

ISSUE BRIEF

Hezbollah Blames Lebanon's Economic Collapse on the United States

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Hezbollah is in a quandary. Lebanon is unraveling under the pressure of its worst economic crisis in decades. The anti-establishmentarian storm that began on October 17, 2019, refuses to dissipate, and its increasingly violent periodic spikes threaten to tear apart the country's fragile social fabric. Months of disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infections have overwhelmed Lebanon's medical system, and lockdowns have further depressed its economy. Meanwhile, no external help is forthcoming. Traditional donors refuse to bail out Beirut, either because of its unremedied and rampant political corruption or Hezbollah's control over critical junctures of the Lebanese state.

Hezbollah has largely avoided defections from its support base caused by the effects of these compounding crises.¹ Nevertheless, the group is caught between an increasingly dissatisfied broader populace and Beirut's stubbornly indifferent ruling political order. Hezbollah is a critical pillar of this order, and the constituent parties of this caste, in turn, empower the group. Abandoning this symbiotic relationship would politically weaken the party, or even risk its demise. Conversely, by clinging to the hated establishment, Hezbollah increases the risk of alienating its supporters or making itself a focal point of public discontent—as increased focus will be paid to Hezbollah's corruption and its role in bringing the country to ruin.²

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- 1 David Daoud, *Lebanon's Uprising Doesn't Threaten Hezbollah's Survival*, Atlantic Council, October 31, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/lebanons-uprising-doesnt-threaten-hezbollahs-survival/>.
- 2 Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Beirut Explosion Unleashes Public Anger at Hezbollah, Lebanon's Most Powerful Group," *Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/beirut-explosion-unleashes-public-anger-at-hezbollah-lebanons-most-powerful-group-11597350861>; Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "Hezbollah Faces Toughest Challenge Yet After Devastating Beirut Explosion," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/hezbollah-faces-stiffest-challenge-yet-after-devastating-beirut-explosion/2020/08/15/51efdae4-d59c-11ea-a788-2ce86ce81129_story.html.



People watch Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah speaking on television inside a coffee shop in the port city of Sidon, Lebanon October 25, 2019. Source: REUTERS/Ali Hashisho

To survive the current crisis, Hezbollah must retain, at a bare minimum, its current Lebanese Shia supporters. This would allow the group to maintain its oft-touted legitimacy as an “integral Lebanese social and political component” during the crisis and beyond. It has, therefore, launched a multipronged strategy to deflect responsibility. The cornerstone is a propaganda campaign that builds off of Hezbollah’s long-standing anti-American narratives, aimed at convincing the Lebanese—or at least Hezbollah supporters—that the United States is deliberately orchestrating Lebanon’s collapse, and is, therefore, the party against which they should direct their anger. As a corollary, Hezbollah is also attempting to convince its supporters that many of the reforms demanded by Lebanese protesters would advance this US plot, rather than save the country. Simultaneously, the group has launched

several initiatives and economic proposals to burnish its image as Lebanon’s savior.

I LEBANON’S CURRENT SITUATION

Lebanon’s rentier economy is collapsing. In total, Lebanese gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to contract between 19.2 percent and 25 percent for 2020.³ And, there’s no end in sight to this crisis. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Lebanon is one of two Middle Eastern economies expected not to recover or see any economic growth in 2021.⁴ The Lebanese lira has become virtually worthless. It has consistently been trading at record lows against the US dollar on black-market exchanges, which reflects the currency’s true value better than the Lebanese Central Bank’s official peg.

3 “Lebanon’s Economic Update—October 2020,” World Bank, October 19, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/economic-update-october-2020>; “Lebanon Economic Monitor: The Deliberate Depression,” World Bank, December 1, 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-economic-monitor-deliberate-depression-fall-2020#:~:text=Real%20GDP%20growth%20is%20projected,to%20triple%2Ddigit%20inflation%20rates](https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-economic-monitor-deliberate-depression-fall-2020#:~:text=Real%20GDP%20growth%20is%20projected,to%20triple%2Ddigit%20inflation%20rates;); “World Economic Outlook, October 2020: A Long and Difficult Ascent,” International Monetary Fund, October 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economic-outlook-october-2020>.

4 “World Economic Outlook, October 2020: A Long and Difficult Ascent.”

Officially pegged at 1,507 Lebanese lira (LL) to the dollar, the lira reached a record nadir of 15,000 LL to the dollar in mid-March 2021, before slightly rebounding to 12,000 LL.⁵

Meanwhile, Lebanese banks have imposed ad hoc capital controls on withdrawing dollars to counter their dwindling reserves of US currency. This has catastrophically impacted Lebanese purchasing power by forcing locals to rely on their increasingly worthless lira, whose deterioration, in turn, has ballooned the prices of even the most basic commodities like bread, milk, or diapers. The country's poverty and unemployment rates continue to skyrocket.⁶ The resulting desperation has led many Lebanese to either borrow, barter, or steal just to eat.⁷ Indicative of the current state of despair, individual stories have even been reported of household

heads committing suicide over their inability to provide even 1,000 LL—or \$0.65 on the official exchange rate—to their family members.⁸

Additional factors are compounding this base layer of Lebanon's crisis. The country has experienced interminable power shortages.⁹ For months, Lebanon experienced one of the steepest surges in COVID-19 cases globally, spiking at between three thousand to five thousand daily cases and overwhelming its medical system.¹⁰ On August 4, 2020, an explosion of 2,750 metric tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate rocked Beirut and destroyed its port. The immediate damages alone are estimated at more than \$15 billion, with thousands left homeless.¹¹ Because Lebanon imports 80 percent of its food, the port's destruction, particularly of its

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- 5 Souad Lazkani, "The Price of the US Dollar Exceeds 15,000 L.L.," *The961*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.the961.com/price-of-dollar-15000ll/>; Souad Lazkani, "Lebanese Pound Stable on the Black Market," *The961*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.the961.com/lebanese-pound-stable-on-black-market/>.
- 6 "ESCWA Warns: More Than Half of Lebanon's Population Trapped in Poverty," United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, August 19, 2020, [https://www.unescwa.org/news/Lebanon-poverty-2020#:~:text=Estimates%20reveal%20that%20more%20than,2019%20to%2023%25%20in%202020](https://www.unescwa.org/news/Lebanon-poverty-2020#:~:text=Estimates%20reveal%20that%20more%20than,2019%20to%2023%25%20in%202020;); "Assessing the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 Crises in Lebanon," United Nations World Food Programme, Lebanon Country Office, June 2020, <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/emergency-response/wfp-2020-assessing-impact-of-economic-covid-19-crises-lebanon.pdf>; Vladimir Hlasny, "Lebanese Poverty Rates Swell Across Income Groups," *Executive Magazine*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.executive-magazine.com/special-report/lebanese-poverty-rates-swell-across-income-groups>.
- 7 "More Than Half a Million Children in Beirut Are Struggling to Survive," Save the Children, press release, July 28, 2020, <https://www.savethechildren.org/about-us/media-and-news/2020-press-releases/half-million-children-in-beirut-struggling-to-survive>; Laila Bassam and Yara Abi Nader, "'Falling Off a Cliff': Lebanon's Poor Borrow to Buy Bread," Reuters, July 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-poverty/falling-off-a-cliff-lebanons-poor-borrow-to-buy-bread-idUSKBN2441ZN>; "Lebanese Turn to Bartering as Cash Runs Out," *Daily Star*, June 26, 2020, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Jun-26/508089-lebanese-turn-to-barter-as-cash-runs-out.ashx>; Rouba El-Husseini, "'Hunger Crimes' on the Rise in Crisis-Hit Lebanon," *Daily Star*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Jul-15/508989-hunger-crimes-on-the-rise-in-crisis-hit-lebanon.ashx>.
- 8 Sunniva Rose, "Lebanon: Suicide of Indebted Father Sparks Anger as Economic Woes Grow," *National*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/lebanon-suicide-of-indebted-father-sparks-anger-as-economic-woes-grow-1.946098>.
- 9 Verity Ratcliffe, "Lebanon's Late Bill to Turkish Firm May Worsen Power Crisis," *Bloomberg*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-29/lebanon-s-late-payments-to-turkish-firm-may-worsen-power-crisis>; "Lebanon's Lights May Go Off as Cash for Electricity Runs Out," Reuters, May 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-could-gradually-go-dark-cash-electricity-runs-out-2021-05-06/>.
- 10 "Clashes in Lebanon's Tripoli as Anger Grows over Virus Lockdown," *France24*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210125-clashes-in-lebanon-s-tripoli-as-anger-grows-over-virus-lockdown>; Isabel Coles, "After Beirut Explosion, Lebanon Faces Surge in Coronavirus Cases," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-beirut-explosion-lebanon-faces-surge-in-coronavirus-cases-11597697343>; Emily Lewis, "Beirut Explosion: Mental Healthcare Central to Relief Effort, Experts Say," *Al Arabiya*, August 11, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/08/11/Beirut-explosion-Mental-healthcare-central-to-relief-effort.html>; David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), "Al-Manar reports number of COVID-19 cases in Lebanon 'increases very dramatically,' and hospitals are experiencing a capacity problem," Twitter, August 12, 2020, 12:18 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1293597860710285319>; Bel Trew (@Beltrew), "A doctor describes delivering a baby in the middle of the explosion, the electricity, generator & back up battery are destroyed meaning ventilators stop working. Medics carry wounded out on sheets in the dark. Full story behind the footage," Twitter, August 14, 2020, 6:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Beltrew/status/1294227694108934145>; Ministry of Public Health—Lebanon (@mophleb), Twitter, February 4, 2021, 11:33 a.m., <https://twitter.com/mophleb/status/1357381666470305793>.
- 11 David Daoud (@DavidADaoud), "President Michel Aoun tells Spain's King in phonecall that preliminary estimates of damage caused by Beirut Port explosion exceed \$15 billion," Twitter, August 12, 2020, 12:00 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1293593098812117005>; Abby Sewell, "Beirut Blasts Leave Hundreds of Thousands Homeless; Hundreds Step Up to Help Lebanon," *Al Arabiya*, August 5, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/08/05/Beirut-blasts-leave-hundreds-of-thousands-homeless-hundreds-step-up-to-help.html>; Al-Jadeed News (@ALJADEEDNEWS), "Beirut Governor Marwan Abboud told Al-Jadeed: I toured the inner streets of Beirut, which has become a ruined city half of which has been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of its residents will not be able to return to their homes for two or three months," Twitter, August 5, 2020, 1:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ALJADEEDNEWS/status/1290897307563687937>.



People gather near a metal sculpture spelling out the word “revolution” topped by flames during a demonstration marking one year since the start of nation-wide protests near Beirut’s port, Lebanon October 17, 2020. Source: REUTERS/Emma Freiha

grain silos, will likely exacerbate the country’s ongoing food shortages.¹² Some countries and companies have expressed interest in rebuilding the port, including a German consortium that submitted a plan in April to Lebanese officials. But, these proposals would cost Lebanon billions of dollars and cannot proceed until a new Lebanese government is formed and undertakes serious reforms.¹³

Meanwhile, Lebanon’s governmental vacuum appears to have no end in sight, leaving the country helpless to even begin confronting the mounting economic challenges. Beirut has been led by a caretaker government since Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned on August 10, 2020. Saad Hariri was

tapped as his replacement on October 22. But, even as the country’s collapse proceeds apace, government formation has been stalled amidst the power struggle between Hariri and President Michel Aoun over the form, size, and ministerial appointments of a future cabinet.¹⁴

II THE ROOTS OF LEBANON’S COLLAPSE

Lebanon’s current crisis is rooted in the economic mismanagement of successive post-civil war Lebanese governments—particularly those that held power before 2005—and Syria’s control over Lebanon’s economic policies. Syria began taking an interest in Lebanese economic affairs

12 “Lebanese Turn to Alternative Farming as Food Prices Soar,” Republic of Lebanon Ministry of Information, June 4, 2020, <https://www.ministryinfo.gov.lb/en/51322>; “Lebanon Can Only Subsidize Fuel, Wheat for 3 More Months: Report,” Reuters, August 20, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2020/08/20/Lebanon-can-only-subsidize-fuel-wheat-for-3-more-months-Report.html>; Maha El-Dahan and Ellen Francis, “Exclusive: Lebanon Navigates Food Challenge With No Grain Silo and Few Stocks,” Reuters, August 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-blast-grains-exclusi/exclusive-lebanon-navigates-food-challenge-with-no-grain-silo-and-few-stocks-idUSKCN25317>; Leila Molana-Allen, “Food Insecurity Hits Middle Class Amid Lebanon’s Economic Crisis,” France24, July 1, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200701-food-insecurity-hits-middle-class-amid-lebanon-s-economic-crisis>; “Lebanon at Risk of Major Food Crisis, PM Warns,” Reuters, May 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-crisis-diab/lebanon-at-risk-of-major-food-crisis-pm-warns-idUSL8N2D311T>.

13 Bassem Mroue, “German Firms Put Forward Proposal to Rebuild Beirut Port,” Associated Press, April 9, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/germany-beirut-lebanon-explosions-hamburg-6c8162c363b06807c9c7e1d5da6c6c74>.

14 “Al-Hariri: Aoun Sent Me Yesterday A Formation Which Includes One-Third Veto Power for His Party, It is Not Accepted, and ‘It’s Not His Business to Form a Government,’” El-Nashra News, March 22, 2021, <https://www.elnashra.com/news/show/1492584>.

after the fiscal mismanagement of Omar Karami's government (1990–1992) sparked riots, threatening Syrian control over Lebanon.¹⁵ As a result, Damascus allowed Rafic Hariri to become prime minister. Hariri was a reputable businessman and a financier of Lebanon's post-civil war reconstruction, and could, therefore, stabilize the Lebanese economy. Equally important to Syria, Damascus thought it could control the incoming premier.¹⁶ Once in power, Hariri undertook policies that would stabilize the Lebanese economy in the short term, granting Syria the quiet it desired from its western neighbor.

However, successive governments rebuilt Lebanon's post-civil war economy by using an unproductive model that was unsustainable in the long run.¹⁷ It was underwritten by domestic borrowing, foreign debt, and remittances.¹⁸ Rather than establish a productive economy and revive the country's agricultural and industrial sectors—which once accounted for up to 19.7 percent and 20–25 percent of Lebanese GDP, respectively—the governments of the 1990s, under pressure from Damascus, recreated the country as a touristic playground and banking hub.¹⁹ Centering Lebanon's economy on these two sectors, however, largely benefited only specific segments of the Lebanese populace and economy, particularly luxury retailers and residents concentrated in urban, coastal areas.²⁰ Moreover, even the vibrancy of Lebanon's touted banking sector was built on an intricate scheme—devised by long-lived Central Bank Governor Riadh

Salameh to compensate for growing fiscal deficits, which ballooned when the country failed to pass a budget between 2005 and 2017—that finally began to crumble in 2018.²¹

Furthermore, the Lebanese lira was pegged at 1,507 LL to the dollar—perhaps the most touted success of the post-civil war years—on an illusion backed by feverish governmental overborrowing.²² Per the Economist, “most Arab states with fixed currencies defend their pegs with revenue from oil and gas exports. Lebanon has none.”²³ In fact, as a direct result of Lebanese governmental policy of centering the economy on tourism and finance, “[Lebanon had] few goods exports at all” to justify this peg. “At their peak in 2012 they came to \$4.4bn, against \$21.1bn in imports. Other sources of hard currency, such as tourism and property, were insufficient to sustain a peg, with current-account deficits exceeding 25%, and fiscal deficits of over 10%, of GDP.”²⁴

Syria profited from Beirut's fiscal irresponsibility, and encouraged it. In fact, according to some estimates, Syria was siphoning at least \$10 billion a year from Lebanon, equivalent to 47 percent of Syrian GDP.²⁵ Beirut let Syria skim off billions of dollars annually—from foreign loans, government spending, private investment, and various illegal enterprises—equivalent to one quarter of Lebanese GDP.²⁶ Lebanon's banking sector and its banking secrecy laws also obscured a widespread racketeering scheme that enriched Damascus with billions

15 Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and its Impact on the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 41–42.

16 Ibid., 43.

17 “Summary of Lebanon Economic Vision,” Consultation and Research Institute, March 7, 2019, https://www.fes-lebanon.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/Mckinsey_Plan/Summary_of_the_Economic_Vision.pdf#page=5.

18 Habib C. Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem: Lebanon and Middle East Peace* (2nd ed.), Policy Paper No. 45 (Washington, DC: WINEP 2000), 54–55.

19 Ibid., 56; Fabrice Balanche, “The Reconstruction of Lebanon or the Racketeering Rule,” *Lebanon After the Cedar Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 146. “Lebanon: GDP Share of Agriculture,” TheGlobalEconomy.Com, accessed May 1, 2021, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Lebanon/share_of_agriculture/; Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem*, 48; Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 167.

20 “Analysis of Lebanon's Travel and Tourism Sector—October 2017,” BankMed, October 2017, http://www.databank.com.lb/docs/Analysis_of_Lebanon's_Travel_and_Tourism_sector,_October_2017,_Bankmed.pdf#page=18.

21 Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem*, 60; “The Final Unraveling: Deconstructing the Lebanese Central Bank's Ponzi Scheme,” *Economist*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2020/11/05/deconstructing-the-lebanese-central-banks-ponzi-scheme>.

22 Hannes Baumann, “The New Contractor Bourgeoisie in Lebanese Politics: Hariri, Mikati, and Fares,” *Lebanon After the Cedar Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 131.

23 “The Final Unraveling: Deconstructing the Lebanese Central Bank's Ponzi Scheme.”

24 Ibid.

25 Gary C. Gambill, “Syria After Lebanon: Hooked on Lebanon,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2005, https://www.meforum.org/769/syria-after-lebanon-hooked-on-lebanon#_ftnref22.

26 Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem*; William Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600–2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 262.

of illicit dollars.²⁷ Syria also fostered and profited from Lebanese corruption, including encouraging drug production, counterfeiting, and money laundering.²⁸

The malleability of the Lebanese governments of the 1990s and early 2000s also benefited Syria. It allowed Damascus to force Lebanon into detrimental economic treaties to enrich itself at Beirut's expense.²⁹ Syria was thus able to drain Lebanon of approximately \$1 billion–\$4 billion annually through the imposition of unilaterally beneficial treaties, like the October 1994 Labor Bilateral Agreement, that flooded the Lebanese market with cheap Syrian labor.³⁰ These laborers—peaking at five hundred thousand workers, or one third of the Lebanese labor market—competed directly with many in Hezbollah's Shia base, leaving them jobless.³¹ As another example, in 2003, Damascus torpedoed a Lebanese-Kuwaiti electricity deal to provide Lebanon with cheap fuel—precisely the type of deal that Hezbollah is now encouraging Beirut to strike with Tehran—because it would have cut into Syrian profits.³² Syria also profited heavily from siphoning funds from various Lebanese economic sectors, including telecommunications.³³

III HEZBOLLAH'S COMPLICITY

Hezbollah now vocally decries the flawed economic policies, unproductive economic model, and spending binge of the 1990s that have brought Lebanon to the brink of collapse. But, the group protests its innocence by stressing its absence from the government between 1990–2005, to exclude itself from the web of mutual liabilities that has made other Lebanese political factions equally responsible for the country's current downfall.³⁴ On the contrary, Hezbollah alleges that its political and military activities have only impacted Lebanon positively.³⁵ In a June 17, 2020, interview, for example, the group's Deputy



Lebanese artist and activist Hayat Nazer's sculpture « Heart of Revolution » is seen by Beirut port as Lebanese demonstrate to mark the first anniversary of the « 17 October Revolution » in Beirut, Lebanon on October 17, 2020. Source: Ammar Abd Rabbo/ ABACAPRESS.COM

Secretary General Naim Qassem even claimed that Hezbollah's "resistance" had invigorated the Lebanese economy.³⁶

Blaming Syria would be equally counterproductive for Hezbollah. After all, the group acted as a central part of the Syrian-dominated order, acting as a restraint on opponents to Syria's hegemony over Lebanon. Additionally, it has spent the last decade sacrificing thousands of young Shia to save the Bashar al-Assad regime—which encouraged, and profited from, the policies that led to the country's current misfortune.

27 Gary C. Gambill and Ziad K. Abdelnour, "The Al-Madina Bank Scandal," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, January 2004, https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0401_f1.htm; Mitch Prothero, "The Money Scandal Behind the Hariri Assassination," *Time*, October 27, 2005, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1123483,00.html>.

28 Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, 63; Gambill, "Syria After Lebanon."

29 "Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination Between the Lebanese Republic and the Syrian Arab Republic [Informal Translation]," Syrian Lebanese Higher Council, accessed May 4, 2021, https://www.syrleb.org/SD08/msf/1507751474_.pdf; William Harris, "Bashar al-Assad's Lebanon Gamble," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2005, 34–44, <https://www.meforum.org/730/bashar-al-assads-lebanon-gamble>; Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, 56–57; Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600-2011*, 259–260.

30 Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600-2011*, 260; Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem*, 40–42, 60.

31 Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600-2011*, 260; "Labor Bilateral Agreement," Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council, accessed May 4, 2020, http://www.syrleb.org/SD08/msf/1507751688_.pdf; John Chalcraft, "Syrian Workers in Lebanon and the Role of the State: Political Economy and Popular Aspirations," accessed May 1, 2021, <https://books.openedition.org/ifpo/4777?lang=en>; Gambill, "Syria After Lebanon."

32 "Kuwait Considers Supply of Petroleum Products to Lebanon on Easy Terms," *Middle East Economic Survey (MEES)*, October 6, 2003, <http://archives.mees.com/issues/452/articles/19023>; Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, 90; Gambill, "Syria After Lebanon."

33 Gambill, "Syria After Lebanon."

34 "An Interview with Sheikh Naim Qassem," LBCI, June 17, 2020, <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/watch/51357/م-س-اق-م-ي-ع-ن-خ-ي-ش-ل-ا-ع-م-ء-ا-ق-ل>.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.



A man rides a motorbike past a poster depicting Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, near Sidon, Lebanon July 7, 2020. Source: REUTERS/Ali Hashisho

Hezbollah has participated in Lebanese politics since it ran in the first post-civil war parliamentary elections in 1992. However, the group remained outside of all governments until 2005, when the Cedar Revolution ejected Syria's military from Lebanon. Hezbollah then joined the cabinet to protect its arms and burgeoning shadow state from any potential curtailment by a nationalist Lebanese government unfettered by Syrian control.³⁷

Prior to 2005, Syria had guarded Hezbollah's retention of its private arsenal, exempting the group from the Taif Agreement's requirement that all militias disarm.³⁸ Damascus

also turned a blind eye to the group's expanding shadow state in Lebanon. But, there was a tradeoff. Syria controlled Lebanon and, to survive, Hezbollah pragmatically adjusted to Syrian demands.³⁹ Despite being ultimately an extension of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah had to subordinate its activities—both military and political—to Syria's interests. Otherwise, it faced annihilation in Syrian-controlled post-civil war Lebanon.

Domestically, the group kept potential political threats to the Syrian order in check. Hezbollah readily profited from the corruption fostered by Pax Syriana. In 1996, Hezbollah

37 Fatima Salameh, "Fneish Speaks to al-Ahed About Hezbollah's Governmental Experience: For These Reasons We Joined, and These are Our Basic Principles," *al-Ahed News*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=24109&cid=125>.

38 Hussein Yassine, "Lebanon's Taif Agreement, Explained," *The961*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.the961.com/taif-agreement-that-changed-lebanon/>; "The Taif Agreement," United Nations Permanent Missions, accessed May 1, 2021, https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_tauf_agreement_english_version_.pdf#page=7.

39 Daniel Byman, *A High Price: The Triumphs & Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214.

became a partner in Rafic Hariri's Elyssar Project to redevelop Beirut's southern suburbs.⁴⁰ From 1996 through 2005—the year Hezbollah first held a ministerial appointment—Elyssar received 164.5 billion Lebanese lira (out of a total of 184 billion LL through 2012), all for ventures that never materialized.⁴¹ Yet, as the group was profiting from Elyssar, its parliamentarians performatively railed against profligate government spending from the opposition—not because they opposed the spending on principle, but to keep Syria's opponents within the government firmly within Damascus' grip.⁴²

Per the admission of even senior leaders within the group, Hezbollah also acted as Syria's cudgel against Israel in Israeli-occupied Southern Lebanon.⁴³ Naturally, Beirut wanted to regain its southernmost territory from Israel. However, Israel wanted to withdraw, and Lebanon could have achieved the exit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) through negotiations, akin to those that regained the Sinai Peninsula for Egypt.⁴⁴ However, Syrian control of Lebanese decision-making prevented Beirut from regaining its territory through peaceful means. Damascus wanted to keep that area an active battlefield against the Israelis. Syria's goal was to bleed the Israelis to make them more pliable in negotiations for the return of the Golan Heights—but to do this in Southern Lebanon and by proxy, to avoid Israeli retaliation. Hezbollah readily obliged. This gave the group the opportunity to exercise its ideologically driven desire to attack the Jewish state, burnished its pretense of

being a Lebanese resistance militia rather than an extension of Iran, and proved its utility to Damascus.

But, the consequences for Lebanon were disastrous. In the immediate term, the country paid the heavy toll of Israel's merciless military retaliation, in both life and treasure. Jerusalem's increased frustration at rooting out Hezbollah's threat to its northern communities led it to adopt a merciless policy of targeting the group's civilian underbelly—including villages, roads, the electric grid, and other vital civilian infrastructure—in a quixotic attempt to turn Lebanese Shia against Hezbollah.⁴⁵

Hezbollah's "resistance" had a longer-term negative impact on the Lebanese economy. Rather than push the Israelis out of Lebanon, the group's clashes with Israel forced the IDF to dig in to the Security Zone. Furthermore, Hezbollah's cooperation with Palestinian factions like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to undermine the Oslo Peace Process—and to serve Syrian and Iranian interests—also undermined the chances of Israeli-Palestinian peace.⁴⁶ This also had a direct impact on Lebanon. Prime Minister Rafic Hariri had been betting on regional peace to increase trade and cooperation between the countries of the Levant to continue his project of reviving the Lebanese economy. However, both prongs of Hezbollah's activities dashed Hariri's hopes of regional peace, upon which he was betting to repay Beirut's mounting foreign debt.⁴⁷

40 Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem*, 50; Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600-2011*, 26; Arie Amaya-Akkermans, "Beirut's Elyssar Project: Spatiality and Hegemony," Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities, June 19, 2012, <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/beirut-elyssar-project-spatiality-and-hegemony-2012-06-19>; Elyssar Project, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.elyssar.com/>; "Amendment to Decree No. 9043, of 08/30/1996 (Establishment of Elyssar Foundation)," Lebanese University—Center for Research and Studies in Legal Informatics, August 27, 1997, <http://legallaw.ul.edu.lb/Law.aspx?lawId=244613>.

41 "17 Years Since the Establishment of Elissar: Incomplete Mission and Ongoing Expenses," *Monthly Magazine*, January 20, 2014, https://monthlymagazine.com/article-desc_444_.

42 Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York, Random House, 2011), 101; Michael Young, *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 68–69; Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600-2011*, 265.

43 Mohammad Raad, the chairman of Hezbollah's parliamentary committee, stated, "The Syrians will never ask us to stop resisting the occupation of southern Lebanon...the Syrians will want to keep Hizbullah as a bargaining tool." Quoted by Nicholas Blanford, "Hizbullah: Lebanon's Heir Apparent?" *Jane's Intelligence Review* 11, no. 11 (November 1, 1999); Martin Van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 304; Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 91; Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 232–233; Byman, *A High Price*, 214.

44 Raphael D. Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah: Military Innovation and Adaptation Under Fire*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 19–20.

45 Laura Blumenfeld, "Israel Assaults Hezbollah After General Killed," *Washington Post*, March 1, 1999, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1999/03/01/israel-assaults-hezbollah-after-general-killed/2fcefccc-34c0-4d80-b099-dc49a8942d48/; Sam F. Ghattas, "Israel Airstrikes Black Out Beirut," Associated Press, June 25, 1999, <https://apnews.com/article/3c3cc9ec763bd5ea46cb8c16a39a7545>; Shlomo Gazit and Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Vintage Books, Second Edition, 2004), 384; Sergio Catignani, "Israeli Counter-Insurgency Strategy and the Quest for Security in the Israeli-Lebanese Conflict Arena" in *Israel and Hizbollah: An Asymmetric Conflict in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 67–90; Byman, *A High Price*, 222–239; Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*, 55–56, 65, 71, 78–80, 87; Moshe Arens, *For the Sake of Israel's Security: An Autobiography* (Rishon LeZion, Israel: Miskal—Yedioth Ahronoth Books and Chemed Books, 2018), 213–214.

46 Christopher Hemmer, "I Told You So: Syria, Oslo, and the Al-Aqsa Intifada," Middle East Policy Council, Fall 2003, <https://mepc.org/journal/i-told-you-so-syria-oslo-and-al-aqsa-intifada/>; "Iran and the Palestinian National Movement," United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), June 2020, https://www.unitedagainstanucleariran.com/sites/default/files/Iran_and_Palestinian_Movement_0692020_JMB.pdf#page=12.

47 Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem*, 51, 62; Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 101.

IV HEZBOLLAH'S NARRATIVE: THE UNITED STATES AS THE SOURCE OF LEBANON'S MISFORTUNE

Hezbollah has been attempting to redirect the public's anger about its complicity in Lebanon's downfall primarily at the United States, at least among its Shia supporters. For decades, the group has been conditioning them through relentless propaganda to reflexively distrust, if not hate, the United States—and to view it as the “primary root of evil” and “source of all [regional] misfortunes,” including Lebanon's, in the words of its foundational document, the 1985 Open Letter.⁴⁸ In the worldview Hezbollah has striven to impart on its followers, even US benevolence is a ruse to weaken, and then dominate, the recipients.⁴⁹

Now, Hezbollah has been engaged in a propaganda campaign that aims to fit Lebanon's current collapse into its larger metanarrative of Middle Eastern history, in which the United States has been engaged in a decades-long plot to subjugate the region.

Hezbollah claims Washington has adopted a multifaceted strategy to achieve regional domination. It claims the United States sows strife and discord within Arab and Islamic societies through local collaborators, to divide and conquer populations. The group also alleges that the United States sponsors terrorist groups—including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), al-Qaeda, and other jihadist organizations—to spread regional chaos, topple governments that would otherwise oppose Washington, and justify direct military intervention in the region under the guise of fighting



A poster depicting Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah is seen in Marwahin, southern Lebanon, May 4, 2021. Source: REUTERS/Aziz Taher

terrorism.⁵⁰ Otherwise, it uses proxy countries—like Israel, Saudi Arabia, or other regional allies—to decimate The United States' foes.⁵¹

However, per this narrative, the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance—which includes Hezbollah—has thwarted every manifestation of this US project in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. As Naim Qassem would have it, the United States is collapsing Lebanon to set the stage for reviving its languishing project to establish a “New Middle East”—which began with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003, saw

48 “Speech of the Secretary-General—On the First Night of Muharram (AH),” al-Manar, August 20, 2020, <http://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/129347>; Qassem Qaseer, “Hezbollah's 1985 Open Letter” in *Hezbollah Between 1982 and 2016: The Constant and the Changing* (Lebanon: Dar Saer Al-Mashrek Publishing, 2017), 146.

49 David Daoud, *Hezbollah Considers the United States, not Israel, Its Greatest Enemy*, Atlantic Council, April 30, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/hezbollah-considers-the-united-states-not-israel-its-greatest-enemy/>.

50 “The Secretary-General's Speech on the Day of the Wounded,” al-Manar, March 18, 2021, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/159315>; Al-Mayadeen Programs, “Game of Nations: Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem 03-03-2021,” March 3, 2021, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5PgoeUg6A0>.

51 David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), “Hezbollah Deputy Sec.Gen. Naim Qassem: America is the main problem. Its proxy Israel is the hand which the US uses to strike at regional stability,” Twitter, February 4, 2021, 3:22 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1357439350775160835>; “The News Broadcast 19:30, 03-02-2021,” al-Manar, February 2, 2021, <https://t.co/imNrYCdl2e?amp=1>.



An Iranian guard holds a Hezbollah flag during a funeral procession and burial for Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani, head of the elite Quds Force, who was killed in an air strike at Baghdad airport, at his hometown in Kerman, Iran January 7, 2020. Source: Mehdi Bolourian/Fars News Agency/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS

Washington prod a reluctant Israel to decimate Lebanon in 2006, and attempted to collapse Bashar al-Assad’s regime in 2011 to unleash ISIS on the region.⁵²

Hezbollah admits that a confluence of factors, some of them domestic in origin, is causing Lebanon’s travails.⁵³ However, the group claims that the severity of the current crisis is primarily engineered by the United States, as part of what Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah dubbed an “American siege” on the country.⁵⁴ Developing this narrative operates on two tracks. First, Hezbollah’s leadership highlights the manifestations of this alleged siege. Often, this takes the form of Nasrallah

making one of his characteristic impassioned speeches, and the more cerebral Naim Qassem elaborating on his points in subsequent interviews.⁵⁵ Then, the group’s affiliated media outlets—including al-Akhbar, al-Manar, al-Mayadeen, and al-Ahed—amplify and expand upon these claims with news reports, written analyses, and talk shows. This echo chamber gives a veneer of respectability to the group’s conspiracy theory that the United States is responsible for creating or exacerbating Lebanon’s worst problems.

For example, Naim Qassem has said: “Those today who say that [our] weapons led to the economic deterioration. We

52 Al-Mayadeen Programs, “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020,” July 26, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/AYmsMbylmcU?t=1685>; Ibrahim al-Amine, “July 12...Birth of Our New Lebanon!” *al-Akhbar News*, July 13, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/291379/12->; EXtra News, “Newsroom! Nasrallah: 2006 War Happened by American Decree,” August 16, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72nV3z5YcUY>; David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), “Hezbollah Sec.Gen. Hassan Nasrallah on anniversary of end of 2006 war: Israel didn’t want war in 2006, would have been content w/its retaliation on 1st day. US pushed it into war for which it wasn’t prepared, continuation of US invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan,” Twitter, August 19, 2019, 8:57 a.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1163449966448263169>; Shahtrex, “Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah’s Speech on Anniversary of July War Victory 08 16 2019,” August 16, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMF2eJJJe0EE&t=719s>; “The Path of Hezbollah: The Full Text and Video of the Interview with His Excellency Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah,” *Khamenei.ir*, September 30, 2019, <http://arabic.khamenei.ir/news/4767>; “The Full Text od Khamenei.ir’s Interview with Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah,” *Khamenei.ir*, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/7075/The-full-text-of-Khamenei-ir-s-interview-with-Sayyid-Hassan-Nasrallah>.

53 “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020.”

54 Daoud, “Hezbollah Deputy Sec.Gen. Naim Qassem: America is the main problem. Its proxy Israel is the hand which the US uses to strike at regional stability”; “‘Welcoming’ Mckenzie,” *al-Akhbar News*, July 9, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/291237/>; “Lebanon: Hezbollah Parliamentary Bloc: American Involvement is the Primary Source of the Widespread Chaos,” al-Mayadeen, October 31, 2019, <https://t.co/OWUrCoQ4Ez?amp=1>.

55 “Game of Nations”; “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020.”

all know the cause of the economic deterioration. Its cause has been the style of governance, corruption, questionable deals, stolen money, manipulation of the dollar, and on top of all of these things—American behavior which prevented the entry of hard cash into Lebanon, and imposed sanctions on Lebanon to force it to change its policies.”⁵⁶

Syrian Refugees

Lebanon's economic collapse has exacerbated the country's hostility to refugees, as natives are now forced to compete with these newcomers for increasingly meager resources.⁵⁷ Hezbollah has attempted to direct this growing xenophobia at the United States, claiming Washington is forcing Lebanon to continue hosting Syrian refugees, despite their ability to safely return home.⁵⁸ Secretary General Naim Qassem has repeatedly called the refugee presence “one of [Lebanon's] biggest economic problems,” and the “biggest proof” that Washington is plotting to break Lebanon's economy.⁵⁹ Under US pressure, “the demands of 1.5 million people” have been added to Lebanon's crumbling infrastructure, educational institutions, and employment market, which can barely accommodate the country's natives. Meanwhile, he alleges, neither the United States nor the international community—under US pressure, of course—is providing Lebanon with enough funds to care for the refugees.⁶⁰

However, as Hezbollah highlights the refugee burden, it opens itself up to accusations of creating that problem. After all, the group's military intervention to save the Assad regime contributed to the refugee flight westward. Here too, however, the group accuses the United States of ultimate responsibility.

In Hezbollah's decade-long narrative of the Syrian Civil War, that conflict was not the uprising of an oppressed population against a brutal dictator, but a US plot to weaken Syria and take it out of the Resistance Axis orbit. Nasrallah has stressed that Syrian refugees fled to Lebanon because of “American regional policies and interventions, particularly the existential war that the U.S. waged on Syria, which impacted Lebanon.”⁶¹

This approach has the added benefit of blunting any lingering animosity among Hezbollah's supporters against Bashar al-Assad and his father for flooding Lebanon with cheap Syrian labor that deprived many Shia of their livelihood.

Decline of the Lira and Banking Sanctions

Hezbollah also blames the decline of the Lebanese lira on the United States. While the group admits that Lebanon's unproductive rentier economy and decades of currency manipulation have contributed to the problem, it claims they are of secondary importance. Instead, according to Nasrallah and Qassem, the Lebanese lira's precipitous decline owed to the United States preventing “fresh dollars” from entering the Lebanese market, and forbidding the Central Bank from circulating its own dollar reserves.⁶² During his June 16, 2020, speech, Nasrallah alleged that this “American conspiracy against Lebanon's people and economy” to destroy the Lebanese currency—rather than poor fiscal policy—is the real cause of the hyperinflation threatening Lebanon with starvation.⁶³ The US goal behind starving Lebanon, Qassem subsequently claimed, was to force Beirut to adopt detrimental policies, like disarming the resistance, that would benefit Israel.⁶⁴

56 “An Interview with Sheikh Naim Qassem.”

57 “Syrians in Lebanon: ‘They Treat us Like We are Dirty,’” *Deutsche Welle*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/syrians-in-lebanon-they-treat-us-like-we-are-dirty/a-39065640>; Bassem Chit and Mohamad Ali Nayel, “Understanding Racism Against Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” Civil Society Knowledge Centre, October 1, 2013, <https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/understanding-racism-against-syrian-refugees-lebanon/>; Celine Hourii (@CelineHourii), *Twitter*, August 13, 2020, 4:38 p.m., <https://twitter.com/celinehourii/status/1294025604711546883?s=12>.

58 “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020”; “Game of Nations.”

59 “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020.”

60 *Ibid.*

61 “The Secretary-General's Speech on the Day of the Wounded.”

62 “The Secretary-General's Speech on al-Manar TV—06-16-2020,” al-Manar, June 16, 2020, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/119704>; “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020.”

63 “The Secretary-General's Speech on al-Manar TV— 06-16-2020”; “Turning Eastward and Pursuing Trade Exchange with Friendly Nations with Lebanese Liras,” *al-Akhbar News*, June 17, 2010, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290165/>; Lina Mounzer, “The Great Lebanese Ponzi Scheme,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/02/opinion/lebanon-protests.html>; “Ratings Action: Moody's Downgrades Lebanon's Rating to C from Ca,” Moody's Investors Service, July 27, 2020, https://www.moody's.com/research/Moodys-downgrades-Lebanons-rating-to-C-from-Ca-PR_428833; “‘People Will Die Within Months’: Lebanon Heads for Famine as Pandemic Accelerates Hunger,” *Telegraph*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/people-will-die-within-months-lebanon-heads-famine-pandemic/>.

64 “Sheikh Qassem to ‘al-Ahed’: America is Starving Lebanon to Accomplish ‘Israel's’ Goals,” *al-Ahed News*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=21166&cid=125>.

To buttress this claim, the group's media outlets subsequently claimed that US sanctions had already destroyed neighboring Syria's currency and economy.⁶⁵ As proof, al-Akhbar pointed to a statement seemingly to that effect from US Special Envoy to Syria James Jeffrey—quoted partially and out of context, according to his deputy, Joel Rayburn—made days prior to Caesar Act sanctions taking effect.⁶⁶ In reality, the collapse of the Syrian lira and economy owed less to US sanctions than to Damascus' decades-long overdependence on the Lebanese economy as an export market, a source of remittances, and a financial hub for Syrian capital and importers.⁶⁷ As Lebanon's economy crumbled and its banks imposed capital controls, Syria's economy collapsed as well, as Jeffrey himself later clarified.⁶⁸

Obstructing Reform and Preventing Foreign Aid

Genuine reform remains highly improbable in Lebanon. But, however farfetched the prospect, real reforms threaten Hezbollah. They would disempower the group's political allies—the basis for its political influence—and could enable the Lebanese state to counter the group's corrosive shadow state and private militia.

Hezbollah teaches its followers that the group's existence—its armed, political, and social strength—benefits Lebanon. As Naim Qassem stressed in a recent interview, Hezbollah alone protects the country from Israel and takfiri terrorist groups, both of which the United States activates against Lebanon.⁶⁹ This message even resonates with many outside of the organization's base.⁷⁰ Because US proposals would weaken Hezbollah, they are, by definition, not calls for genuine reform. Instead, they are disguised attempts to subjugate Lebanon



A Hezbollah flag and a poster depicting Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah are pictured along a street, near Sidon, Lebanon July 7, 2020. Source: REUTERS/Ali Hashisho/File Photo

to US diktat by removing the country's sole bulwark against foreign domination.⁷¹ By contrast, Hezbollah claims genuine reforms are those that would weaken Washington's malicious influence over Lebanon—for example, by reducing local dependency on the dollar or establishing economic ties with US competitors.⁷²

Hezbollah claims the United States has no intention of helping Lebanon emerge from its crisis. Washington's sanctions targeting Lebanese politicians—like Ali Hassan Khalil, Yusef Finyanus, or Gebran Bassil—are meant to further Washington's siege on Lebanon by strangling Hezbollah and weakening

65 Sanaa Ibrahim, "The Age of 'Caesar': The Worst is Yet to Come!" *al-Akhbar News*, June 11, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/289891/>.

66 Firas al-Choufi, "Lebanon and Syria: The Unity of the Siege and Confrontation," *al-Akhbar News*, June 11, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/289886/>.

67 Rohan Advani and Walid al-Nofal, "How is the Lebanese Crisis Affecting Syria?" *SyriaDirect*, December 10, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/how-is-the-lebanese-crisis-affecting-syria/>.

68 Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Lebanon Crisis Wreaks Havoc on Syria's War-Torn Economy," Reuters, November 29, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-economy-lebanon/lebanon-crisis-wreaks-havoc-on-syrias-war-torn-economy-idUSKBN1Y3117>; Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Syrian Pound Hits New Low in Contagion from Neighboring Lebanon's Currency Crisis," Reuters, March 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east-africa/syrian-pound-hits-new-low-contagion-neighboring-lebanons-currency-crisis-2021-03-03/>; Benedikt Barthelmess and Liam Carson, "How is the Crisis in Lebanon Impacting Syria's Economy?" Middle East Institute, August 28, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-crisis-lebanon-impacting-syrias-economy>; "Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey On Syria Caesar Act Designations," US Department of State, June 17, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/special-representative-for-syria-engagement-james-jeffrey-on-syria-caesar-act-designations/index.html>.

69 "Game of Nations."

70 Dd Dd, "Screen Recording 2019 10 25 at 1 45 49 PM," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScS0MWlu1dw>.

71 David Daoud, *Hezbollah Considers the United States, not Israel, Its Greatest Enemy*.

72 "The Secretary-General's Speech on al-Manar TV—06-16-2020."

its otherwise blameless allies, rather than measures to curb Beirut's corrupt oligarchs who have ruined the country.⁷³ To convince its followers that the United States isn't interested in anticorruption measures, al-Ahed has boldly asserted that "Washington and its tools"—not Hezbollah's allies—"have fed corruption in Lebanon." Rather than offer proof, the publication stated "that there is no need to discuss the details of this matter," to give the impression that it was discussing a patently obvious fact.⁷⁴

Conditioning foreign aid on reform is another US ruse to break Lebanon.⁷⁵ In Hezbollah's narrative, it's not Washington's attempt to correct past mistakes and prevent aid dollars from being stolen or wasted, but to discourage otherwise willing countries—like France—from rescuing Lebanon.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the group claims the United States is actively blocking Lebanon's alternate economic recovery routes, including preventing foreign investment in Lebanon, and prohibiting economic ties with countries like China or Iran.⁷⁷ Al-Ahed even claimed the United States had undermined Israeli-Lebanese maritime-border demarcation talks to force Beirut

into accepting Israel's position, or otherwise be denied access to desperately needed income from its offshore hydrocarbon resources.⁷⁸ Washington's goal, the group alleges, is to make Lebanon so desperate for assistance that it will acquiesce to the impossible demands of US-controlled international bodies, like the International Monetary Fund, which are smokescreens for US domination.⁷⁹

Hezbollah's mouthpieces similarly covered for the group's political allies when they rejected an audit of the Central Bank by corporate investigations firm Kroll, Inc., citing the firm's ties to Israel.⁸⁰ This was clearly a stalling tactic by politicians fearful of the discovery of their corruption, as the Lebanese government has cooperated with other financial entities, like McKinsey, with Israeli offices.⁸¹ Nevertheless, al-Akhbar soon spun a tale of a US conspiracy to justify rejecting Kroll's help, claiming the firm is "an arm of the U.S. administration...which it uses to stage coups, regime change, and [justify] military intervention."⁸²

Meanwhile, the group claims that the United States is obstructing Lebanon's attempts to implement genuine

73 "Hezbollah: We Consider the Decision of the American Treasury Department Against the Head of the Free Patriotic Movement to be Blatant and Provocative Interference in Lebanese Domestic Affairs," al-Manar, November 6, 2020, <https://ftp.almanar.com.lb/7454306>; "American Sanctions on Khalil and Finyanus," *al-Akhbar News*, May 9, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/293646>; Maysam Rizk, "Amal Movement Declares It Will Confront Sanctions: Let the Siege Come," *al-Akhbar News*, May 10, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/293690>; As'ad Abu Khalil, "American Sanctions and Gebran Bassil: Forcing the Allies to Their Knees," *al-Akhbar News*, November 21, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Opinion/296731>; Maysam Rizk, "American Sanctions: Abbas Ibrahim is Wanted by Name!" *al-Akhbar News*, November 14, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/296451>; "American Sanctions on Bassil Under 'Magnitsky' Umbrella," *al-Akhbar News*, November 6, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Lebanon/296098>; Fatima Salameh, "Sanctions on Bassil...How America Violated International Law and Cast Aside Norms," *al-Ahed News*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=25438&cid=125>; "Sanctions on Bassil: Punishing the Lebanese People for Their Choices," *al-Ahed News*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=25370&cid=125>.

74 Fatima Salameh, "For These Reasons They Want Hezbollah Out of the Government," *al-Ahed News*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=24040&cid=125>.

75 "Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020."

76 Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600-2011*, 266–267; Hiyam al-Quseifi, "French Exploration of Aiding Lebanon: Washington is Disinterested, and Riyadh Explores Without Offering Initiatives," *al-Akhbar News*, June 26, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290621/>; Maysam Rizk, "Lebanon is America's Hostage: Washington to France: 'No Oil or Fund While Hezbollah is in Government,'" June 27, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290682/>; Hiyam Al-Quseifi, "Macron Despairs: French Warning of Lebanon Deterioration," *al-Akhbar News*, June 17, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290161/>; Maysam Rizk, "Drilling on the Cusp of the Border: Pressure to Drag Lebanon into Negotiating," *al-Akhbar News*, June 29, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290737/>.

77 David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), "58-Nasrallah: @usembassybeirut's role here has been to starve Lebanon, prevent investment in Lebanon, scare off foreign investment, etc. All of this, they're doing on Lebanese territory," Twitter, July 7, 2020, 1:37 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1280571553458028544>; "The Secretary-General's Speech on Al-Manar Television, 07-07-2020," al-Manar, July 7, 2020, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/122146>; David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), "104-Nasrallah: However, the Americans won't allow this. They'll sanction Lebanon if they normalize relations with Syria," Twitter, May 26, 2020, 3:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1265374922798510082>; "The Speech of the Secretary-General: Exclusive Conversation with Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah about May 25," al-Manar, May 26, 2020, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/114534>.

78 Fatima Salameh, "The Americans Obstruct Border Demarcation Negotiations: Have They Stopped?" *al-Ahed News*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=26606&cid=125>.

79 "Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020"; "The Secretary-General's Speech on Al-Manar Television, 07-07-2020," al-Manar, July 7, 2020, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/122146>.

80 Chloe Cornish, "Forensic Auditor to Review Every Transaction at Lebanon's Central Bank," *Financial Times*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/bc16f282-2874-4e0b-acec-84119b61044f>; Najia Houssari, "Lebanon Hires US Firm for Central Bank Probe," *ArabNews*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1708561/middle-east>; Magaly Abboud and Philippe Hage Boutros, "BDL Audit: Cabinet Chooses Turnaround Specialist Alvarez & Marsal," *L'Orient LeJour*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1226955/bdl-audit-cabinet-chooses-turnaround-specialist-alvarez-marsal.html>.

81 "Welcome to McKinsey Israel," McKinsey, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/il/overview>.

82 "Kroll...To Pursue America's Enemies!" *al-Akhbar News*, June 8, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/289723/>.

reforms—i.e., those that fit Hezbollah's definition—because they would weaken US influence. The group alleges Washington forced Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign in October 2019, just after he had announced his economic reform package.⁸³

Hezbollah's media outlets then spun the tale that the United States was also plotting to collapse the government of Hariri's successor, Prime Minister Hassan Diab, just as the latter's reforms, including establishing trade ties with China, were within reach.⁸⁴

Al-Akhbar ran articles claiming US Ambassador Dorothy Shea—routinely maligned by the group as the instigator of Lebanese social strife—was pushing to collapse Diab's government, including one quoting unnamed "sources" that alleged Shea had told her close associates that "Hassan Diab is over!"⁸⁵ Nasrallah would echo these claims shortly thereafter in his July 7, 2020, speech, adding that Shea was interfering with the appointment of the deputy governor of the Central Bank and dictating the makeup of a post-Diab government.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, according to the group's affiliated outlets, Hezbollah was trying to prevent US pressure from collapsing Diab's cabinet, denying the United States its desired Lebanese governmental vacuum and further paralyzing the country.⁸⁷

Sowing Strife

According to Hezbollah, the United States isn't content to economically strangle Lebanon; it is simultaneously trying to precipitate the country's social collapse.

When the October 17, 2019, economic protests erupted, Hezbollah began warning that the United States was exploiting the legitimate demands of protesters to destabilize Lebanon.⁸⁸ At the time, Naim Qassem told al-Ahed that Hezbollah sympathized with the protesters. However, he stressed that some individuals purporting to speak in the name of the protesters were engaging in activities that harmed Lebanon and average citizens, a clear sign that the US embassy was taking over the popular movement.⁸⁹ In his most recent remarks on the matter, Hassan Nasrallah reiterated this point that the uprising and its paralyzing effect on Lebanon were "orchestrated by the U.S. Embassy in Beirut."⁹⁰ Hezbollah was, thus, able to successfully peel away its sympathizers from the ranks of the protesters.⁹¹

Similarly, the group—rather conveniently—depicted any organic domestic dissatisfaction with Hezbollah as a US plot to foment "civil strife."⁹² When some Lebanese protested Hezbollah's private arsenal on June 6, 2020, the group's media responded that the "U.S. Deep State in Lebanon" was

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- 83 An Interview with Sheikh Naim Qassem"; "Loyalty to the Resistance: Hariri's Resignation is Wasting of Time," al-Manar, October 31, 2019, <https://almanar.com.lb/5898972>; "Lebanon PM Hariri Agrees Reform Package in Bid to Resolve Economic Crisis: Official Sources Tell Reuters," Reuters, October 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-government-reforms/lebanon-pm-hariri-agrees-reform-package-in-bid-to-resolve-economic-crisis-official-sources-tell-reuters-idUSKBN1WZ0KC>.
- 84 Firas al-Choufi, "Official Messages from China to Lebanon: We Are Ready to Invest in Electricity and Rail," *al-Akhbar News*, July 3, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290960/>.
- 85 "Shea Blows Whistle to Collapse the Government!" *al-Akhbar News*, June 27, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290681/>; "The American Ambassador Threatens Diab," *al-Akhbar News*, July 6, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/291064/>; "Dorothy Shea: Diab is Over," *al-Akhbar News*, July 3, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290953/>.
- 86 "The Secretary-General's Speech on Al-Manar Television, 07-07-2020."
- 87 "Shea Blows Whistle to Collapse the Government!"; "The American Ambassador Threatens Diab"; "Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020."
- 88 "Naim Qassem: We are Part of the Suffering People, and Beware Those Trying to Steal the Uprising," *al-Ahed News*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12822&cid=113>; "The Secretary-General's Speech—Discussing the Latest Developments—10-25-2019," al-Manar, October 25, 2019, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/86220>; Fatima Salameh, "Billions of American Dollars to Tarnish Its Image...and the Resistance Gains Strength," *al-Ahed News*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=23985&cid=125>; "The Secretary-General's Speech—Martyr Day Celebration—11-11-2019," al-Manar, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/88420>; "The Secretary-General's Speech—During Eulogy of Sayyed Mortada al-Ameli," al-Manar, November 1, 2019, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/86924>; "The Secretary-General's Speech—Sayyed Nasrallah's Speech 12-13-2019," al-Manar, December 13, 2019, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/91870>; "From October 17 2019 until October 17, 2020: This Destruction Has Been Visited Upon Lebanon," *al-Ahed News*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=24652&cid=125>.
- 89 "Naim Qassem: We are Part of the Suffering People, and Beware Those Trying to Steal the Uprising," *al-Ahed News*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12822&cid=113>.
- 90 "The Secretary General's Speech on Anniversary of Day of the Wounded, 03-18-2021," al-Manar, March 18, 2021, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/159315>.
- 91 Mona El-Naggar, "Beirut's Shiites Like the Idea of Change, but Like Hezbollah More," *New York Times*, February 4, 2021, [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/middleeast/lebanon-beirut-explosion-hezbollah-shiites.html?smid=tw-share; Dd Dd, "Screen Recording 2019 10 25 at 11 14 48 AM," October 29, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOBxNMj2blo>.](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/middleeast/lebanon-beirut-explosion-hezbollah-shiites.html?smid=tw-share; Dd Dd,)
- 92 "Ferzli to al-Mayadeen: Bringing Down President Aoun Means Civil Wars or Regional Entrenchment," al-Mayadeen, August 10, 2020, <https://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/1415512>.



Anti-government protesters chant slogans against the Lebanese government, in Nabatieh, - a bastion of the powerful Shiite movement where Hezbollah and its political affiliate the Amal Movement hold sway - south Lebanon, on November 10, 2019. Source: Rafael Yaghobzadeh/ABACAPRESS.COM

trying to “raise sectarian tensions to civil war levels.”⁹³ Al-Akhbar even alleged that these US collaborators had been prompted to instigate civil strife by then-Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker.⁹⁴ But, in the interview in question, Schenker had only remarked that Hezbollah was hindering the Lebanese economic reform upon which US aid was preconditioned.⁹⁵ Hezbollah’s media outlets leveled similar accusations against Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale, who told the Senate Foreign

Relations Committee that the United States had provided Lebanon with “\$10 billion” over several years in security assistance and to “private NGOs...for economic development and humanitarian support.”⁹⁶ In al-Ahed’s retelling, this funding went to “tarnish the image of the resistance” and “destabilize Lebanon and capitalize on its chaos.”⁹⁷

Hezbollah launched a more elaborate smear campaign against Ambassador Shea to silence her criticisms of the group. Shea

93 Abby Sewell, “Splinters in Lebanon Protests Emerge as Some Call for Hezbollah Disarmament,” *Al Arabiya*, June 6, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/06/06/Splinters-in-Lebanon-protests-emerge-as-some-call-for-Hezbollah-disarmament>; Amaal Khalil, “The South’s Protest: Against the ‘Counter-Revolution,’” *al-Akhbar News*, June 6, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/289668/>.

94 Maysam Rizk, “Akar’s Surprise: The Government Adopts Caesar Act?” *al-Akhbar News*, June 1, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/289384/>.

95 France24, “US Official: Libyan Conflict ‘Could Spin Out of Control if the Russians Choose Escalation,’” May 28, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/wifaGuO4SXY?t=466>.

96 “U.S. Policy in a Changing Middle East,” United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, September 24, 2020, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/us-policy-in-a-changing-middle-east>.

97 Salameh, “Billions of American Dollars to Tarnish Its Image...and the Resistance Gains Strength.”

had been astutely using the media as a platform to counter Hezbollah's falsehoods about the US role in Lebanon and highlight the group and its allies' corruption.⁹⁸ As this risked disturbing Hezbollah's ability to spin the Lebanese crisis as a US plot, the group seems to have sought to silence her. After Shea's June 26, 2020, critique of Hezbollah and Lebanon's political class, and defense of US policy towards Beirut, on al-Hadath, Faten Ali Qasir—a Shia resident of Tyre—felt moved to submit a judicial complaint against the US ambassador.⁹⁹ Qasir, who had stressed she was merely a concerned citizen, later defended Hezbollah's Lebanese legitimacy to al-Ahed, and echoed its claims of a US plot to collapse Lebanon.¹⁰⁰ Judge Mohammad Mazeh swiftly responded to Qasir's complaint, placing a one-year media ban on Shea. Hezbollah welcomed Mazeh's decision, and its media outlets heaped praise upon him.¹⁰¹ Mazeh claimed his ruling wasn't politically motivated, telling al-Manar and al-Ahed that he wanted to stop Shea from “planting strife among the Lebanese by inciting them against” Hezbollah and its supporters.¹⁰² Despite his claims of impartiality, however, Mazeh could barely contain his pride when Nasrallah lauded the judge and his ruling in his July 7, 2020, speech.¹⁰³

Hezbollah revived these claims against the US embassy after the murder of anti-Hezbollah activist Lokman Slim. Initially, journalists and outlets affiliated with Hezbollah claimed the United States had murdered Slim as a “sacrifice” to incite hatred against the group and stoke “strife.”¹⁰⁴ However, Hezbollah would soon partially backtrack. Naim Qassem claimed the group did not know the identity of Slim's murderers. However, he claimed it possessed “verified information” that the US embassy in Beirut had paid two unnamed Lebanese media outlets “huge sums of money” to tarnish Hezbollah's image, including by suggesting its responsibility for this crime.¹⁰⁵

V HEZBOLLAH AS LEBANON'S SAVIOR

Hezbollah alleges that Washington's desired outcome is to cause Lebanon's “total meltdown.” The group's al-Akhbar mouthpiece falsely attributed these words to then-Deputy Assistant Secretary for Levant Affairs Joel Rayburn.¹⁰⁶ Al-Ahed even misquoted a New York Times report to claim that Washington knew about the deadly ammonium nitrate cache at Beirut Port, but remained “murderously silent” about this

98 David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), “US Ambassador to Lebanon to LBCI: US not preventing entry of dollars into Lebanon. Blaming US for Lebanon's economic crisis is a lie. Truth is decades of corruption, unsustainable policies led to this crisis,” Twitter, June 17, 2020, 11:59 a.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1273299355617964037>; OTV, “The U.S. Ambassador to OTV: New Sanctions On June 1st, and This is the Message That She Conveyed to Diab and Bassil,” May 31, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnUeVnVxsd8>.

99 Al-Hadath TV, “American Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea's Full Interview with Al-Hadath,” Facebook, June 27, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=305421160492708>.

100 “Faten Ali Qassir Who Submitted Complaint to Judge al-Mazeh...What Did She Say to LBCI?” LBCI, June 28, 2020; “This is What Complainant Against American Ambassador Said to ‘Al-Ahed,’ and This is How She Identifies Herself,” *al-Ahed News*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=20949&cid=125>.

101 Radwan Murtada, “The Judge Who Stood Alone in the Face of the Empire,” *al-Akhbar News*, July 1, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290850>; Radwan Murtada, “The Judge Who Confronted America and the Banks,” *al-Akhbar News*, June 29, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290746>.

102 “Judge Al-Mazeh Confirms He Had No Political Motivation for His Decision Regarding the American Ambassador...Here's What He Said,” LBCI, June 27, 2020; “Judge Mohammad Mazeh to Al-Manar: His Ruling Against the American Ambassador in Beirut Was Judicial and Based on the Law,” al-Manar, June 28, 2020, <https://almanar.com.lb/6879930>; Fatima Salameh, “What Did Judge al-Mazeh Say to ‘Al-Ahed’ About His Judicial Ruling and the Ambassador of Strife?” al-Ahed News, June 29, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com/article.php?id=20925&cid=125&st=جرائم%20محم>; Fatima Salameh, “Judge Al-Mazeh Tells *al-Ahed* the Story of His Resignation: For These Reasons I Submitted It,” *al-Ahed News*, June 30, 2020.

103 Fatima Salameh, “Judge Al-Mazeh Declare Through ‘al-Ahed’ His Decision to Stand By his Resignation,” *al-Ahed News*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com/article.php?id=21267&cid=125&st=جرائم%20محم>; “Judge Al-Mazeh Responds to Sayyed Nasrallah's Salute: ‘What a Great Honor I've Achieved...’” *al-Manar*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.almanar.com.lb/6922918>; “The Secretary-General's Speech on Al-Manar Television, 07-07-2020.”

104 David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), “6-Pro-Hezbollah WhatsApp group quoting jouro Qassem Qassir, who claims ‘informed regional religious figure’ told him he warned Lebanese political leadership ‘assassinations to resume, targeting anti-Hezbollah activists...on Day 1 of Biden Presidency. All must beware of strife,’” Twitter, February 4, 2021, 1:32 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1357411726732496900>; David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), “7-Video by Hezbollah media (see logo in upper right): ‘murder of Lokman Slim new opening to target Resistance’ says ‘media outlets of strife circulating news, tying it to his staunch opposition to Resistance’ proving ‘this is orchestrated campaign to target Resistance,’” Twitter, February 4, 2021, 1:44 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1357414740407050245>; David A. Daoud (@DavidADaoud), “9-Al-Manar's Soheil Diab tweets @usembassybeirut, Gulf murdered Lokman Slim. ‘Akwar Embassy, normalizing Gulfies’ funded Slim's ‘campaigns to besmirch Hezbollah.’ When campaign failed, ‘handlers ended his mission w/assassination making up for his failure,’ besmirching Hezbollah,” Twitter, February 4, 2021, 1:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADaoud/status/1357418243305127948>.

105 “Game of Nations.”

106 Confirmed by author; “The American Ambassador Threatens Diab,” *al-Akhbar News*, July 6, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/291064/>.

hidden danger to Lebanon, to hasten this plotted meltdown and exploit the explosion's fallout.¹⁰⁷

To make the US effort more hateful to the public, Hezbollah's media outlets claim that Washington's immediate goal behind besieging Lebanon is to make Beirut more pliant to the demands of the country's greatest enemy, Israel.¹⁰⁸ These supposed demands include expanding the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), maritime and territorial border demarcation, offshore resource exploitation, and—most dangerously for Lebanon, of course—weakening and disarming Hezbollah.¹⁰⁹ But, in Hezbollah's imagination, Israel is only a US tool and Washington's forward military base.¹¹⁰ Therefore, empowering Israel at Lebanon's expense is only a precursor to the larger US scheme of using the country as a reentry point into the region.

Hezbollah has, thus, reframed Lebanon's collapse not as a financial meltdown, but yet another part of the broader conflict

between the Resistance Axis and the United States. Having nestled the crisis in its broader "Resistance" narrative, the group has positioned itself as Lebanon's savior, rather than a source of its ills.¹¹¹

Aid

At the most basic level, Hezbollah has engaged its charitable organizations and membership to alleviate the daily effects of Lebanon's crisis.¹¹² The group has been freely distributing basic food products—including otherwise unaffordable, but desperately needed, bread—and food baskets, including to non-Shia areas.¹¹³ In his March 18, 2020, speech, Nasrallah called on Hezbollah members who were paid in increasingly scarce dollars to set aside a part of their salary to help their families and neighbors. He also claimed the group had established an internal dollar fund to help the needy.¹¹⁴ Hezbollah also distributed heating fuel to twenty thousand needy families to counter the bitter winter cold, and vowed to continue monthly distributions until the economic crises

- 107 David A. Daoud (@DavidADAoud), "Al-Ahed's story misquotes report which originally appeared in @nytimes—but fails to mention this.: Twitter, August 12, 2020, 12:33 p.m., <https://twitter.com/DavidADAoud/status/1293601492381859840>; Leila Nicoula, "Political Exploitation of Beirut's Catastrophe: International Guardianship?" *al-Mayadeen*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/article/1414322/>; "Special Coverage: Faisal Abdelsater and Anise Naccache," *al-Manar*, August 8, 2020, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/127587>; "Hale From the Port...Exudes His Administration's Demonic Nature!" *al-Ahed News*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=22500&cid=113>.
- 108 "Between Brackets: Lebanon Between the Hammer of American Pressure and the Threat of the Anvil of Economic Collapse," *al-Manar*, July 12, 2020, <http://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/122135>; Maysam Rizk, "Maritime Border Demarcation Negotiations: Aoun Decides to Pull File From Berri," *Aa-Akhbar News*, June 18, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290214/>; "Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020"; Hassan Lafy, "Israeli Strategic Lines After Beirut Port Explosion," *al-Mayadeen*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/article/1414671/>; "تتوريب-أفردم-ري-جفت-دع-ام-خي-لي-ئارس-ال-ة-ج-ي-تار-تس-ال-ا-ط-و-خ".
- 109 Lafy, "Israeli Strategic Lines After Beirut Port Explosion"; "Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020"; Ibrahim al-Amine, "The Crime of Joining in the Siege Against the Syrian People," *al-Akhbar News*, May 27, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/289158/>; Maysam Rizk, "Washington Resurrects Issue of Border Demarcation...Through Bassil," *al-Akhbar News*, June 27, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/289161/>; Yahya Dbouq, "Lebanese Concession...Under American 'Auspices?'" *al-Akhbar News*, June 29, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290736/>; Nicoula Naseef, "American Threats to Halt Aid to UNIFIL: It's Not More Important than the World Health Organization," *al-Akhbar News*, June 6, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/289665/>; "The News Broadcast 19:30, 08-24-2021," *al-Manar*, August 24, 2020, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/130847/>; Salameh, "For These Reasons They Want Hezbollah Out of the Government."
- 110 Al-Ikhbaria al-Suriya, "Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's Speech in Eulogy Ceremony for Soleimani and al-Muhandis 05.01.2020," January 6, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/i2LPHJZIHdW?t=3104>; "The Party of God and its Greatest Satan: The 36-Year Confrontation Between Hezbollah and the United States," United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), October 2018, https://hezbollah.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/US-Hezbollah%20Report_101218.pdf#page=5.
- 111 Layla Amasha, "From 'April's Sour Grapes' to 'We Will Not Starve'...and What Has Changed," *al-Ahed News*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=30494&cid=125>.
- 112 Hezbollah Fights Deprivation," *al-Ahed News*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=30785&cid=125>.
- 113 Laila Bassam, "Lebanese Government Raises Subsidised Bread Prices as Currency Tumbles," Reuters, June 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-bread-prices/lebanese-government-raises-subsidised-bread-prices-as-currency-tumbles-idUSKBN2412YT>; Edith M. Lederer, "UN Food Chief: Beirut Could Run Out of Bread in 2 ½ Weeks," Associated Press, August 10, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/u-s-news-middle-east-lebanon-david-beasley-united-nations-9aaa0ae70fc0373531e9430888f6d807>; Hanin Ghaddar (@haningdr), "Turning people into beggars is not a solution to the crisis—#Hezbollah thinks they can maintain loyalty by displaying bread. They used to be smarter and more strategic," Twitter, June 30, 2020, 10:20 p.m., <https://twitter.com/haningdr/status/1278166477150064647>; "Hezbollah Bribes Its Supporters With Pack of Bread...Preparations for Total Civil Disobedience!" *Janoubia*, June 29, 2020, <https://janoubia.com/2020/06/29/ح-ت-و-ز-ب-خ-قط-ب-ب-ه-ي-ر-ص-ا-ن-م-ي-ش-ر-ي-ط-ل-ا-ب-ز-ح>; "Food Packages From Hezbollah to Needy Families in Akkar and the North," *al-Manar*, January 19, 2021, <https://almanar.com.lb/7749029/>; "Hezbollah Mountain Sector Distributes Food Packages to Neediest Families," *al-Manar*, May 4, 2020, <https://almanar.com.lb/6623212>.
- 114 "The Secretary-General's Speech on the Day of the Wounded."



A woman takes a selfie as Lebanon’s Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah speaks through a screen during an event in solidarity with Palestinians, in Beirut, Lebanon July 5, 2021. Source: REUTERS/Mohamed Azakir

among other things—importing medicine and readying storage for fuel from its patron Iran.¹²² This suggests the group may roll out additional aid projects to shield its communities from the worst impact of the continuing crises, and to contain restlessness among its core supporters.

Policies

Hezbollah is also trying to position itself as Lebanon’s responsible party by suggesting policies that would seemingly forestall Lebanon’s collapse. Hassan Nasrallah and Naim Qassem have both claimed to have offered compromise

solutions to Aoun and Hariri to break the government-formation deadlock, saying the party is particularly interested in overcoming this hurdle so the country can begin focusing on solutions to its growing crises.¹²³ The party has also suggested a “turning eastward” economic plan, whereby Lebanon would establish economic ties with Iraq, Syria, China, Russia, and Iran to rebuild the country’s infrastructure and counter the alleged “American economic siege.”¹²⁴ Last June, Nasrallah even offered to facilitate Lebanon’s purchase of fuel from Iran to combat the country’s energy crisis, claiming this would additionally alleviate the country’s dollar shortages because

122 Laila Bassam and Ellen Francis, “With Food and Fuel, Hezbollah Braces for the Worst in Lebanon Collapse,” Reuters, April 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/with-food-fuel-hezbollah-braces-worst-lebanon-collapse-2021-04-16/>.

123 “The Secretary-General’s Speech—the Secretary General’s Speech on the Anniversary of the Martyr Commanders 2021,” al-Manar, February 15, 2021, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/155828>; “The Secretary-General’s Speech on the Day of the Wounded”; “Game of Nations.”

124 “Chinese Support for Lebanon...Clear Support, With Nothing Hidden,” *al-Ahed News*, March 6, 2021, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=29263&cid=125>; Fatima Salameh, “Chinese Offers to Lebanon...Important Projects Buried in the ‘Alleyways’ of Politics,” *al-Ahed News*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=30989&cid=125>; Firas al-Choufi, “Official Messages From China to Lebanon: We Are Ready to Invest in Electricity and Rail,” *al-Akhbar News*, June 3, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290960/>; Fatima Salameh, “Documented: Chinese Messages to the Lebanese Government, and Offers...Readiness to Cooperate on Projects Reaching 50 Billion Dollars,” *al-Ahed News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=20561&cid=125>.

Tehran was willing to accept Lebanese lira for its fuel.¹²⁵ On March 18, 2021, he reiterated this proposal, saying he hadn't waited for permission from Lebanese officials to facilitate the deal. "I went and spoke to the Iranians, and they're ready to supply Lebanon with fuel," he claimed.¹²⁶

VI CONCLUSION

All indicators suggest Lebanon will continue a steep decline. The crisis has already begun to outpace the Lebanese state's capability to alleviate the burdens of its citizenry. As this crisis inevitably becomes more severe, it may also overwhelm Hezbollah's social and charitable organs. The group's propaganda campaign will help soften the impact on the party's popular support. After all, if—as Nasrallah claims—"all of Lebanon's economic hardships are the result of U.S. policy," then Hezbollah is recast from one of the villains in the country's tragic story into a heroic underdog trying to protect tiny Lebanon from the US juggernaut trying to strangle and subjugate the country.¹²⁷

If the party's efforts fail, then it can hide behind its propaganda's claims that it failed in a confrontation with the world's sole superpower, and not because its ideas, proposals, actions, and "resistance project" were inherently lacking or detrimental to Lebanon's wellbeing. This would blunt the blow to its popular support.

If its solutions succeed, then Hezbollah will reap the benefit of having once again "saved Lebanon," and it stands to gain in popularity. Additionally, its policy recommendations will have enabled the group to accelerate Beirut's ongoing drift into the Iranian orbit, interlinking the two countries' economies, and potentially making Lebanon another market

for Iranian goods—and, therefore, yet another outlet to circumvent US-imposed sanctions on the Tehran regime. Hezbollah could even emerge from its current crisis in a stronger position. Hezbollah will have once again succeeded in turning a disaster for Lebanon into an opportunity for the group to empower itself.¹²⁸

Succeed or fail, Hezbollah will have at least accomplished one of its ideological mainstays: to increase its supporters' hostility toward the United States.

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125 "The Secretary-General's Speech on al-Manar TV—06-16-2020"; Zeinab Nehmeh, "Iranian Electricity Offers to Lebanon: Where No Others Dare!" *al-Ahed News*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=30690&cid=125>; "Iran is Ready: Buy Oil With Liras!" *al-Akhbar News*, July 1, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/290856>.

126 "The Secretary-General's Speech on the Day of the Wounded."

127 "The Secretary-General's Speech—The Secretary-General's Speech on Martyr Day 11-11-2020," al-Manar, November 11, 2020. <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/143376>.

128 "The Secretary-General's Speech on Al-Manar Television, 07-08-2020," al-Manar, <https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/127334>; "The Secretary-General's Speech on Al-Manar Television, 07-07-2020."

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