



US Action and Inaction in Lebanon: Charting the Best Course for US Interests in Great Power Competition

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What is NSI Reachback?

The Joint Staff, Deputy Director for Global Operations (DDGO), jointly with other elements in the Joint Staff, Services, and United States Government (USG) Agencies, has established a Reachback capability based on the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) team’s global network of scholars and area experts. It provides Combatant Commands with population-based and regional expertise in support of ongoing operations. The Reachback team combines written and interview elicitations with additional research and analyses to provide concise responses to time-sensitive questions.

This report responds to one of a series of questions posed by USCENTCOM about the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region.¹

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Question of Focus

[A6] What is the US reaction to a government collapse in Lebanon? What US actions could cause Lebanon to fall into Russia's orbit?

US Action and Inaction in Lebanon: Charting the Best Course for US Interests in Great Power Competition²

Abstract

Despite significant challenges to its stability, Lebanon has long survived politically and economically. Nonetheless, poor governance and a severe economic crisis, coupled with ongoing public outrage, signal that the Lebanese government may no longer be able to withstand its enduring pressures. In this report, we consider two recommendations for how the United States should react to the current situation in Lebanon: continuing aid and political support while exerting diplomatic pressure, and limiting aid and political support to the government while supporting those who would disrupt it. Expert observers are largely oriented toward maintaining aid (primarily through assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces [LAF]) and political support. Underlying this recommendation is the belief that the LAF can be distinguished from the political elites, most notably, Hezbollah. Though less commonly proffered and more controversial, it is important to similarly consider the logic underpinning the latter recommendation, as it reflects certain political realities within the United States. This recommendation is predicated on the view that all Lebanese political actors—whether individual politicians, Hezbollah, the security forces (viz., Internal Security Forces, LAF), or otherwise—remain tied to the sectarian system and are therefore all inextricably linked through this system as an organizing principle. According to this viewpoint, the LAF may consequently be unlikely to provide a significant counterweight to Hezbollah.

While there is some disagreement over Russia's motivation to engage with Lebanon, several experts indicate that Russia not only would stand to gain from involvement in Lebanon but has been purposefully positioning itself for such involvement, which is arguably motivated by competition with the US. While there is no inherent Lebanese motivation to ally with Russia, the Lebanese are likely to be practical and act in their own self-interest during this period of crisis. A frequent refrain among observers considering US actions that could cause Lebanon to fall into Russia's orbit is that cutting funding to Lebanon and to the LAF in particular at this juncture could leave Lebanon susceptible to exploitation by US adversaries, including Russia. More generally, US disengagement from the region may present an ideal environment for great power competition.

Introduction

Though Lebanon has long been a US partner in the Middle East, instability arising from poor governance and economic deterioration has provoked alarm among some US policymakers (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). Lebanon, in fact, lacks two qualities commonly associated with state stability—legitimacy and governing effectiveness (Goldstone, 2008). As the anti-government protests that began in October 2019 sharply illustrate,

² The following subject matter experts kindly contributed to this analysis: **Tony Badran** (Foundation for the Defense of Democracy), **Jeffrey Feltman** (Brookings Institution), **Dr. Arie Kruglanski** (University of Maryland), **Dr. Imad Salamey** (Lebanese American University), and **Behnam Ben Taleblu** (Foundation for the Defense of Democracy).

For the first time, people want to bring down the political sectarian system that's been governing them, and this poses an existential crisis for political parties that rely on sectarian identities.

— Maha Yahya (2019)

the Hariri-headed government, and now the Diab-headed government and new cabinet, are perceived by the Lebanese people as highly corrupt and illegitimate—so much so that protesters have called for dismantling the sectarian system and removing the entire political class (E. Cohen, 2019; Mounzer, 2019; Yee, 2019). The government is also seen as ineffective due to its inability to deliver basic goods, such as removing garbage, providing clean drinking water, or delivering 24-hour electricity (Galer, 2018; Yee, 2019).

Lebanon additionally faces its worst economic crisis since its civil war—with one of the highest national debt to GDP ratios in the world, a currency that has lost about a third of its value against the US dollar (against which it is pegged) since October 2019, and a rapidly worsening situation for the majority of the population (Azhari, 2019; Haltiwanger, 2019). Unfortunately, a widely acceptable resolution to the governance issue remains out of sight (The National, 2019).

Given these conditions, many observers consider Lebanon to have collapsed or be near collapse (Alterman, 2019; Anderson, 2019; Badran, 2019; E. Cohen, 2019; Feltman, 2020; Salamey, 2020; Takieddine, 2019).³ Yet Lebanon has long survived politically and economically despite conditions that challenge its stability. Even amidst the current crisis, constitutional processes previously put in place were invoked to deal with the October 2019 resignation of Prime Minister, Saad Hariri—and basic elements of governance in Lebanon have to some degree continued. Unlike the period from 1975-1990,⁴ there is still a Lebanese government, and the state—while in a precarious position—has not devolved into internecine fighting.⁵ Nonetheless, the increasingly dire economic situation, together with ongoing public outrage over the “sectarian script”⁶ and leaders advancing personal interests over the good of the country may signal that the government may no longer be able to withstand its perennial pressures (Feltman, 2019c). Ultimately, however, it is still early in the crisis, and what occurs next cannot be predicted with any degree of precision (Badran, 2019; Salamey, 2020).

A significant focus of US attention in Lebanon thus remains the mitigation of instability, which can help to constrain US adversaries’ influence (viz., Iranian, Russian) in the region as well as facilitate a diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). In line with this view, the US approach to Lebanon following Hariri’s October 2019 resignation has been to continue providing support to the LAF, and to offer reassurance to the caretaker Government of Lebanon that the US will monitor but not interfere, while watching for actions by Hezbollah or Iran to capitalize on the situation in ways that threaten US interests (Karam, 2019).

With the recent designation of Hassan Diab—who is backed by Hezbollah and its allies—as the new Prime Minister (Qiblawi et al., 2019), it is possible that the US approach will be modified. In late January 2020, US

³ Feltman (2020) highlights another scenario that could presage collapse: a (previously unseen) splintering of the Lebanese Armed Forces, exacerbated by Lebanese Central Bank collapse.

⁴ Badran (2019) suggests that a similar outcome to the 1975-1990 period may not only be unlikely but may be impossible. This is in large part because Hezbollah, along with the Amal Movement and other allies, has a significant advantage in the use of force. Hezbollah receives between 100-200 million in funding from Iran per year; as a point of comparison, the LAF receives 80 million in foreign aid, and as such, “their military capability cannot match that of Hezbollah” (al Masri, 2017). As Badran notes, because none of the potential challengers to the government have the kind of military capacity (e.g., trained cadres, open access to armaments, control of territory, etc.) that Hezbollah does, the group is able to deter the likelihood of statewide internecine conflict.

⁵ However, Salamey (2020) suggests that collapse might provoke military action from Hezbollah, should it feel cornered; though the group’s awareness of its limited capability to stabilize the country under those conditions may instead mean that it will “seek to negotiate a solution out of this crisis.”

⁶ The sectarian script can be understood as the political mechanisms and rhetoric that confine Lebanese society to sectarian divisions, which in turn prevent reform and enable the confessional patronage system (Feltman, 2019c).

Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, indicated that the US was prepared to engage and provide support, “but only to a government that’s committed to reform...[and] reflects the will of the people” (Bilbassy-Charters, 2020). About whether the US would work with the Diab-headed government and new cabinet, Pompeo said that “[the US] will have to take a look at it,” and the Trump administration indicated that it was not certain whether “it would work with the coalition dominated by Iranian ally Hezbollah and its Christian allies” (Bilbassy-Charters, 2020; Nissenbaum & Osseiran, 2020; US Embassy in Lebanon, 2020).

How Should the US React to the Current Situation in Lebanon?

The challenges Lebanon faces bring into sharp relief disagreements about what constitutes an effective US response to events in Lebanon, and furthermore, how the US response might impact US-Russian competition for influence in Lebanon and the USCENTCOM theater as a whole (see Saab, 2019 for one discussion). Recommendations for US action in Lebanon are largely oriented toward maintaining aid (primarily in the form of security assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces) and political support. However, vocal individuals within Congress and the White House, as well as among subject matter experts, express unease about aid to Lebanon, with the implication—or outright suggestion—of limiting such aid as well as political support (Badran, 2019; Livingston, 2020; Plitnick, 2018; Saab, 2018). These differences in opinion essentially hinge upon views regarding how entrenched the various political actors in Lebanon are with one another and subsequently, whether the US should continue support to the LAF (summarized in Figure 1). Fundamentally, the debate comes down to whether Lebanon is perceived as a “lost cause,” where US investment is costly and ineffective or whether ongoing efforts to build a strong state would enable it to depend less on Hezbollah (Samaha, 2018). In the next sections, we will explore these two recommendations and their underlying logic.

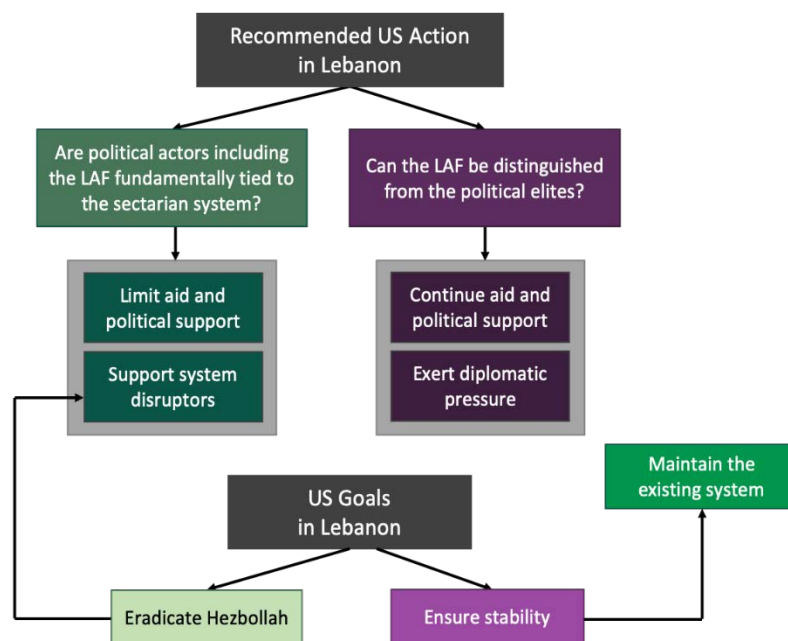


Figure 1: Expert recommendations for US action in Lebanon and tension between US goals

Continue Aid and Political Support, and Exert Diplomatic Pressure

[Following the May 2018 elections] an old canard in Washington is likely to resurface with full force: the idea that US policy in Lebanon is a disaster. Don’t buy it. In fact, of all the investments the United States has made in the Middle East over the past decade, Lebanon has generated the greatest returns.

– Bilal Saab (2018)

The most frequent recommendation is to continue providing aid (largely in the form of security assistance to the LAF), and more generally lending political support to the Lebanese government (Awadallah, 2018; Feltman, 2020; Kaye, 2019; Plitnick, 2018; Saab, 2018; Shah et al., 2019). Doing so can help bolster an unstable Lebanon at a particularly vulnerable time, serving to marginalize and weaken Hezbollah,⁷ and ensure that the US is continuing to compete effectively against Iran for influence over

⁷ Hezbollah as an organization incorporates both a militia and a political wing (with positions in Lebanon’s parliament and cabinet), which it can use in combination to achieve its aims—for example, to “exercise effective veto” over any government policy with which it does not agree (Feltman, 2019a).

Lebanon's political identity and strategic orientation (Baaklini, 2019; Feltman, 2020; Kaye, 2019; Lee, 2019; Saab, 2018a; Schenker, 2017).⁸ In May 2018, the State Department released a statement indicating that,

US assistance for the LAF is a key component of our policy to reinforce Lebanon's sovereignty and secure its borders, counter internal threats, and build up its legitimate state institutions. Additionally, US security assistance supports implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1559, 1680, and 1701, and promotes the LAF's ability to extend full governmental control throughout the country in conjunction with the UN Interim Forces in Lebanon (Humud, 2018).

In contrast, limiting US aid and political support may contribute to greater instability (or total collapse) in Lebanon.⁹ Such an outcome might simultaneously benefit Hezbollah and Iran; each of these actors is well equipped to operate in a chaotic environment (Feltman, 2020). US withdrawal from the region would moreover expedite the processes contributing to Iranian hegemony in the region (Kruglanski, 2019). While financial collapse in particular would hurt all actors—from everyday people to Hezbollah—the latter is likely to suffer the least (Feltman, 2020). As Feltman (2020) details, this is due to Hezbollah's social services network, their comfort with dealing with illicit funding and smuggling, and their connections to the South American drug trade and the stolen used car markets to Africa—giving the group options that are unavailable to everyday Lebanese people. Moreover, outside of government employees, the organization's money is often kept in homes, caves, or tunnels rather than Lebanese banks—and is thereby insulated from loss (Takieddine, 2019).

Sustained US assistance and political support also have narrative power. This backing may insulate the US from adversary claims intended to reduce US influence, such as the narrative put forth by Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, and Russia that the US is unreliable and thus lacks credibility (Davison, 2019; Feltman, cited in Lee, 2019; see also Cafiero, 2020). US support to the LAF in particular helps to undermine Hezbollah's narrative that only they can provide security for the Lebanese people, especially as Hezbollah allies, such as Michel Aoun, have also argued that the Hezbollah militia is essential for Lebanon's defense (Feltman, 2020).¹⁰ At the same time, the United States must be careful not to appear too heavy-handed in its intervention in Lebanese politics, as the Lebanese will not want to be seen as US agents; appearing as such could reinforce Hezbollah's narrative regarding US and Western interference (Feltman, 2020; Nakhoul & Perry, 2019).¹¹

The start of a solution to this catastrophic situation could come from international and regional support, but only if a credible government with honest, capable ministers who can inspire confidence is formed.
— Randa Takieddine (2019)

Alongside this support, diplomatic pressure should be applied to urge the formation of a more credible and competent government—for example, one that takes immediate steps to head off the financial crisis, and is both supportive of Lebanese rights to protest and responsive to protesters' demands (Feltman, 2020; Salamey, 2020; Shah et al., 2019; Nissenbaum & Osseiran, 2020; Takieddine, 2019).¹² Such diplomatic pressure might also

⁸ Salamey (2020) also indicates several specific actions that the US should support in the case of collapse, including political reforms that lead to more transparent institutions, privatization in the electricity sector, and assisting in the drafting of a more "democratic electoral system" where a majority are not excluded from participation.

⁹ Lebanon may also be unable to look to the Gulf for help during its economic crisis; both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been gravely concerned over Hezbollah's rising influence in Beirut, and thus appear to be hesitating over the provision of financial support (Reuters, 2020).

¹⁰ In contrast, Badran (2019) indicates that the US cannot degrade Hezbollah through narrative or credibility, which he suggests are essentially imagined categories.

¹¹ Instead, the US might take the tactic of advising the Lebanese government on the implications of its choices for its future government (Feltman, 2020).

¹² Sustained attention and interest from Congress, the administration, and the UN Security Council can also help protect the protesters,

convey that Congressional and US public approval for aid and political support may be more readily attained for this kind of Lebanese government (Feltman, 2020).¹³ However, such calls for reform may have an inherent problem; the same people who have been presiding over a corrupt system would now be asked to reform it (Badran, 2019). Badran (2020) highlights the potential issues should this come to pass, asking, “Does that mean that the United States is going to deal with such a government, and bail out such a government, and extend economic assistance to that government?” He notes the resulting US dilemma—while it is beneficial to work with a familiar actor, none of the existing options are accepted by the protest movement or likely to institute real change in Lebanon.

Underlying this recommendation is the belief that the LAF can be distinguished from the political elites, most notably, Hezbollah. US support to the LAF has been predicated on this assumption. Both the State Department and the Pentagon assert that the LAF is the only independent Lebanese institution that can challenge Hezbollah (Haltiwanger, 2019; Lee, 2019). Safeguards are also used by State and DOD to limit the risk that terrorist organizations will benefit from US assistance to Lebanon; for example, State regularly reviews the Lebanese military and police leadership to determine that they are not controlled by a foreign terrorist organization, and DOD vets potential trainees to ensure that they do not have ties to terrorism (Bielby, 2019).¹⁴ While Feltman (2020) acknowledges that the LAF provides tacit support to, and is unlikely to directly confront, Hezbollah, he asserts that the LAF still reflects a diverse and non-partisan identity to which the people of Lebanon aspire. As such, though it may be the “best of the worst,” the LAF remains the most viable option for US support in Lebanon (and this support is critical to the LAF’s capability and success). General Joseph Votel, former USCENTCOM commander, strongly reinforced this point in 2019, noting

I saw progress in both professionalism, capability, and legitimacy in the eyes of the Lebanese population...and in the current turmoil of Lebanon there is an opportunity to double down ...by showing our support for a professional LAF that is focused on protecting the people (General (Ret.) J. Votel, 2019).

Limit Aid and Political Support to the Lebanese Government, and Support Those Who Would Disrupt It

Though less commonly proffered and more controversial, another recommendation is to limit aid (especially security assistance to the LAF)¹⁵ and political support for the Lebanese government.¹⁶ It is important to consider the logic underpinning this recommendation because it reflects certain political realities within the United States. The current US administration has itself been deliberating on whether to cut off aid to the new Lebanese

including Hezbollah’s detractors (Feltman, 2019c).

¹³ Feltman (2020) argues that the maintenance of Congressional support for the LAF, the Foreign Military Financing program and training, and a robust USAID program depend in large part on whether the Lebanese government is seen as addressing the needs of its people. These needs have been identified by the protesters and include fighting corruption, working to build state institutions, and ensuring that Lebanon does not simply become a client of Iran.

¹⁴ Additionally, annual appropriations bills establish limitations to US provision of security assistance, including prohibition against providing funding to organizations controlled by a US-designated foreign terrorist organization (Humud, 2018).

¹⁵ The US has, for example, given over \$1.7 billion to the LAF since 2006, and billions more in the form of humanitarian and education funding over the period from 2008-2018 (Humud, 2018; Levingston, 2020).

¹⁶ The governance situation in Lebanon has been fluid since October 2019. Though a new government was eventually formed (including the appointment of a new Prime Minister, Hassan Diab), this government is composed “mostly of college professors, almost none of whom has ever served in government” (Battah, 2020). Moreover, as Battah (2020) notes, “more than half of the new ministers served as advisers or supporters of past politicians, mostly tied to the party of the president and his allies.” Taking note of these connections, Badran (2019) has described the situation within the Lebanese government as an “incestuous cartel.”

In so far as Hezbollah is a stakeholder...[and]...dominant player in that sectarian system, the notion that that system and that political order and Hezbollah's position in it is going to tell the LAF to take action against Hezbollah is a fiction.

– Tony Badran (2019)

government, in light of concerns over Hezbollah's influence (Nissenbaum & Osseiran, 2020).¹⁷ Indeed, this recommendation is predicated on the view that all Lebanese political actors—whether individual politicians, Hezbollah, the security forces (viz., Internal Security Forces, Lebanese Armed Forces), or otherwise—remain tied to the sectarian system and are thus in reality all tied together. According to several observers, actors such as President Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, Saad Hariri's Future Movement,¹⁸ Hezbollah, and other political parties are all stakeholders within the

confessional system, the survival of which is in their joint interest (Alterman, 2019; Badran, 2019; Daoud, 2019; Kranz, 2019). The LAF, too, while seen as a national institution, has been described by several observers as being afflicted by sectarianism (Alami, 2014; Salamey, 2020; Schenker, 2017).¹⁹ While the organization is intended to represent all communities, the higher ranks within the LAF are essentially Christian and Shia—who “are currently allied under an agreement between Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement, and Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah” (Alami, 2014). The alliance struck between President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah in 2006 indeed has contributed to the political status quo (Haboush, 2019). Since that time, Aoun has been “a reliable front for Hezbollah's and thus Iran's interests in Lebanon,” and Hezbollah has increased its influence over domestic institutions, gaining a “vener of national, cross-sectarian political legitimacy” (Feltman, 2019b).

According to this viewpoint, the LAF may consequently be unlikely to provide a significant counterweight to Hezbollah.²⁰ Several findings seem to support this contention. First, Hezbollah “wields tremendous sway over the direction and stability of the government,” of which the LAF is a part (Counter Extremism Project, 2018). The “March 8” Hezbollah-led Parliamentary coalition has held 57 out of 128 Parliamentary seats since the 2009 elections and 17 of 30 cabinet positions following the 2016 election of Michel Aoun (Counter Extremism Project, 2018). Second, despite the LAF's major reliance on the US in terms of training, equipment, and infrastructure, Hezbollah holds some sway in terms of political influence (Salamey, 2020).²¹ For example, the Minister of Defense is an ally of Hezbollah, the head of the LAF (President and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, Michel Aoun) received the imprimatur of the group, and the LAF commands fall under the “watchful eyes” of the Amal Movement, Hezbollah's ally (Salamey, 2020).²² Third, the LAF has coordinated on activities with Hezbollah. This includes the LAF and Hezbollah coordinating against Syrian rebel groups and growing their relations through increased intelligence sharing and coordination on domestic security issues (Badran, 2019; Counter Extremism Project, 2018; Schenker, 2017; see al Masri, 2017 for a further discussion of coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah). Fourth, despite UN tasking, the LAF has not ensured Hezbollah's disarmament;²³ instead, Hezbollah has increased its military capabilities and presence. Moreover, the LAF has

¹⁷ Taking a similar position, pro-Israel US lawmakers have worked to eliminate funding to the LAF, arguing that it has been compromised by Hezbollah (Mroue & Karam, 2019).

¹⁸ Hezbollah even came to view former rival, Hariri, as an essential guarantor of the order that Hezbollah helped establish (following initial opposition) and continues to depend upon (Kranz, 2019).

¹⁹ Cf. Feltman (2020), who acknowledges that the LAF is not immune to the country's politics, but does not see the LAF as a sectarian institution, noting that, “the fact that the LAF is made up of representatives from all parts of Lebanon, means that all parts of Lebanon try to insert the politics inside the LAF as well.”

²⁰ Washington, the UN Security Council, and Israel have all issued calls for Beirut to confront Hezbollah and reassert its monopoly over the use of force and control over national security, as well as reassert control over the country's financial security (Levitt, 2019).

²¹ Note also that the LAF's intervention in attacks by Hezbollah against the protesters should not necessarily be construed as a change in the LAF's overall orientation toward the group (Daoud, 2019).

²² Salamey (2020) further notes that the LAF “remains subject to Syria's political and... security influence from outside its structure of command.”

²³ While the LAF has otherwise been professionalized and has had some success in combatting Sunni jihadis, Badran (2019) argues that this success has occurred in large part because Sunni jihadis are not part of the political system; in contrast, the LAF cannot touch actors

not kept Iranian weapons systems and instruments from going to the organization,²⁴ despite the fact that US funding of the LAF was intended to prevent such an outcome (Badran, 2019; Counter Extremism Project, 2018; Schenker, 2017).²⁵ Badran (2019) attributes this lack of activity to the LAF operating within a government and political order that is fundamentally run by Hezbollah. Fifth, an LAF clash with Hezbollah would split the army, destabilizing the country further and potentially leading to the scenario encountered during the 1975-1990 civil war (Feltman, 2020; Mroue & Karam, 2019; Saab, 2019).²⁶ Finally, Hezbollah itself has over time also been working to consolidate its association with Lebanon's security institutions, including the LAF (al Masri, 2017). The implication of these collective findings is that US support for the LAF cannot be clearly separated from support for Hezbollah and the structures and systems that provide support to it.

Tension Between US goals in Lebanon

There is arguably an inherent tension or incompatibility between US goals or interests in Lebanon (Badran, 2019; Yee & Saad, 2019). As discussed by Badran (2020), if the goal is to ensure stability in Lebanon, then the existing order must be maintained. In contrast, if the goal is to eradicate Hezbollah, then this would require disruption of the existing order, of which Hezbollah, its partners, and other political entities are all a part.²⁷ If the *primary* goal is to disrupt Hezbollah, then the United States should be providing support to those who seek to revise the existing order (e.g., the protesters) (Badran, 2019).²⁸ For example, the US might support the protesters' demands for a new and more transparent government that is responsive to popular demands and less aligned with foreign (viz., Iranian) interests (Salamey, 2020). Doing so not only has the potential to reduce Hezbollah's power, but also serves another US interest—diminishing Iran's influence in Lebanon and the region as a whole. However, the pathway from protester demands to revision of the existing system of governance is broad and unclear and protester momentum has already begun to dissipate (Badran, 2019; Feltman, 2020).

Cultivating Lebanon: What is the Role of the US and Russia?

Before considering US actions that could cause Lebanon to fall into Russia's orbit, it is useful to explore Lebanon's susceptibility to Russian overtures, as well as Russia's interest in having Lebanon in its sphere of influence. Furthermore, it is important to consider the role played by Iran, and to a lesser extent, Syria.²⁹

that are part of the existing political system, such as Hezbollah. This logic is also mirrored by (Alami, 2014), who indicates that the LAF was unable to do much about its involvement in the Syrian war due to fear that there would be backlash if it arrested Hezbollah militants heading to Syria, while it was able to more freely take action against Sunni jihadis as they did not have the support of any major Lebanese political force.

²⁴ Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, Iran has enabled an "an exponential increase in the size, sophistication, and lethality of Hezbollah's arsenal" (Feltman, 2019a).

²⁵ Note, however, that claims that the LAF has been providing Hezbollah with US tanks and weapons are false, and have been debunked by US military leaders (Votel, 2019).

²⁶ Note: This view stands in contrast to Badran's assertion that Hezbollah's advantage in the use of force would likely prevent internecine fighting.

²⁷ In a separate discussion, Daoud (2019) considers how the protests may have weakened Hezbollah to the extent that they have drawn from its base as well as undermined the stability that has characterized the existing political system that enabled Hezbollah to grow undisturbed.

²⁸ This is not to say, however, that those seeking to bolster stability in Lebanon through continued support to the LAF do not similarly suggest providing support to the protesters. However, the intention underlying that support may not necessarily be to disrupt the entire system or order, but instead to lead to more metamorphic changes.

²⁹ On the surface, the interests of the Syrian regime as they relate to Lebanon are often similar in practical terms to those of Iran.

Lebanese Susceptibility to Russian Overtures

Some observers suggest that Lebanese society is Western-oriented and cosmopolitan and, thus, has no inherent motivation to ally with Russia or even Iran (Feltman, 2020; Mintner, 2019; Salamey, 2020). Others speculate that the Lebanese government views Russia as a better alternative to the United States, given what it views as US willingness to allow a vacuum in the region (Vohra, 2019). As Feltman acknowledges, the Lebanese—as citizens of a small and vulnerable country—are practical and will ultimately act in their own best interest (Feltman, 2020, 2019b). Though Lebanon is unlikely to turn to Russia over the United States in the near-term, there are some early indications that the Lebanese-Russian relationship has been growing closer. After resisting Russian military aid and materiel for a number of years, in deference to the United States,³⁰ Lebanon accepted \$5 million in military funding from Russia in late 2018 (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018; The New Arab, 2018). Russia’s assistance came with fewer ties attached than did US support; for example, Russia did not require Hezbollah’s power to be limited (Kuttab, 2019). Though Russian funding is only a fraction of that received from the United States, Lebanon’s eventual acceptance of funds can be viewed as a win for Putin (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018). Lebanese trade with Russia also nearly doubled during the 2012-2017 period, and a cooperation agreement removing obstacles to trade has since been signed (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018; Foy & Cornish, 2019; Samaha, 2018). A close relationship with Russia ultimately would translate to reduced dependence on the United States (Samaha, 2018). However, these military and economic incentives may not be sufficient to warrant alienating the United States, particularly given Lebanese dependence on the free flow of US dollars (Vohra, 2019). Moreover, Lebanese political will to increase formal cooperation with Russia has generally been lacking, though the situation may change as a function of the new government in place or US pressure on the Lebanese political and economic systems (Samaha, 2018).

What Does Russia Stand to Gain from Lebanon?

Putin has long expressed hope that the [US] will withdraw from... Lebanon...Although Putin’s initiatives [there] may ultimately fail, he has repeatedly showed an eagerness to assume a leading role there, and a willingness to invest the time and resources necessary for reaching that objective.

— Anna Borshchevskaya & Hanin Ghaddar (2018)

At least one expert appears to suggest that the potential benefit of Russian involvement in Lebanon may be overstated. Badran (2019) avers that Russia has already achieved its regional geopolitical goals through its activities in Syria, including establishing military bases that allow it to project influence into Lebanon and the eastern Mediterranean. Nor has the political order that has been in place precluded Russia from activities in Lebanon, including obtaining offshore drilling rights (Badran, 2019). In considering whether Russia would fund the LAF if the United States were to step back, Badran contends that Russia’s main objective in Lebanon

would be to obtain money, which it probably would not receive given Lebanon’s dire economic situation. Even if the Russians (or Iranians) were to step in, he indicates that both the US and Israel would have many tools at their disposal (including sanctions enacted through the US Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) to preclude such action and ensure that Lebanon does not obtain weapons systems that the United States does not wish it to obtain.

In contrast, several experts argue that Russia not only would stand to gain from involvement in Lebanon but has been purposefully positioning itself for such involvement. Feltman (2020) argues that Russia’s interest in Lebanon is grounded in its desire to compete with the United States (rather than achieve tangible inputs, such

³⁰ For example, Lebanon was offered, and turned down in response to US pressure, a military package in 2008 that included T-72 tanks, ammunition, and MiG-29 fighter jets (Samaha, 2019).

as money).³¹ In Lebanon, Russia can continue aggressively expanding its regional and Mediterranean role (Feltman, 2019c). He argues that Russian exploitation of Lebanon's three ports and hydrocarbon reserves would increase the sense that Russia is winning relative to the United States in the southern and eastern Mediterranean (Feltman, 2019b; see also Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018; Foy & Cornish, 2019; Humud, 2018). This view is echoed by other observers, who note that the Kremlin has long aimed to cultivate economic, cultural, religious, and military ties³² with Beirut as part of a broad strategy to increase Russian influence in the Middle East, push out the United States, and elevate its role as a peacemaker³³ (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018). Though Russia's strategy centers on Syria, Lebanon is viewed as a "natural extension of that effort" (Samaha, 2018). Having Lebanon within its sphere of influence would enable Russia to protect its presence in Syria and establish a strong and enduring presence on the eastern Mediterranean (Samaha, 2018).

What US Actions Could Cause Lebanon to Fall into Russia's Orbit?

Badran questions the underlying premise that Lebanon is a contested space between US and Russian spheres of influence, noting that the primary stakeholders in Lebanon are Hezbollah and Iran (Badran, 2019). However, observers generally frame the discussion in terms of Lebanon being either within the US or the Russian orbit. Despite this competition, some suggest that the United States (and Israel) may tolerate a degree of Russian influence in Lebanon, if this influence counters that of Iran, and as long as Russia refrains from engaging with the Lebanese defense sector (Samaha, 2018; Vohra, 2019). As far as internal and regional dynamics, Hezbollah and Iran both have reservations about Russian activities in Lebanon; Russia is viewed as a competitor with their own powerbrokers and neither wants to cede control (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018).

A frequent refrain among observers considering US actions that could cause Lebanon to fall into Russia's orbit is that cutting funding to Lebanon and to the LAF in particular at this juncture could leave Lebanon susceptible to exploitation by US adversaries, including Russia (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018; Haltiwanger, 2019; Saab, 2019; Yee & Saad, 2019; Zengerle & Stone, 2019). More generally, US disengagement from the region may present an ideal environment for great power competition. The resulting vacuum, particularly at this critical time for Lebanon, would leave Lebanon vulnerable to Russia's overtures to expand bilateral ties, increase Iran's regional influence, and open up the country to exploitation by other actors (e.g., Syria and China) (Feltman, 2020; Kruglanski, 2019; Kuttab, 2019; Samaha, 2018; Vohra, 2019). Comparisons are made to the 1980s US pullout, which was exploited by the Soviet Union; US withdrawal is now being similarly exploited by Russia to broaden its regional influence (Wright, 2019). Lebanon may also become a major battleground due to US action against Iran, which will result in Putin's support for Tehran—"both vis-à-vis the United States and in the Iranian-Hezbollah-Israeli conflagration that will likely erupt in such circumstances" (Melamedov, 2020). Finally, US consideration of tougher sanctions on Hezbollah that could include political affiliates reportedly has many in

³¹ China may also be a player here, given its interest in ports and new markets for 5G infrastructure (Feltman, 2020).

³² Russia has been working to establish a military presence in Lebanon under the auspices of brokering the return of Syrian refugees (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018). On the economic front, Russian oil company, Rosneft, has signed a contract to operate oil storage facilities in Tripoli, while Russian company, Novatek, won a bid to explore potential oil and gas reserves off Lebanon's southern coast (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018; Vohra, 2019). Russia has also engaged in soft power efforts in the region and in Lebanon, specifically. In addition to its Sputnik satellite broadcasts in Arabic, partnership agreements with local Lebanese radio stations have enabled Russian programming to be heard throughout Lebanon (Kuttab, 2019). Finally, Russia opened three cultural centers in Lebanon in 2018 (Vohra, 2019).

³³ "Russia apparently hopes to mediate an agreement like the one reached in south Syria, this time managing escalation between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. To do so, it needs a greater presence in Lebanon" (Borshchevskaya & Ghaddar, 2018). See also (O'Connor, 2019) for a discussion of Russia's ties with Iran and Israel.

Lebanon looking to Russia as an alternative for economic and military investment that is without political preconditions (Samaha, 2018).³⁴

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³⁴ However, Russia and Hezbollah may have diverging agendas, and thus is it unclear whether an increased alliance between them is likely (Melamedov, 2020).

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Appendix A: Hezbollah in Lebanon: Political Dynamics and Near-Term Considerations

Despite having a parliamentary majority, Hezbollah and its allies cannot form a government on their own, as they would encounter international isolation and certain financial collapse (Reuters, 2019). While Hezbollah recognizes the need to adapt somewhat, it will continue to act in ways that are sure to protect its interests, including who is in government (Kranz, 2019). Compromise thus seems unlikely, as Hezbollah has forcefully rejected the possibility of naming technocrats (as desired by the protesters) as its representatives in any future cabinet (Haboush, 2019).

At the same time, the protesters also view Hezbollah as the primary participant in what they view as a corrupt system. Increasing criticism has been aimed at Hezbollah since the protests began, and the US Treasury Department has noted how recent developments have underscored Hezbollah's prioritization of its own interests over those of the Lebanese people (e.g., assassinating politicians, putting civilians at risk for its missile project, attacking UN forces, and undermining financial stability) (Levitt, 2019). This viewpoint was echoed by Salamey, indicating that Hezbollah has "always prioritized its strategic alliance that protects its weapons arsenal and power at the expense of the public interests of the larger Shiite community" (Nashed, 2019). Hezbollah's defense of a status quo that has been harmful to many has even angered former supporters (Nashed, 2019).

The protesters—though not a unified block—count among them several thousands who are calling for an independent government without any direct representatives of Hezbollah (Haboush, 2019). As such, Hassan Diab's designation by President Aoun as the new Prime Minister has been met with strong disapproval from the protesters, who have refused his appointment, indicating that it would empower corrupted political parties (Azhari, 2019; The Statesman, 2020). The protesters moreover called for Diab's resignation fewer than ten days after he was appointed (Agence France-Presse, 2019). Many protesters have largely ignored the demands of Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, to leave the streets, a defiance previously unseen in Lebanon (Naharnet Newsdesk, 2019).

Given what Hezbollah and other political actors have to lose in the case of a fundamental system change, it is unsurprising that their response to the protests has been to try and shift people's loyalties back toward their sectarian identities. Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsor have used tactics ranging from "thugs on motorcycles" and emphasizing the "Israeli threat" to accusing foreign powers of being behind the uprising and labeling the protests as sedition (Daoud, 2019; Fassihi, 2019; Feltman, 2019b; Haboush, 2019).³⁵ Though the political elites have paid lip service to change, they may in fact simply be trying to wait out the protesters (Feltman, 2020). Hezbollah will also be unlikely to make any concessions to the protesters, as doing so would indicate that it is subject to popular pressure, ultimately weakening the group (Haboush, 2019). Iran has urged a swift response to the protests, fearing that they could feed unrest at home, and ultimately diminish its soft power in the region (Azodi & Cafiero, 2019). Moreover, Iran is concerned with Hezbollah's survival, having invested in the group since the 1980s with the aim of countering US, Israeli, and Saudi Arabian influence (Azodi & Cafiero, 2019; Fassihi, 2019). Hezbollah's utility (strategic, political, and ideological) to Iran is arguably at its apex (Taleblu, 2020). Observers speculate that even the show of national unity demonstrated by the protesters does not "portend the downfall of the dominant sectarian parties, least of all the militant group, Hezbollah"³⁶ (Daoud, 2019).

Yet, there are contrasting views on whether Hezbollah's power is waning. Some observers indicate that Hezbollah's prestige or *wahra* has not yet been threatened, nor have their red lines (its "large arsenal and expanding state-within-a-state") been compromised (Daoud, 2019).³⁷ In this view, Hezbollah will most likely maintain its powerful position within Lebanese politics, as Shi'a support for Hezbollah, as well as backing from Iran and Syria, ultimately remain strong (Haaretz, 2019; Kranz, 2019). Other observers suggest, however, that "the currency of Iran-backed Hezbollah has been devalued," emphasizing that the group is no longer an untouchable "resistance" working against Israel but is instead viewed as a part of a failed government (R. Cohen, 2019; see also Naharnet Newsdesk, 2019). Some argue that Hezbollah's use of scare tactics and violence against the protesters has backfired, turning an increasing number of sympathizers against the party rather than silencing them (Haboush, 2019; Nashed, 2019; Reuters, 2019). Hezbollah's attempts to undermine and discredit the protesters instead undermined their own credibility (Naharnet Newsdesk, 2019; Nashed, 2019).

³⁵ Note that there are also unconfirmed but widely circulated reports that death threats are being sent to Shi'a protesters who have criticized Hezbollah (Haboush, 2019)

³⁶ Daoud (2019) contends that even the more organized and unified protests do not call for any stipulations that would fundamentally weaken Hezbollah, for example, calling for its disarmament. Moreover, the protests do not oppose Hezbollah per se, beyond being part of or supporting the hated ruling class. Even Hezbollah's verbal and physical attacks have not been enough to turn critical masses of protesters against them. Instead, there have been anti-government counter-protests by supporters of Hezbollah (and Amal) (see also Badran, 2019; Haboush, 2019).

³⁷ Daoud (2019) indicates that should this happen, Hezbollah would step up its response, noting that the May 2008 armed takeover of Beirut or the 2011 intervention in Syria illustrate the lengths to which the group is willing to go for self-preservation.