

**STUDY**

# A Reading Into the Lebanese Arena: Chronic Crises and Prospective Challenges

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## Introduction

Lebanon's successive crises — including the energy and electricity shortages as well as the Tayouneh clashes and the security tensions that followed – contributed to bringing the country back into the limelight. The latter Lebanese crisis came at a time when regional countries and beyond are attempting to tackle their consecutive crises and deal with their growing concerns in light of the escalating US-Chinese competition and its direct and indirect impact on several regional issues and against the backdrop of US-Iran talks to revive the nuclear deal. Lebanon is suffering from deepening crises, instability and increasing internal and external tensions because of the consecutive economic and political crises. These crises have emerged due to domestic divisions among the country's different political forces and the intersection of external geopolitical interests. As soon as Lebanon manages to resolve one crisis, it is faced by a deeper and more severe one, adding to the series of crises gripping the country. These current crises emerged evidently in 2019. Despite the formation of a new Lebanese government

resulting in a partial breakthrough, optimism is not the prevalent sentiment across the country. This is because most of the indicators point to the country's challenges and impediments outweighing the number of proposed solutions on the table.

In this paper, we briefly try to answer some questions related to the Lebanese landscape. These pertain to the reality of the Lebanese crises and their most salient economic, political and security manifestations, the ongoing challenges, and the biggest existing impediments to overcoming the crises facing the country. Finally, we will look at the indicators pointing to the future that is awaiting Lebanon.

## **1. Complex Crises and Intractable Solutions**

The economic and financial crises as well as the challenges facing the Lebanese state are diverse. Lebanon started the year under the weight of the protests that erupted across the country, prolonging the state of emergency which has been prevailing since late 2019. In addition, the ramifications of the devastating explosion which rocked Beirut in August 2020 are still being felt. These major incidents contributed to aggravating the economic woes facing the country.

### **1.1 Dimensions and Significations of the Lebanese Economic and Energy Crises**

Lebanon is going through one of the worst economic crises globally. In addition to the long-term systemic and structural problems resulting from the impact of several internal and external factors and the chronic corruption cutting across the country's economic pillars, the ongoing crises can also be attributed to the adopted monetary and banking policies, contributing to significant ramifications — though expected.

Public debt until the end of 2020 reached \$95.6 billion (17.7 percent of GDP), an increase of nearly 5.3 percent from 2019. The Central Bank's reserves in the first quarter of 2021 reached approximately \$17.5 billion, down from an estimated \$30.3 billion in 2020.<sup>(1)</sup>

All the foregoing can be understood in light of the value of the local Lebanese currency declining by nearly one-tenth of its value against other foreign currencies, especially the US dollar.<sup>(2)</sup>

The World Bank estimated that GDP contracted by 20.3 percent in 2020 following a 6.7 percent decline in 2019. Meanwhile, living standards have deteriorated further, putting greater pressure on the Lebanese people. The purchasing power of the Lebanese people has declined by nearly 90 percent.<sup>(3)</sup> The best forecasts indicate that Lebanon needs nearly 12 years to initially overcome the ongoing crises.<sup>(4)</sup> Other indicators paint a bleaker picture, indicating that the country needs two decades for its economy to bounce back.

This economic deterioration was accompanied by a downward trend in Lebanon's economic relations with regional and international actors. Lebanon's trade exchange with the Gulf states over the past 10 years significantly declined, from nearly \$450 million per year before the recent diplomatic crisis to nearly \$50 million in 2020. Gulf investments have also gradually declined.<sup>(5)</sup> This decline in economic relations between Lebanon and regional countries is because of the latter's protest against the role and practices of Hezbollah — whether inside or beyond Lebanon. Further, the financial support to the Lebanese government is conditioned with disarming Hezbollah. Regional protests against Hezbollah's overseas practices — including its links to smuggling operations via the illegal crossings in Lebanon and Syria and its role in the ongoing crisis between Lebanon and the Gulf states due to its smuggling activities — are elements that need to be considered when thinking about the Lebanese crises today. These elements have played a significant role in aggravating Lebanon's crises at the very least, bringing about its economic and financial collapse, harming the reputation of the country and its economy, and causing a significant change in the way regional and Western countries deal with Beirut.

The economic and energy crises have worsened over the past few months which has impacted the delivery of essential public services. The capacity of the Lebanese state to supply the needed finances for the country's regions and districts has declined, hence contributing to millions of Lebanese not having access to health services and water

resources. This is extremely problematic in light of the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>(6)</sup>

## **1.2 Proposed Solutions Exacerbate the Crises Further**

Given Lebanon's deepening economic crises and the decline of the government's capacity to offer suitable solutions to reduce their ramifications on the domestic front, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah over the past few months made a series of remarks alluding to Iranian solutions to overcome the domestic crises and prevent further internal deterioration. He launched a series of initiatives using private foundations linked to Hezbollah. These initiatives have drawn widespread criticism for significantly contributing to the country's current financial crisis and operating beyond their remit as tackling crises is the job of state institutions. As a result, Hezbollah has been accused of working to build a state within a state to serve Iranian interests, such as expanding its clout in the region.<sup>(7)</sup>

Among Hezbollah's initiatives was to secure hard currency through its parallel banking system, known as al-Qard al-Hasan Association (AQAH). The latter operates as a charitable association, offering loans and carrying out sales and purchases in US dollars.

In addition to the aforementioned semi-banking service, Hezbollah issued ration cards and implemented agricultural programs through the Jihad al-Binaa Development Association which is tasked with constructing civilian and military infrastructure for Iran in several regional countries.<sup>(8)</sup>

Through its array of unofficial activities, Hezbollah intended to take advantage of Lebanon's crises and turn these into opportunities to secure more power and recognition, expanding its support base and restricting the activities of the Lebanese state through building a new alternative economy. This will lead to severe ramifications, particularly related to upholding the writ of the Lebanese state.

As the economy and the energy crises continued to escalate, Hezbollah announced that a ship carrying fuel was setting sail from Iran to Lebanon. Then it spoke of a second and third ship. Then Hezbollah made a controversial proposal, suggesting that Iranian

companies should search for oil in Lebanon's territorial waters. Hezbollah's activities in the Lebanese energy crisis indicate a new equation related to Lebanese politics and the balance of power inside and beyond the country. There are many sinister objectives behind Hezbollah wanting to import fuel from Tehran to Beirut that go beyond the purported humanitarian assistance to the country amid ongoing domestic crises.

Nasrallah's proposal of importing Iranian fuel is consistent with the idea he floated nearly one year ago: asking Beirut to look eastwards and boost its economic cooperation with Iran to overcome its economic crises. This idea is in line with Iranian aspirations following the 1978 revolution, such as turning the region away from the West and replicating its political and socioeconomic model across the region.

In light of Lebanon's ongoing deterioration, Hezbollah believes the time is ripe for Lebanon to turn eastwards and rely on Iranian help, including cooperation in the oil and gas sectors. There is a heavy cost as well as there will be severe ramifications if Lebanon embraces this path of turning to Iran.<sup>(9)</sup>

While Nasrallah's proposal would help mitigate some of the fuel shortage problems facing Lebanon, in fact, it is not a sustainable solution to the energy crisis and its ongoing ramifications which are felt across Lebanese society. It is rather a temporary solution, with the risks outweighing the benefits. In addition to the aforesaid, Hezbollah's efforts to strengthen its image and stature in Lebanon through taking advantage of the Lebanese fuel crisis by bringing in Iranian fuel ships will open a new chapter in the country's financial crisis. Hezbollah and Iran will reap financial benefits and profits from selling fuel to Lebanon at prices far higher than the actual market value.<sup>(10)</sup> In addition, there is a bigger danger lying in the execution of financial dealings beyond the framework of official apparatuses — given the ambiguity surrounding the method of payment. The likeliest scenario is that any payments will be made in Lebanon's national currency due to the constraints placed on Iran and Hezbollah by US sanctions. In the end, the payments will be subject to changes and

transfers to convert them to the US dollar. Hence, all the transactions will be carried out beyond the official scope of the Lebanese state.<sup>(11)</sup>

### **1.3 The Initiative of Sending Gas and Electricity and the Framework of Foreign Mediation to Resolve the Crisis**

Hezbollah's announcement to bring Iranian ships carrying fuel to Lebanon was followed by an announcement from Washington. The US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea said that the plan for Lebanon to secure gas and electricity via both Egypt and Jordan through Syria was consistent with the regional outlook of these countries to enhance economic integration.<sup>(12)</sup>

Hence, this proposal, according to the prevailing vision of multiple analysts, aims to create some sort of stability for the aforementioned countries and counterbalance Iran's clout that extends throughout multiple countries in the region, including Lebanon. This proposal impedes Hezbollah's path — for fear that it could exploit the distribution of Iranian fuel to boost its chances in the next Lebanese parliamentary elections.<sup>(13)</sup>

Despite the goals of the regional project to send gas and electricity to Lebanon, it reveals a glaring contradiction and huge flaws regarding several aspects of regional and international policies. Iran continued to send fuel to Lebanon across the Syrian border despite the international and regional efforts over the past years to monitor illegal border crossings and provide the necessary security infrastructure on the Syrian-Lebanese border.<sup>(14)</sup> Further, several countries in the region and the world implemented mechanisms and understandings to halt cross-border smuggling operations — such as the recent understandings between the United States, Russia and Israel to end Iran's presence in Eastern Syria on the border with Iraq. They also aimed to stop Iran's overland communication from its territory to the Mediterranean coast in Lebanon. However, these mechanisms and understandings proved a failure whether in stopping the illegal smuggling of fuel or in curbing Iran's proxy: Hezbollah. Therefore, the regional project of sending gas and electricity to Lebanon and the ongoing understandings regarding Syria's Daraa Governorate are questionable when it comes to stopping Iran's activities in the region.<sup>(15)</sup>



## **2. The Crisis of Forming a New Lebanese Government – Between Competition and Impediments**

Cautious optimism has prevailed among the observers of Lebanese affairs, whether inside or beyond Lebanon, after the formation of the new Lebanese government was announced on September 20, 2021, headed by Najib Mikati. This announcement came after the existence of a governmental vacuum and political gridlock involving appointments and removals. This phase began after the resignation of the Hassan Diab government in August 2020 following the Beirut Port explosion, with Mustapha Adib and Saad al-Hariri declining offers to form a new government.

### **2.1 The Mikati Government and Internal Interactions Among Lebanon's Political Forces**

The breakthrough ending the obstruction to forming the next Lebanese government is attributed to internal compromises and understandings among the main political actors that were themselves responsible for the political stalemate in the country over the past period — especially Hezbollah and its allies inside the country. It has become clear that Hezbollah has not lost any strategic points with the formation of the new government. Rather, it seems like Hezbollah has cemented its position inside and beyond the country, with it taking over a number of positions in important government ministries and institutions that have security dimensions as well as those related to public services such as the Ministry of Public Works and Transport.<sup>(16)</sup>

After taking over this ministry, Hezbollah will consolidate its domination over land, sea and air ports. This means it will supervise the extension of Egyptian gas to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria. Hezbollah also secured control over Beirut Airport which it will use to continue with its smuggling operations. Hezbollah also took control over the country's official border crossings after it had already assumed control over the unofficial ones. Hezbollah's control over these crossing points will inevitably impact Lebanon's security and relations with its neighbors, which continue to have diplomatic and political differences with the country.<sup>(17)</sup>

## **2.2 Compromises With External Actors to Form the New Lebanese Government**

The differences among Lebanon's political forces at home were not the only reason behind the country's political crisis and the deadlock that preceded the formation of the new government. Lebanon's political forces were waiting for global powers to make compromises amongst themselves and assess their ramifications on the Lebanese landscape. Hence, it could be argued that the new government was formed after compromises and understandings were concluded amongst a quartet of regional and global powers: the United States, France, Russia, and Iran. While the United States and Russia remained backstage, France and Iran led the compromise process, with some involvement from Hezbollah. Following the phone call made by France's President Emmanuel Macron to his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi, an agreement to form the next Lebanese government was reached between France, Iran and Hezbollah.<sup>(18)</sup>

This Iranian-French agreement revealed the contradictions in the French approximations on the Lebanese file. After Macron had exerted pressure on Lebanon's political forces (i.e., threats to impose sanctions) that impeded the French initiative announced following the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020, France itself played an active role in forming the new Lebanese government, even though the criteria of its formation differed from those mentioned in the French initiative. Paris cut a new deal with the traditional Lebanese political forces which it had previously accused of corruption and by endorsing Mikati's government, it has in effect reproduced the same political class.<sup>(19)</sup>

## **2.3 Challenges and Obstacles Facing the New Mikati Government**

Generally, in spite of the breakthrough leading to the formation of the new Lebanese government, optimism in the Lebanese street is still limited, given that the new government has a narrow window of about a few months, making it very unlikely that Mikati's government will be able to embark on a path of carrying out strong structural reforms.

Another challenge facing the new government is dealing with escalating security and political tensions that could lead to Lebanon

entering a major political impasse. This may result in a crisis of governance, not just a government crisis. These expected tensions are in light of the ongoing investigation into the Beirut Port explosion, and Hezbollah's attempts to implicate the new Mikati government in another crisis while it seeks to pull the country out from its deep economic crisis.<sup>(20)</sup> The recent clashes in Tayouneh which involved armed violence are not a surprise to anyone who follows the Lebanese situation. Other clashes simultaneously took place on a smaller scale in the Lebanese village of Khalde. However, the circumstances that preceded and accompanied the Tayouneh clashes are a new alarm bell, added to a long series of negative indicators warning that Lebanon is on the brink of a real abyss threatening its stability. On the one hand, the clashes indicate that a new looming reality is ahead for Lebanon. The most prominent feature of this new reality is that Lebanon has actually entered, since the explosion at Beirut Port, a phase of growing differences and divisions. In addition, the relationship between a number of Lebanese parties has deteriorated with quarreling over the management of certain files to serve their interests.<sup>(21)</sup> The Tayouneh clashes prove that limiting arms to the state is impossible. Hezbollah is now playing a sectarian game, exacerbating sectarian tensions inside Lebanon and driving the country towards the brink of a security breakdown, miring it in a state close to civil war, for various considerations. Most notably, Hezbollah and Iran want to blackmail Lebanese forces to reach domestic understandings and consensus, in light of the general atmosphere surrounding the country, to reduce regional tensions, and to avoid Lebanese sectarian forces clashing with Hezbollah.

The other challenge to the Lebanese government is the upcoming parliamentary elections, which have attracted significant internal and external attention for the sake of resolving the pressing domestic economic and political crises. They are also viewed as a starting point to change or restructure power in Lebanon. The current reality does not sound good to anyone observing the Lebanese landscape. There are new potential scenarios that have begun to surface, indicating that delaying or thwarting the elections is possible in spite of the official announcement by the Lebanese Government Council that March 27

is the official date for holding parliamentary elections instead of May 8, 2022.<sup>(22)</sup> This announcement was made in light of the differing interests among Lebanon's political parties and forces.

Lebanon has been witnessing several developments, making the scenario of postponing or cancelling the elections possible. First, the Lebanese Parliament approved the amendments to advance the date of the elections. This has triggered a constitutional dispute between the Parliament and the cabinet. Therefore, Lebanon is expected to face further political disputes in addition to its ongoing multifaceted crises. Second, Hezbollah is concerned that the results of the 2022 parliamentary elections may erode the influence it secured during the previous parliamentary elections that were held in 2018. Hezbollah's concerns are real given the internal transformations that have taken place in the country resulting from the "October Revolution" in 2019, and the growing internal opposition against its role and contribution to the country's deepening crises. Therefore, Hezbollah has adopted a policy of mobilization and provision of services to convince people to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections, especially within areas where the party enjoys popular support. The Iraqi parliamentary elections might somehow affect the upcoming parliamentary elections in Lebanon.<sup>(23)</sup> However, we rule out that the regress of pro-Iran parties and forces in the Iraqi elections will be repeated in Lebanon due to the role of Hezbollah which has imposed Iran's will in Lebanon politically, socially and economically for several decades, unlike the relatively new Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq.

The upcoming parliamentary elections are therefore of great importance, and each party will be betting on winning the elections. Therefore, these elections are an important challenge for the government. As for post-elections, regardless of the results, mixing the political cards is inevitable, if they are in favor of Hezbollah due to the absence of international support, the lack of Arab support and the domination of the United States over global financial institutions. However, if the election results are not in Hezbollah's favor, a lapse into a political and security crisis cannot be avoided.

### **3. Geopolitical Considerations Extending Beyond the Proposed Solutions**

Some say that the strong internal factors dominate the future of Lebanon in addition to its economic and political crises. While others argue that the regional and international factors will also play an integral role in the future of Lebanon because all solutions to the current economic crisis are based on political dynamics and developments in the region.

#### **3.1 The United States and the Considerations of Iran's Nuclear Deal**

A number of regional developments have taken place: the United States withdrew from Afghanistan; the Taliban took over power in Kabul; Baghdad held a summit to normalize relations with its Arab neighbors; regional stakeholders attempted to entrench their influence in future regional arrangements; Baghdad held secret talks with a number of countries — similar to the talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the US-Russia-Emirati summit in which Lebanon was discussed. The aforementioned regional developments reveal that Lebanon is at the center of rotation of regional power and that there is a heated competition between some parties to gain more bargaining chips in light of the Vienna talks. The outcomes of the nuclear talks will determine the new power balance in the region; accordingly, impacting Lebanon's multiple crises; which will be either curbed or expanded further. The outcomes will also reveal the general prospects for the future of Lebanon in the coming period.

#### **3.2 The French Initiative: Intersection of Interests With Iran**

In a preemptive move, France also sought to anticipate the potential outcomes of the US-Iranian nuclear talks by showing a degree of diplomatic flexibility in dealing with Iran on some regional issues. It attended the Baghdad Summit for Cooperation and Partnership where it achieved consensus points and political and economic gains with some of the internal actors in Iraq. France also reached understandings with Iran, leading to the formation of the Lebanese government — after many internal disputes over its formation. France adopted a flexible approach to make the negotiations succeed and

maintain its interests along with Iran in its main spheres of influence: Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. It also aims to maintain close ties with the traditional political forces in Lebanon; accordingly, maintaining a good position in the new Middle Eastern equation.

France was able to find common ground with the United States which facilitated the formation of the Lebanese government. Paris and Tehran have common interests in Lebanon. However, signs of a looming conflict of interests and influence began to emerge between France and the United States immediately after the new government was announced; including the Australian submarine crisis. France considered it a “betrayal” by the United States as Paris never exploited its influence in Lebanon against Washington’s interests. In response, French President Emmanuel Macron received Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati in France in his first foreign visit <sup>(24)</sup>.

### **3.3. An Arab Return to Lebanon Subject to Security Considerations**

Amid the current regional developments surrounding Lebanon; Paris has boosted its ties with Tehran while Washington resorted to strategically withdraw from the Middle East, therefore, the region is expected to witness de-escalation. Players in the region are collecting their cards for upcoming negotiations, aiming to settle as many differences as possible and manage conflicts. These developments will definitely include Lebanon. This is clearly evident in the two projects to supply Lebanon with electricity and fuel, which mainly aim to address its demand for energy at this critical juncture and to curb Iran’s influence in the country. The main question here remains: are these projects sufficient to reduce Iran’s influence in the region and to address the security concerns of several countries in the region over Tehran’s growing influence?

This question is hard to answer in light of the limitations regarding the project to supply gas and electricity to Lebanon, and the recent escalation in Lebanese-Gulf political and diplomatic relations. Within a short period of time, the Mikati government proved that it is subject to Hezbollah’s influence and hegemony in relation to decision-making, including security decisions. Therefore, there is little hope for Lebanon to receive funds from the Arab states — to

halt an expected economic collapse. Furthermore, the international community has not made active efforts to stop the economic collapse in Lebanon. It has not confronted the influence of Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, in Lebanon and the region. Moreover, betting on the nuclear talks between Iran and Washington and other international powers to address Tehran's nuclear program and growing influence has proved a failure.

#### **4. Iran Strengthening the Linkage Between the Lebanese Situation and Its Regional Project**

In light of the aforementioned, it is apparent that Hezbollah enjoys a dominant role in Lebanon. Beirut under Najib Mikati's government entered a new stage characterized by openness to Damascus and accepting Iranian fuel. The Mikati government will remain under Hezbollah's influence. The party controls Lebanon's decision-making process in light of domestic, regional and international developments. Therefore, Hezbollah's economic and political power will be enhanced further. It has become the strongest and most influential actor in the country, controlling the trajectories of power in the Lebanese state.<sup>(25)</sup>

It is expected that Lebanon will witness a stronger Iranian grip through Hezbollah in the future due to the aforementioned considerations and the implicit political message conveyed during the visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to Lebanon — which explicitly aimed at discussing economic projects.<sup>(26)</sup> The visit clearly indicates Iran's potential strategy concerning the future of Lebanon and the region as a whole by increasing Lebanon's and the region's dependence on Iran.<sup>(27)</sup> The visit came a few weeks after the Iranian foreign minister participated in the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership and met with French President Macron, and amid international confusion over the US position on the well-planned exemptions for Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Syria from the Caesar Act for supplying gas to Lebanon.

The future of Iran's role in Lebanon and its relation to Tehran's regional project becomes quite apparent when taking into consideration Lebanon's security and political developments as well as Iranian official and unofficial visits to the country — this is

in addition to Iranian official visits to Syria. Moreover, Iran, by these visits, aims to collect more bargaining chips for the seventh round of nuclear talks. Abdollahian also sent provocative messages to several countries, including Saudi Arabia, that Tehran does not intend to change the current balance of power in Lebanon, neither will it include Iran's regional role in the nuclear talks.<sup>(28)</sup> Further, Iran will adopt the policy it believes that is best to deal with the US administration's attempts to curb its influence in the region, especially in Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Washington, and the Western powers, meanwhile, have been increasing pressure on Iran to return to the nuclear talks.

### **Forecasts and Outcomes**

In conclusion, upon the aforementioned analysis, the future of Lebanon is still bleak. Lebanon's crises are expected to remain unresolved as long as it remains a bargaining chip for Iran's multifaceted maneuvers. Amidst its surrounding complexities whether at home or abroad, Lebanon is likely to wait for longer to find a way out of its dilemma. At home, the Lebanese government reflects the internal and regional balance of power. It cannot, however, now resolve completely the country's thorny issues neither can it make a drastic change. The Lebanese government is merely a temporary solution to outstanding issues and crises.

Lebanon is in dire need of urgent international financial aid to avoid a looming economic collapse while it is preparing to conduct its parliamentary elections within a few months. The Mikati government, therefore, may not be able to save the country's economy as it takes months of negotiations. International financial support to Lebanon is linked to implementing internal political and economic reforms and to restoring Lebanon's foreign relations with its regional and international surroundings. This is in addition to establishing foreign policies that align with the interests of regional and international actors. Thus, it is expected that the recent tensions and events will create a major impasse, marked by incitement and tensions in the Lebanese street. Consequently, we may witness a major imbalance of power and no state writ while Hezbollah will expand its influence



further in the country whether by political means or through using arms. Therefore, betting on a competent government role in light of the aforementioned complexities seems quite unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future. Though multiple international delegations have visited Lebanon, providing solutions and agreements to resolve the Lebanese crisis, the complex geopolitical contradictions surrounding Lebanon may thwart all diplomatic efforts. Thus, the economic and political crises are expected to prevail in Lebanon in the near future.

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