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The Demonstrations in Lebanon:
Hezbollah Struggles to Preserve its Status
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The ongoing protests in Lebanon are a threat to both stable governance and to the dominant role of Hezbollah within the political system. Hezbollah is not interested in change to a status quo that has allowed the organization to wield significant influence without being perceived as a lead actor, all the while preserving its independence, primarily as an armed militia. Consequently, Hezbollah has been working to quell the upheavals without thus far resorting to wide scale violence, while pointing the finger of blame at outside actors, chiefly the United States, as those responsible for fomenting the protest. In parallel, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has labored to prevent a political solution in the form of the technocrat government demanded by the demonstrators, which would undermine his clout. Israel has no interest in being involved in Lebanon's internal affairs, but must be mindful of the possibility that Hezbollah will take action against it so as to divert attention from Lebanon's domestic events and demonstrate its self-styled role as "defender of Lebanon."

The sweeping protests that erupted spontaneously in Lebanon on October 17, 2019 have persisted, with a consistent cry for far ranging steps to change the existing political order and improve the population's economic situation. The anger of the demonstrators, who hail from all of the country's confessional groups, is directed primarily against the old and corrupt elite, with no distinctions among leaders based on sect: "Everyone Means Everyone." The demonstrators are calling for the current leadership to be replaced forthwith and for a new, technocrat cabinet – without the participation of familiar, corrupt politicians – to be appointed instead. They are demanding that the elite, which has abused the Lebanese economy over the years while not improving the living conditions of a population living among old infrastructures and with insufficient income, be brought to justice. The protests have led to a paralysis of the government system, to the impaired function of banks and educational institutions, and to an economy on the verge of collapse. Since the resignation of Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri (October 29) there have been contacts on forming a new government, but these have so far proven fruitless given how loth those currently at the helm are to relinquish their power and due to disputes over the composition of a cabinet.

Hezbollah stands to be harmed by any change to the status quo in Lebanon that has allowed it on the one hand to influence the political system, while on the other hand to cultivate its special status as a party that also has an armed militia. The organization has proven skilled at preserving its independence, which involves primarily retaining its military power and the autonomy to decide when to apply this power, while pursuing a force buildup with the aid of its patron Iran and in accordance with its interests and those of Iran. Similarly, Hezbollah maintains a socio-economic network for the welfare of its constituent Shiite population, in a matter that is independent and separate from the existing ruling system.

The Hezbollah-aligned camp won a majority in the Lebanese parliamentary election of May 2018. This was an important achievement for the organization, and the protest poses a threat of political destabilization and harm. The Hezbollah camp ("March 8 Alliance") accounts for most of the ministers (18 out of 30) in the cabinet formed in January 2019 following long debates. Hezbollah can thus advance decisions that match its interests while preventing decisions that in its mind are problematic, and it can also tap, in accordance with its interests, the budgets of ministries controlled by its representatives. Furthermore, its involvement in the Lebanese political system, combined with regional and international interest in Lebanon's stability and the preservation of its integrity as a state, serves to shield Hezbollah from harsher criticism and more biting sanctions than those imposed on the organization and its senior representatives, mainly by the United States.

The demonstrators' anger is directed at the Sunni Prime Minister, the Christian President, the Shiite parliament speaker, and the cabinet ministers, some of whom belong to Hezbollah or to its camp. This is convenient for Hezbollah leader Nasrallah, who is not an elected leader and thus not subject to any direct demand that he be replaced, though his name is at times mentioned by demonstrators as among those responsible for the situation. While the protestors generally tend not to ascribe responsibility to Hezbollah for the difficult situation in Lebanon, with the exception of sporadic critical calls against the organization and its leaders, the organization worries about the consequences of the protest for its dominant role in the country. Hope for an end to the protests and a preservation of the existing order has dominated the four speeches Nasrallah has delivered since the protest erupted. Already in his first speech, Nasrallah made clear that Hezbollah would not support a resignation of the government or creation of a technocrat cabinet, or early parliamentary elections. This has been a consistent theme in all of Nasrallah's speeches, and he has warned repeatedly that a continuation of the protest and adoption of all the changes demanded by the demonstrators would spell real dangers to the stability of Lebanon, with economic collapse and a violent struggle liable to escalate as far as civil war. Instead of reform processes that would take years, he said that what

would be appropriate are immediate steps to deal with corruption and failing institutions, as well as measures for the public's welfare. Similarly, Nasrallah has repeatedly voiced concern for the Lebanese people and stressed Hezbollah's role as defender of Lebanon, while underscoring its power and ability to contend with the "Israeli threat." In a speech on November 1, Nasrallah went so far as to declare: "We have so many missiles that we don't know where to put them."

Hezbollah charges that foreign actors – specifically Saudi Arabia, Israel, and above all the United States – are involved in igniting the protest. On November 24, Hezbollah members mounted a violent demonstration in front of the US Embassy in Beirut, and a Hezbollah lawmaker, Hassan Fadlallah, claimed on November 25 that the United States was stirring up the protest and trying to impose its agenda on Lebanon aimed at weakening the organization.

Hezbollah, which is not interested in an escalation of the protest, has until now, despite its concerns, avoided recourse to heavy handed force and to sweeping violence to hamper the demonstrators. While there were several incidents where Hezbollah supporters used violence against protestors (October 29, November 24), and where Lebanese troops intervened to preserve order, the organization has adopted a policy of political *taqiyya* (a traditional mode of concealment used by the Shiite sect given its history of persecution by the Sunni majority).

Meanwhile, Hezbollah representatives have been involved behind the scenes in all of the political processes to respond to the demonstrators, while striving to prevent significant changes that could threaten its status. Hezbollah even tried to prevent the resignation of Hariri, its veteran political rival, who met Nasrallah before publicly announcing he would step down. Similarly, the organization is involved in contacts on forming a new government and, alongside its camp allies and President Michel Aoun's Christian party, opposes the popular demand – supported by Hariri – on the formation of a technocrat cabinet. It appears that this demand by Hezbollah and its camp constitutes a main obstacle to the ongoing government-building efforts. Thus, for example, President Aoun declared (*al-Manar*, November 12) that no one can deny Hezbollah membership in a new government given its central role in the country as a representative of a third of the population. Aoun further argued that Hezbollah takes pains to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701 of 2006, and contended that the sanctions imposed on Hezbollah have no deleterious effect on the Lebanese economy.

Ramifications for Israel

Israel has no interest in becoming involved in Lebanon's internal affairs, but it should closely monitor the course of the events and the possibility of spillover violence beyond

the Lebanon's borders. The longer the protest in Lebanon persists, the greater the distress for Hezbollah, which is mired in economic difficulty and is under increased pressure in the international arena, prompting it to address internal developments in Lebanon. On the other hand, it is possible that under these circumstances the organization will choose to divert the criticism toward external actors, as it has done by accusing the United States of stirring up the protest in Lebanon, and there is even the possibility – albeit of low probability given the price of escalation – that Hezbollah will initiate military actions, even limited ones against Israel, so as to deflect Lebanese public scrutiny and calm the domestic protest. Hezbollah's October 31 shooting at an Israeli UAV in southern Lebanon can be interpreted as an example of this possible approach, which requires preparation for the possibility of similar and even graver incidents.

What has also been noteworthy during the events has been the stabilizing and calming role of the Lebanese army, as it has imposed boundaries on the protest and limited the tension between citizens from all communities vis-à-vis the government, while using non-violent means (as of now, only one person has been killed as a result of a security officer's gunfire). This conduct by the army underscores once more the dilemma of the Israeli position when it comes to foreign aid that Lebanon receives from the United States – and especially at this current juncture, given discussions within the US administration about a release of \$105 million in aid for the Lebanese army that was suspended due to the protest. On the one hand, the importance of strengthening the Lebanese army as the only Lebanese force that can serve as a counterweight to the might of Hezbollah's armed militia is clear. On the other hand, concern remains that the Lebanese army, either wholly or in part, will fight against Israel alongside Hezbollah if and when a broad conflict breaks out.