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. 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.

Hezbollah Blames Lebanon’s Economic Collapse on the United States

AUGUST 2021  DAVID DAOUD

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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. 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. 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.

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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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\(^7\) Sunniva Rose, “Lebanon: Suicide of Indebted Father Sparks Anger as Economic Woes Grow,” The961, March 16, 2021.


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grain silos, will likely exacerbate the country’s ongoing food shortages. 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.

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.

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...
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

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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.
23 “The Final Unraveling: Deconstructing the Lebanese Central Bank’s Ponzi Scheme.”
24 Ibid.
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 COMPLIENCY

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 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.

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28 Blanford, Killing Mr. Lebanon, 63; Gambill, “Syria After Lebanon.”
30 Harris, Lebanon: A History 600-2011, 260; Malik, Between Damascus and Jerusalem, 40–42, 60.
33 Gambill, “Syria After Lebanon.”
34 “An Interview with Sheikh Naim Qassem,” LBCI, June 17, 2020, https://www.lbcdnetwork.tv/watch/s13575/masl-
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
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.  

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. 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. 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

became a partner in Rafic Hariri’s Elyssar Project to redevelop Beirut’s southern suburbs.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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, burred 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 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.\textsuperscript{47}


\textsuperscript{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.


\textsuperscript{47} Malik, Between Damascus and Jerusalem, 51, 62; Blanford, Warriors of God, 101.
HEZBOLLAH BLAMES LEBANON’S ECONOMIC COLLAPSE ON THE UNITED STATES

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 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

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

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


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 opens itself up to accusations of creating that problem. After all, the group's military intervention to save the Assad regime—though it would benefit Israel—was taking 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.\(^{64}\)

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56 “An Interview with Sheikh Naim Qassem.”


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.”


To buttress this claim, the group’s media outlets subsequently claimed that US sanctions had already destroyed neighboring Syria’s currency and economy. 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. 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. As Lebanon’s economy crumbled and its banks imposed capital controls, Syria’s economy collapsed as well, as Jeffrey himself later clarified.

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. This message even resonates with many outside of the organization’s base. Because US proposals would weaken Hezbollah, they are, by definition, not calls for genuine reform. Instead, they are disguised attempts to subjugate Lebanon to US diktat by removing the country’s sole bulwark against foreign domination. 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.

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 America’s main allies in the region.

69 “Game of Nations.”
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

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\(^{74}\) “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020.”


\(^{79}\) “Exclusive Conversation: Sheikh Naim Qassem—the Deputy Secretary-General of Hezbollah 07-26-2020.”


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.  

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.  

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!” 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.  

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.

**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. 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. 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.” Hezbollah was, thus, able to successfully peel away its sympathizers from the ranks of the protesters.

Similarly, the group—rather conveniently—depicted any organic domestic dissatisfaction with Hezbollah as a US plot to foment “civil strife.” 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...
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.” 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. But, in the interview in question, Schenker had only remarked that Hezbollah was hindering the Lebanese economic reform upon which US aid was preconditioned. 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.” In al-Ahed’s retelling, this funding went to “tarnish the image of the resistance” and “destabilize Lebanon and capitalize on its chaos.”

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

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.\(^9\) 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.\(^9\) 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.\(^60\) 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.\(^60\) 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.\(^62\) 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.\(^104\) 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 “murdishly silent” about this...
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 morepliant 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

114 “The Secretary-General’s Speech on the Day of the Wounded.”
abated. Hezbollah’s health organs, including its Islamic Health Committee and the group’s hospitals, have also been engaged in activities to counter the spread of COVID-19.115

Projects
Hezbollah has also launched more ambitious projects to counter Lebanon’s economic collapse. At Nasrallah’s behest, the group launched what he advocated the Agricultural and Manufacturing jihad projects. Here, Hezbollah claimed to counter the state’s neglect of these two productive sectors by sponsoring private citizens to engage in these activities116 With agriculture, for example, the group suggested that its followers counter the country’s looming famine by planting everywhere possible, including on balconies and rooftops.117 Meanwhile, its dedicated Agricultural Jihad Center and Jihad al-Bina arms provided enterprising citizens with the basic tools, supplies, and knowledge to engage in small-scale farming.118

Meanwhile, as the Lebanese government vacillates between lifting subsidies for essential items (a position which Hezbollah opposes) or issuing a cash-card program to aid struggling citizens, Hezbollah has launched a chain of subsidized supermarkets called al-Sajjad.119 These markets are stocked with Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian products at prices discounted up to 40 percent, which are accessible with a party-issued cash card to those earning less than $125 a month. Access will be granted to Lebanese of all sectors and party affiliations, according to Hezbollah.120 Reports also indicate that Hezbollah is preparing for all-out collapse of the Lebanese state by—

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among other things—importing medicine and readying storage for fuel from its patron Iran.12 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.12 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

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Tehran was willing to accept Lebanese lira for its fuel. 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.

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.

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.

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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