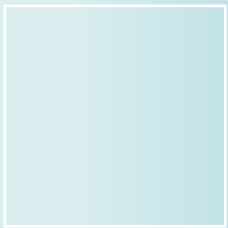




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## *Breaking the Cycle: A New American Approach to Lebanon*

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### **Abstract**

For the last three decades since the near-simultaneous end of the Cold War and the end of the Lebanese civil war, United States (US) policy towards Lebanon has continued to be dominated by support for specific personalities, parties and officials deemed to be ‘pro-Western’ rather than the construction of strong and effective democratic institutions for the country as a whole. At the same time, successive US administrations have led or encouraged the application of military, financial, judicial and political-diplomatic pressure against Lebanese Hezbollah in an effort to reduce (and at some times eliminate) the party’s military and political standing. In all of these endeavours, the result has been failure. ‘Pro-Western’ establishment parties are overall weaker than they were following the diplomatically-induced withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, with the not-so-‘silent majority’ of unaffiliated Lebanese citizens generally being assumed to now want the ousting of all political leaders, including those traditionally supported by the US. The Lebanese state is the closest that it has been to complete collapse since the civil war era, corruption is rampant, the banks are broken and unemployment is at unprecedented levels. Meanwhile, hate, crime and violence grow daily as the spectre of widespread hunger and hyper-inflation draws closer by the month. Through all of this, Hezbollah’s military power has only grown, as has its multifaceted ability to, comparatively, withstand even more force, pressure and breakdown in Lebanon. A new US-led approach to the country is therefore urgent, if only from the limited perspective of peace and stability in the eastern Mediterranean and Levant.

1. The views expressed here are wholly the author’s own and do not reflect those of the EUI or any other organisation.



Any such re-orientation, however, must first be linked to a marshalling of allies, competitors and enemies for a regional dialogue focused on Iran and Saudi Arabia and an immediate de-escalation or freezing of relevant conflicts, especially between Hezbollah and Israel. With such a vital ‘breathing space,’ a multilateral Lebanon-specific reform policy could then be credibly launched to invest in effective democratic institution-building, a new socio-political compact in line with the Taif Accord that ended the last civil war and a national defence strategy capable of delivering security for all Lebanese citizens.

## Introduction

The 4 August explosion that devastated much of Beirut killing at least 193 people and leaving as many as 300,000 effectively homeless could not have come at a worse time for Lebanon. The small Mediterranean state was at the start of yet another government crisis following the 17 October 2019 revolt and, perhaps even more immediately concerning, was being lashed daily by cascading economic, financial and currency shocks threatening the basic livelihoods of millions of Lebanese and Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

At the same time, hostilities between Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah had yet again reached an extremely dangerous level. Following Israeli strikes in late July in Syria that reportedly killed a Hezbollah member, a retaliatory operation that could have escalated to war – one far more devastating than the 2006 conflict – appeared both likely and imminent.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps in part because of the recent (albeit uneven) losses and rising instability that threatens so many in Lebanon and beyond, a unique opportunity for rapid recovery, deep reform and peacebuilding has emerged out of necessity, one that should be seized upon by the Lebanese and the country’s international partners.

However, while more Lebanese citizens than ever appear to back far-reaching changes, with the blast having laid bare the existential threat that is the current system of government, it will *first and foremost* require a fundamentally different approach by the same international partners who have often called for reform over the last thirty years but who have then heavily invested in their

own narrow portions of an ultimately destabilising and unjust Lebanese state.

Indeed, the reality of many of Lebanon’s current woes is that the political elite and parasitic socio-economic structures that directly laid the ground for an explosion causing mass casualties are certainly of local constitution. And yet, this ‘made in Lebanon’ matrix is only symbiotically perpetuated by consistent access to international financial flows, foreign political cover and hard power supplied by others.<sup>3</sup> Whether it is due to the country’s small size, its long-standing dependency on external actors and/or its unfortunate positioning at the centre of so many strategically significant conflicts, all actors who genuinely want to reverse Lebanon’s vicious circle must start with frank acknowledgment of this or else risk drowning any locally-focused initiatives in the constant machinations of geopolitics.

As the strongest state-superpower affecting Lebanon’s future prospects, and the one with the most leverage over others, the US has both a special responsibility and an opportunity to forge a fundamentally different policy based on this core premise. Under the Trump administration, however, Lebanon has been seen almost exclusively as a space to further punish Iran with a ‘maximum pressure’ doctrine bereft of any reasonable end-goals, unconcerned about the abuses and corruption of key allies<sup>4</sup> and which callously risks the lives of tens of millions in the Levant if only Iran and its key partner Hezbollah can be hurt a bit more. The essential strategic obtuseness of this approach when it specifically comes to Lebanon is that Hezbollah is the local entity *best equipped to survive* economic collapse, further financial sanctioning and any ‘final’ disintegration of the Lebanese state. Moreover, at each stage in the past 15 years that direct military force and pressure has been brought to bear against the party, Hezbollah’s influence and capabilities have only grown,<sup>5</sup>

2. [Hezbollah says its soldier killed by Israeli airstrike in Syria; ‘One Israeli soldier for every Hezbollah fighter,’ vows Nasrallah](#)

3. In this regard, German legal scholar Ernst Fraenkel (among others) has observed, there is all too often “the concurrent existence of a ‘normative state’ that generally respects its own laws, and a ‘prerogative state’ that violates the very same laws” when it comes to its foreign relations. [Trump among the kleptocrats](#)

4. One example of this was seen in the exceptionally mild Trump Administration reaction to the detaining of Lebanese Premier Saad Hariri by Saudi Arabia in November 2017. [Saudi Arabia forcibly detained Lebanon’s prime minister, sources say; The Trump Team’s Fawning Over Saudi Arabia Is Getting Ridiculous.](#)

5. [20 years after Lebanon pullout, IDF faces a stronger Hezbollah – in Syria too](#)



most notably following the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah during the period 2006-2008 which led to the May 2008 street conflict and during the Syrian Civil War over the last nine years. As such, pushing Lebanon towards greater chaos, division and violence on the altar of ‘maximum pressure’ – when Hezbollah is at its strongest militarily – actually threatens perceived American allies within the country and its regional allies, including Israel and Europe, far more than it does Iran or Hezbollah. After all, the probable mass emigration and refugee flows out of a collapsing Lebanon are unlikely to significantly impact Hezbollah’s concentric circles of core constituencies as they surely will others, especially Europe. Further financial breakdown is comparatively manageable for the party as it has had to work outside the global system for years now. Perhaps most dangerously, a fully-fledged failed state, disproportionately bled of effective opponents, would not only further unbind Hezbollah’s calculations from domestic considerations but the climate of aggravated armed conflict would actually only increase the rationale for deepening its military capabilities, especially the formidable precision missile programme,<sup>6</sup> and in the process escalate the prospects of a wider war, which would essentially be a repeat of so many similar and disastrous episodes in modern Lebanese history.

## The Abandoned Path

A coherent diplomacy-led American re-engagement with Lebanon would not only have to depart from the Trump doctrine of the last four years; it would also have to break with the failed Democratic and Republican policies of the past 30 years since the end of the Cold War and the close of Lebanon’s 15-year civil war. In fact, a return to earlier US wisdom on the country, as was broadly laid out by the Eisenhower administration in the wake of US military intervention in summer 1958, may provide the best roadmap. As the National Security Council wrote in its final policy determination on 4 November 1958, the US should

“Support the continued independence and integrity of Lebanon, but avoid becoming too closely identified with individual factions in Lebanese politics and seek discreetly to disengage from relationships that may be disadvantageous to U.S. interests. Provide Lebanon with political support and with military assistance for internal security purposes, stressing our support for

6. [Hezbollah and Israel: Deterrence at the Edge of Destruction \(2019\)](#)

the country as a whole rather than for a specific regime or faction.”<sup>7</sup>

As the Cold War wore on, however, the Eisenhower policy on Lebanon shifted back to that which had brought US marines to the shores of Beirut in the first place (backed by tactical nuclear weapons and erroneously believing Lebanon was about to become a Nasser-ruled Moscow on the Med). ‘Our man in Beirut’ – disproportionately investing in specific personalities and parties deemed at the moment to be pro-American rather than in strong democratic institutions for the country as a whole – became the default setting for protecting US interests and, as was all too often claimed, perceived Lebanese interests.<sup>8</sup> Over the last three decades, and despite the far wider preponderance of post-Cold War US power that should have instilled confidence in our ability to deploy more flexible non-military policies regarding long-standing conflicts, this approach has persisted, eventually fusing with direct military action spread out across the Middle East under the umbrella of America’s ‘Global War on Terror.’<sup>9</sup>

7. [Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula, Volume XII](#)

8. Even when Assistant Secretary of State David Schenker recently tried to at least message American support for institutional reform over support for specific parties – proclaiming that he would not meet with officials during a two day visit – he quickly undercut the effort by meeting with more than a half-dozen MPs long regarded as stalwart US allies at the headquarters of one of the oldest Lebanese establishment parties. [Schenker will not meet Lebanese officials in Beirut in sign of US frustration; Report: U.S. to Impose New Batch of Sanctions Next Week; Schenker Met With Speaker Birri’s Advisor](#)

9. For a compelling articulation of this argument, see Stephen Wertheim’s [The Price of Primacy](#): “Freed from major challengers, the United States had an unprecedented chance to shape international politics according to its wishes. It could have chosen to live in harmony with the world, pulling back its armed forces and deploying them only for vital purposes. It could have helped build a world of peace, strengthening the laws and institutions that constrain war and that most other states welcome. From this foundation of security and goodwill, the United States could have exercised leadership on the already visible challenges ahead, including climate change and the concentration of ungoverned wealth. Instead, Washington did the opposite. It adopted a grand strategy that gave pride of place to military threats and methods, and it constructed a form of global integration that served the immediate interests of a few but imperilled the long-term interests of the many. At best, these were mistaken priorities. At worst, they turned the United States into a destructive actor in the world. Rather than practice and cultivate peace, Washington pursued armed domination and launched futile wars in Afghanistan in 2001, in Iraq in 2003, and in Libya in 2011. These actions created more enemies than they defeated. They killed hundreds of thousands of



In Lebanon at least, the outcomes have been uniformly bad when judged only from the point of view of US interests. As mentioned above, Hezbollah is militarily, politically and financially far stronger than it was when Syrian troops were forced to exit the country in April 2005 as a result of deft US/French-led diplomacy following the assassination of former premier Rafik Hariri and '14 March' street protests that momentarily left it cornered virtually alone. More than this, however, the party now plays key roles across the region, including in the affairs of several states. It has also managed to bear the political brunt of its involvement in the Syrian civil war on the side of President Assad – although this is still a terrible bleeding wound for many – and even, comparatively speaking, its own deepening relation to domestic corruption as the single most powerful local actor controlling the Lebanese game.<sup>10</sup>

Concurrently, because of the corrupt and inefficient structures of governance exercised by so many among the business and political elite, including key allies of the US, Lebanon itself is now in technical default on its debt obligations, financially eviscerated and experiencing economic freefall, and all of this before the devastating 4 August explosion. Not surprisingly then, establishment politicians and elected parties across the board face significant opposition, especially in popular street protests, with all sides appearing to dig in for an 'existential' next stage where local compromise is increasingly impossible, desperation drives decision-making and violence is seen as the only remaining hope for extracting at least a sliver of security from the shards of collapse.

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civilians and overextended a generation of U.S. service members. They damaged laws and institutions that stabilise the world and the United States. They made the American people less safe.”

10. Hezbollah's 'deal with the devil' in summer 2005, when it decided to join a Lebanese government for the first time in its history at the ministerial level, can now be said to have reached its nadir following the 4 August explosion. With each step deeper into the heart of Lebanon's unsustainable corrupt governing matrix, the party's centrality and power has surely grown, but so too has its identification with precisely the cancerous structures that it had long criticised and which are now more easily hung around its neck, given its evident role as Lebanon's pre-eminent decision-maker. [Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm \(2005\)](#)

## Towards Recovery, Reform and Peacebuilding

Of course, reforming Lebanon's current elite away from power while also reducing Hezbollah's desire and ability to employ armed force will certainly be an enormously difficult task even if enough international and local actors are able to come together and put substantial resources behind such an effort. It will be impossible, however, should various local lifelines persist, predicated, as they overwhelmingly are, on undiminished regional conflicts.<sup>11</sup> To avoid reproducing what has become a fatal cycle, the US should prioritise four indispensable regional de-escalation steps:

1. As a core part of re-joining and re-invigorating the Iran Nuclear Deal – presumably under a new Biden administration<sup>12</sup> – and reversing some of the damage wrought by the Trump administration, it is crucial for the US to put maximum effort behind the immediate launch of a regional dialogue focusing on direct Saudi-Iranian negotiations to de-escalate (and hopefully end) the multiple conflicts in the region that are primarily affected by their mutual enmity and hostile policies towards one another.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Here lies one essential weakness of French President Emmanuel Macron's narrowly-focused 'reform' proposal recently submitted to Lebanon's ruling political parties: agreements on local transformations, in the electricity sector for example, can be effectively derailed at any point, even before the more fraught implementation phase is reached, since almost any actor has the ability to aggravate conflicts along geo-political lines that will suddenly change the calculations and focus of external states. [French roadmap sets blistering pace for Lebanon to change course](#)

12. See especially Jake Sullivan and Daniel Benaim, [US Diplomacy Could Succeed In the Middle East Where Military Force Has Failed](#)

13. Whether one views Hezbollah crudely as a mere appendage of Iran's IRGC or as an independent non-state ally, the party's unparalleled strategic relationship with Iran and their deep shared interests necessitate that any Lebanon-focused reform effort be linked to a regional dialogue which also tries to reasonably address the interests of Iran's main Arab opponent in Lebanon and the Middle East – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – and its primary military enemy in the area besides the US – i.e. Israel (see Step 2). Of course, while a de-escalation of all area armed conflicts (Syria, Yemen, Libya especially) within the context of such a dialogue would certainly be significantly beneficial for Lebanon, it is hardly an absolute prerequisite. Indeed, even the receding armed conflict in neighboring Syria – the one that most directly concerns Lebanon – now exercises far less influence over the country and Hezbollah except insofar as it periodically draws both into the ongoing and potentially calamitous military struggle between



2. Under this umbrella, and in the context of wider good-faith steps by all parties designed to lay the foundation for a sustainable regional dialogue, the US should negotiate a 12-month ‘freeze in place’ of the Hezbollah-Israel conflict – in both Lebanon and Syria – given that it constitutes the likeliest imminent flashpoint for a large-scale war. This might specifically entail a temporary halt of (a) cross-border missile transfers into Lebanon, (b) the further development of Hezbollah’s precision missile programme and (c) cross-border military operations in exchange for a temporary halt of cross-border Israeli military strikes against Hezbollah.
3. The US should strongly encourage Israel to expeditiously move occupied northern Ghajar and the ‘disputed’ Shebaa Farms and Kfar Shouba Hills into UN trusteeship (and eventually back to Lebanon) in order to end the flashpoint of occupied and ‘disputed territories’ that continues to threaten regional peace and security despite the lands themselves being incredibly small and of little strategic added value any longer to either of the two states.<sup>14</sup>
4. The US should call for delimitation of the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon according to Lebanon’s current legal claim. This would mean effectively withdrawing the Obama-era ‘Hof Line,’ which proposed giving approximately 55% of the current ‘disputed’ area to Lebanon and 45% to Israel. Given that Lebanon’s existing maritime border claim is (a) almost uniquely in the world far from the maximum permitted under international law, and (b) that even with this line, most if not all of the energy-

Iran, Israel and the US (Saudi Arabia having largely withdrawn from the field some time ago). In fact, with Lebanon’s economic and financial crisis in the last year, the flow of Syrian refugees has been reversed, lessening real and perceived impacts. Although economic and trade relations with Syria remain badly affected by the civil war, Lebanon’s enormous internal problems have also rendered this particular issue of secondary importance for most local actors. And finally, Hezbollah has significantly reduced its combat role in Syrian army actions compared to several years ago. Taken together, this means that the civil war itself, while certainly still having an important local impact on Lebanon overall, need not be treated as the immediate and decisive factor it once was in stabilising the country and putting it on a sustainable path to peace and development.

14. UNIFIL Commander Says Israel Obligated to Withdraw from Northern Section of Ghajar

rich Karish field<sup>15</sup> would be available for Israel alone to develop with greatly enhanced stability, ending the land *and* maritime border conflict between two states *de jure* and *de facto* engaged in a decades-long conflict should well serve the overall security and economic interests of both states and US and European interests.<sup>16</sup>

By removing, or at least freezing, these four main sources of regional conflict that together inexorably overwhelm the prospects of local reform efforts in Lebanon, the US could effectively create a short-term ‘breathing space’ for a new multilateral approach that aims to achieve a just and sustainable model of *both* reform and stability. Specifically, this would mean focusing US diplomatic energy, material resources and regional alliances on several socio-political transformation building blocks, all of which are well-known to the Lebanese and their establishment:

**1. A durable recovery from the explosion.** Given the tremendous needs resulting from the 4 August tragedy – public sector reconstruction and recovery costs alone are estimated in the \$1.8-\$2.2 billion range<sup>17</sup> – it is crucial to first put in place adequate structures and institutions that together can provide immediate relief and long-term protection against future disasters.

- **In-source emergency aid management.** Most of Lebanon’s government structures lack transparency, trust and efficiency. While some emergency aid should be directed to well-vetted NGOs, international donors should beware of *only* focusing funds outside the government since corruption and a lack of transparency is also a problem in Lebanon’s NGO sector and, some argue, in the regional UN system. Instead, the US should explore supporting *ad-hoc* but nevertheless constitutional structures that are tied to institutional legitimacy in overseeing emergency relief. The Lebanese armed forces, the judiciary and various levels of elected officials (to mention only a few pillars of the Lebanese body politic) all have members who possess the skills, honesty and validity to perform a historic national duty.

15. Karish

16. Lebanon’s Southern Maritime Border Dispute: Legal Issues, Challenges, and the Way Forward

17. World Bank: Decisive Action and Change Needed to Reform and Rebuild a Better Lebanon



Instead of out-sourcing the task, and further undermining the state, the US should therefore work with local and international partners to help craft credible transparent Lebanese *state* structures – composed of qualified Lebanese individuals – that can deliver the relief and accountability citizens urgently need and demand.<sup>18</sup>

- **Investigating the explosion via judicial independence.** Similarly, although an international investigation and even an international tribunal on the tragic events of 4 August may seem to some inside and outside Lebanon to be indispensable steps, they do nothing to address the underlying institutional flaw which prompts the call for outside intervention in the first place: an utter lack of judicial independence. As such, it is crucial that the US leads a vigorous multilateral effort to exert pressure for the immediate passage of the strong judicial independence bill currently being tabled in parliament as the best way to enforce long-term justice and accountability.<sup>19</sup> In the short term, while an investigation involving the UN and even a mixed international/national tribunal may both be beneficial, the US should follow the same approach to emergency aid management and only support and help fund such efforts if they are rooted in well-functioning Lebanese state structures with a majority of qualified Lebanese individuals.

**2. Financial and socio-economic stabilisation.** For any substantial reform effort to proceed, the approaching spectre of hunger and hyper-inflation – with all of the attendant risks of crime and violence – must be vigorously dissipated.

- **An International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout and banking sector reorganisation.** The US should state clearly that tethering a full IMF bailout – if focused on sustainable reform and institution-building – to direct pressure against Hezbollah (by suggesting its political neuterisation, as but one example) is actually counterproductive for everyone's

interests except Hezbollah, which (a) is the strongest local power able to withstand any governmental vacuum or further state breakdown and (b) can also portray itself and Lebanon as victims of a US interference that only cares about eliminating Hezbollah, regardless of the practical impossibility or cost to others.<sup>20</sup> The US should therefore support the IMF's audit, transparency and reorganisation requirements as part of its conditionality approach (step by step cash for reforms) governing a full bailout alongside similar CEDRE<sup>21</sup> funding requirements that also target deeply inefficient and corrupt sectors such as energy.<sup>22</sup> This, together with a major shrinkage of the banking sector, will, of course, not be a pretty process for some of America and Europe's long-standing allies and economic partners who are implicated in the corrupt and inefficient structures that effectively destroyed Lebanon's once-vaunted financial sector and literally blew up in a human catastrophe on 4 August.<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, some may object that the IMF and other international institutions represent poor partners for struggling countries to actually get out of their holes. While the US should at the very least explore a fundamental reappraisal of US-supported international financial institutions and should stress the need for robust social safety net programmes, as

18. It is important to note that this path is fundamentally different to the longstanding and ultimately corrosive 'our man in Beirut' approach since it makes the selection of qualified individuals subservient to and dependant on the promulgation of strong democratic institutions rather than merely an end in itself, i.e. the easiest immediate means of preserving shares in an otherwise failing enterprise.

19. [Civil society coalition presents judicial independence draft law to Aoun](#)

20. Following the 4 August explosion, Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale (a career official and not a Trump political appointee) seemed to offer some minimal flexibility on one of several points that the US is taking into consideration when it comes to unlocking any aid for Lebanon (the US holds veto power over any large IMF bailout), saying "we'd have to examine closely" Hezbollah's role in a future government. However, his superior, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, has repeatedly made it clear that "only a government capable of and committed to undertaking real and tangible reforms will restore investor confidence and unlock international assistance for Lebanon" and, specifically, that "real reform" means a government "...operat[ing] in a way that is not beholden to Hezbollah ... real change, a fundamental shift away from Hezbollah as the governing power inside of Lebanon." [Facing economic crisis, Lebanon's government weighs options; Briefing With Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale On His Recent Trip to Lebanon; Hezbollah obstructs urgent reforms in Lebanon](#)

21. [Lebanon – CEDRE Conference \(06.04.18\) – Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs](#)

22. [Statement by IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva on the International Conference on Support to Beirut and the Lebanese People](#)

23. [Investigating Riad Salame's wealth in Europe: Companies, Real Estate and "5 Dimensions of Fun," Daraj](#)



far as Lebanon is concerned the IMF road represents the best path forward from the point of view of US interests, given (a) the threat to regional peace and security that Lebanon's state of affairs today represents, (b) the lack of (and problematic nature of) rapid alternatives, i.e. 'turning to the east,' and (c) Lebanon's wide scale parasitic privatisation, which makes the IMF look like a beacon of social justice in comparison.

- **Immediate IMF Covid-19 aid and a Gulf deposit.** Well before the explosion, the IMF made clear its debt sustainability, audit and reform conditions for both the large-scale bailout package above (up to \$10 billion) and Covid-related relief (\$800 million).<sup>24</sup> To obtain much-needed Covid-19 funds, the main sticking point has been for the government to show serious 'intent' to design a debt sustainability plan, which practically means (a) at least engaging foreign creditors in negotiations over a restructuring of defaulted and outstanding loans, (b) finally agreeing on the calculation of the country's losses and (c) putting forward a vision of how debt sustainability *might* be achieved. The US should therefore focus international pressure on Lebanon meeting these three conditions, together with the overall bailout and CEDRE conditions, if need be by raising the prospect of multilateral (instead of unilateral) UN sanctions. The US should also consider supporting the exercise of Lebanon's quota drawing rights (\$500 million), which would together unlock almost \$1.3 billion of much needed short-term financial support that could stabilise the difficult months ahead and help lubricate further concrete reform steps. Finally, the US should strongly encourage its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council to commit to a substantial deposit of dollars in Lebanon's central bank as both a means of building further goodwill for a regional dialogue and to invest in Lebanon's overall re-positioning.

**3. Structural transitions.** By fashioning a sustained international emphasis on long-term institutional changes, the US and its international partners could provide the *force majeure* needed to finally help Lebanese citizens build a stable, just and non-sectarian state.

- **Re-orienting US financial sanctions towards multilateralism and anti-corruption.** The wide proliferation of unilateral US financial sanctions imposed by successive administrations must be globally rethought, especially in the case of Lebanon, where the US should avoid extending its sanction actions further against *political* opponents based primarily on their relationship to Hezbollah instead of corruption in general<sup>25</sup> (i.e. under the Magnitsky Act, Caesar Act or previous executive orders<sup>26</sup>). Thus, while sanctions related to American definitions of terrorism and criminality would presumably continue as far as Hezbollah and trade with the Assad-led government of Syria are directly concerned, the US should channel its energies into building multilateral UN-led sanctions<sup>27</sup> to both encourage acceptance of IMF/CEDRE reform conditions and to actually help Lebanese institutions stem corrupt financial flows and recover assets, whether from our allies or our opponents.<sup>28</sup> Thankfully, since local Lebanese corruption is not significant enough to lead to international deadlock on its own, the prospect of a UN Security Council veto or other obstruction against such an effort is reasonably manageable, allowing the US to lead in developing a comprehensive sanctions and asset recovery effort related to specific institution-building objectives – instead of punishment that could greatly improve Lebanon's short- and long-term reform prospects.
- **Decentralisation.** The US should support administrative decentralisation reform, versions of which are currently being discussed in parliament. As a July 2020 report by The Middle East Institute noted, "The oligarchy thrives on keeping all decision making under their control in the capital, Beirut. Decentralisation is a means of increasing transparency, increasing decision-making efficiency, empowering the citizenry, and loosening the stranglehold that the oligarchy has on all decisions and monies of the state."

24. [New Capital Control Law Awaits Approval of Lebanese Parliament](#)

25. [US preparing sanctions against Hezbollah's allies in Lebanon: Report; U.S. Seeks to Reshape Lebanese Government With New Sanctions](#)

26. [Text of a Notice on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to Lebanon \(2007\)](#)

27. [Guatemala's anti-corruption CICIG body to shut down: What to know](#)

28. For a mainstream critique of unilateral US sanctions' policy, see Richard Hass's [Economic Sanctions: Too Much of a Bad Thing](#)



However, this can only be effectively implemented by building local capacity in governance skills at the municipal and regional level that disrupt corruption and support the rule of law administration.<sup>29</sup>

- **Creating a bi-cameral legislative branch to gradually end sectarianism.** According to the Lebanese Constitution, amended after the Taif Accord of 1989 that brought the Lebanese civil war to a close, the country should have already created a bi-cameral legislative branch that would see a lower de-confessional house and an upper confessional-based senate, of which the latter would have a remit for a limited number of subjects of special national importance. A renewed national dialogue to this end should be urgently supported by the US as the best means of gradually reducing the scourge of sectarianism, which is so often played upon by local and international powers to the detriment of all Lebanese citizens.<sup>30</sup>
- **Early Elections.** The US should strongly encourage the swift passage of a fairer electoral law – one that would help even partially open up the system to non-traditional parties and coalitions – in order to organise early parliamentary and presidential elections together (currently set for 2022). First and foremost, it is crucial to hold fresh elections given the deteriorating situation and the deteriorating legitimacy of the existing governing structures. Second, if elections are to be moved forward they should be set early for *both* the parliamentary and the presidential contests (the latter of which, under the Constitution, would fall under the responsibility of a newly elected parliament). This will reduce the prospects for overall conflict by setting the two important political polls at effectively the same time instead of spreading the contests out, and will increase the likelihood that the Lebanese can make a choice for comprehensive change at the executive, governmental and parliamentary levels all at once. It is crucial to note here that as a part of a revived ‘Eisenhower’ approach the US should expressly refrain from supporting any side – even the most seemingly ‘reformist’ or pro-American – and should work with its allies and adversaries to effect a mutual ‘ceasefire’ when it comes to external interference in Lebanese elections. A repeat, in other

words, of the 2009 election, which saw US allies alone reportedly spending hundreds of millions of dollars alongside pro-Iranian forces spending large amounts too, should be strenuously avoided, and, if need be, deterred by US-led diplomacy and pressure.<sup>31</sup> While of course this could mean a short-term loss for American allies (although not necessarily), the medium- and long-term gains from establishing clear US partisanship towards the independence, accountability and transparency of Lebanese institutions would probably be significant and durable.

**Enhancing sovereignty and security.** Given all the previous failures in aggressively dealing with Hezbollah’s independent armed capabilities, the US should lead a different approach rooted in a regional dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia and bereft of territorial disputes between Israel and Lebanon, premised on the belief that the best way – morally and strategically – to reduce the party’s ability and desire to exercise force is to draw it deeper into a dialectical relationship with strong democratic Lebanese institutions.

- **A national defence strategy dialogue.** In the context of negotiating a regional security agreement, the US should immediately encourage its traditional allies and all Lebanese actors to re-engage in the national defence strategy (NDS) dialogue that Hezbollah, President Michel Aoun, the Lebanese armed forces (LAFs) and all ‘pro-American’ parties have publicly said they support.<sup>32</sup> As part of the incentive structure publicly or privately offered, the US should: (a) seek to support an NDS that could even marginally begin to link Hezbollah’s military decision-making to national Lebanese structures; (b) dispense with counter-productive efforts to tie aid to a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy for the LAFs, i.e. seeking to sanction

29. [LEBANON POLICY PAPER \(2020\)](#)

30. [FSI - Establishing a Legislative Upper House in Lebanon](#)

31. Also to be avoided: US ambassadors engaging in electioneering and lobbying on behalf of specific candidates, parties and civil service positions, perhaps best illustrated by the failed January 2011 attempt on the part of the US Ambassador to secure a notorious low-level MP’s support for Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s teetering government and the spring 2020 attempt by the US Ambassador to secure a central bank appointment. [Opinion: Is This Lebanon’s Final Revolution?; Needed: A Nuanced Middle East Policy; Foreign Money Seeks to Buy Lebanese Votes](#)

32. [The Lebanese National Dialogue: Past and present experience of consensus-building; Reports-2012: Sayyed Nasrallah Delivers Speech on Martyrs Day...; Aoun Remarks on Change of Defense Strategy Standards Spark Debate](#)





officers/units deemed insufficiently anti-Hezbollah and then encouraging the remaining forces to challenge Hezbollah. This approach not only risks fracturing the LAFs, perhaps along confessional lines as during the civil war, but it would also most certainly severely weaken the one national institution America has invested substantial resources to build over the past 15 years and which still retains a high degree of credibility amongst the Lebanese.<sup>33</sup> (c) Although the revived NDS dialogue process will significantly benefit from both an end to the occupied territory/maritime border disputes as well as a 12-month free in the Hezbollah-Israel conflict, it should also be supplemented with a US engagement with allies (and especially Israel) on the question of finally equipping the LAFs with weapons that would allow it to credibly defend the entire nation, whether from terrorist groups or from any state adversaries. Given Israel's 'qualitative military edge'<sup>34</sup> concerns and current US law, the US should seek first to explore and develop a formula that would strike an acceptable balance over time along the lines of gradually tethering Hezbollah's military capabilities to sovereign national institutions while building up the LAFs in the areas of national defence that they have previously not been able to provide for.<sup>35</sup>

- **Supporting the continuation of UNIFIL's status quo mandate.** Given the extreme fragility of the current situation, and the important contribution that UN forces have continued to make in keeping a 'relative peace' for the last 14 years along the Israel-Lebanon border, the next administration should dispense with Trump administration threats to defund or even veto UNIFIL's annual mandate renewal unless it takes a far more aggressive and unilateral approach against Hezbollah, i.e. one that runs counter to UN Security

Council Resolution 1701 while at the same time only inflaming tensions further towards what would very probably be an array of negative outcomes for the US and its allies.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

If US policy towards Lebanon continues on its current trajectory of collective punishment, or even hardens further, the prospects for wider instability, misery and violence will only increase for the Lebanese people and the people of the region generally. At the same time, Hezbollah will probably be the last man standing, given its strong position in the country compared to other local political actors and an understandably exhausted citizenry.

Instead of staking Lebanon policy and much of America's Middle East policy in general on hurting Hezbollah and Iran – i.e. the failed Trump administration approach – a new US Administration can leverage this moment of near collective loss and setback regionally, i.e. given the economic downturn, Covid-19 and expanding armed conflicts, in order to pursue an aggressive policy of diplomacy, de-escalation and flexible negotiating parameters. Taking the above steps, especially the first four very 'difficult-to-thread' regional ones, would certainly not guarantee a short-term solution for Hezbollah's weapons, nor would it ensure the durability of accountable democratic institutions gaining preponderance across Lebanon. It would, however, offer the best chance to stem Lebanon's immediate suffering, to step back from a series of violent conflicts that appear increasingly likely and that would be devastating for all involved, and to lay the medium- and long-term frameworks for what could be the much hoped for re-birth of Lebanon, although this time through the actions of Lebanese empowered by their own sovereign institutions with some genuine help from their friends.

33. [WINEP: What's Next for Lebanon? Examining the Implications of Current Protests](#). Efforts to selectively target and sanction LAF officers, LAF formations and other security officials – or to target LAF funding as a whole – have also been seen on the part of the executive branch (via a sudden 'hold' on LAF appropriations in autumn 2019) and the Republican-controlled Senate, where a sustained call for sanctions and cuts has been repeatedly stymied by the Democratic-controlled House. [US Senate's McConnell Calls on Lebanese Army to Unify](#); [Republican Congress looks to pile pressure on Hezbollah, broadens scope of sanctions](#)

34. [US Foreign Aid to Israel](#)

35. [Opinion: A Fair Fight for Lebanon's Army; Re-Imagining the Lebanon Track: Towards a New US Policy](#)

36. Unless the goal of a more aggressive UNIFIL mandate is to try to provoke a violent conflict between Hezbollah and the other, mainly EU, states contributing to the UN forces (a 'Machievellian' approach, to put it mildly, that is both reckless and obtuse as far as international peace and security are concerned), it is illogical to believe that an unbounded, belligerent UNIFIL would be able to succeed – by almost any definition – where a far more determined, coherent and powerful Israeli force failed in the 2006 War, i.e. when Hezbollah was materially far weaker than it is now. [Constructing UN Security Council Resolution 1701 for Lebanon in the Shadow of the War on Terror](#); [U.S. threatens to veto UN peacekeeping in Lebanon over Hezbollah concerns](#)

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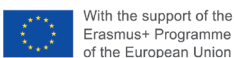
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