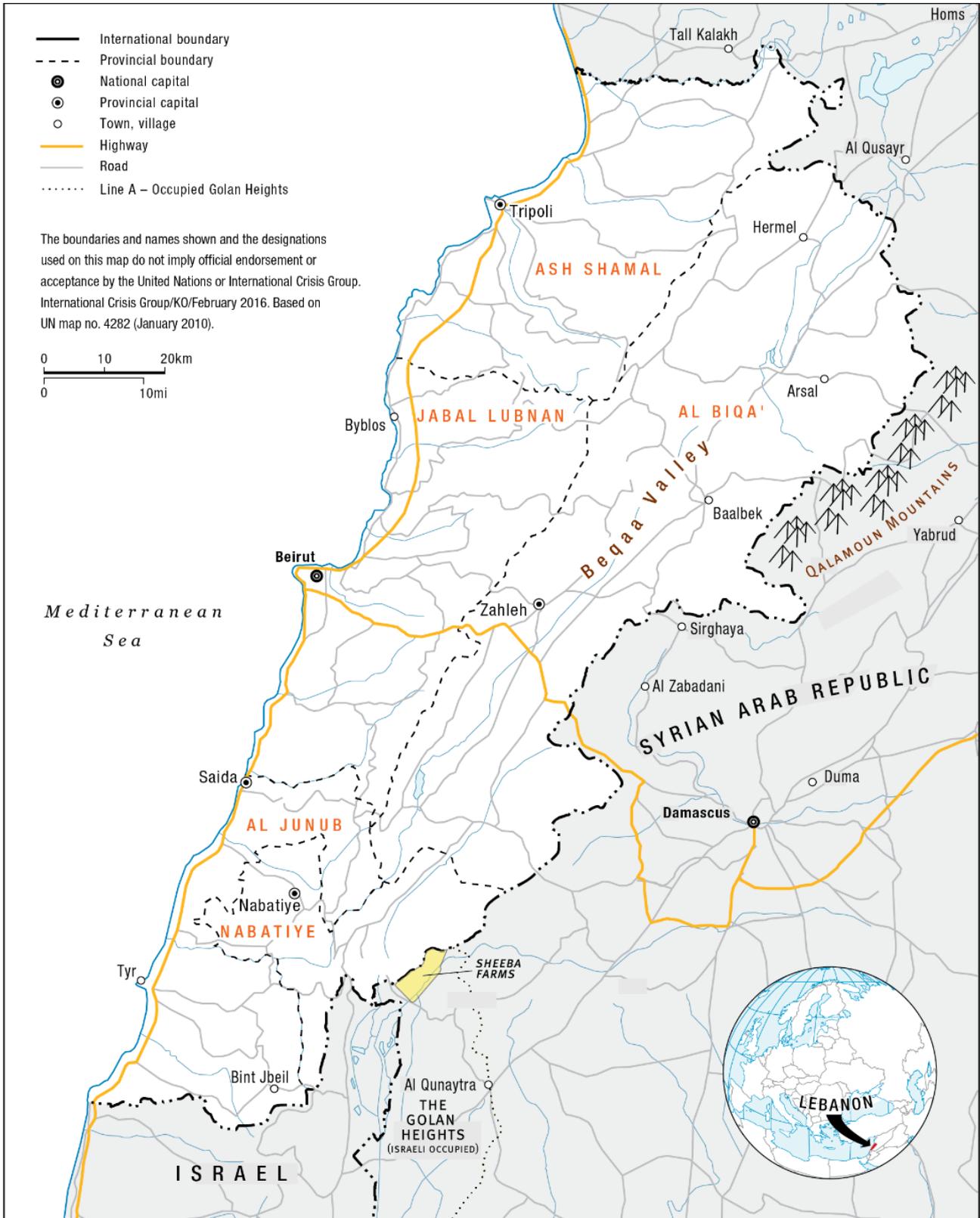
What little hope remains for rescuing Lebanon hangs on joint action by the country's political elites and international partners on urgently needed reforms. Hizbollah's rivals and foreign enemies have serious objections to the party's role in regional affairs and in Lebanese politics. Yet there is seemingly no way to advance a reform program without its cooperation. The type of emergency measures needed now require political consensus, or something close to it. Attempts by the U.S. and others to significantly weaken Hizbollah amid this crisis seem likely to pit the country's political factions against one another, preventing collective action to meet an existential challenge. At this critical moment, Lebanon cannot afford more polarisation and paralysis. There is no time to spare.

**Beirut/Brussels, 10 November 2020**

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<sup>73</sup> Ishac Diwan, "It's the economy, stupid", L'Orient Today, 16 October 2020.

Appendix A: Map of Lebanon



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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