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**The Coronavirus Crisis Heightens the Distress of Lebanon and Hezbollah**

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**The coronavirus pandemic has placed an additional burden on Lebanon, which was already experiencing one of the worst crises in its history. With a failing economy, the country is on the verge of insolvency. According to official statistics, so far the number of infected people is relatively low (a few hundred), but the low rate of testing and the concealment of data suggests that the real figure is likely much higher. The Lebanese government has adopted strong measures and announced an emergency situation and nighttime curfew, but is finding it difficult to formulate a plan to emerge from the economic and fiscal crisis. Street protests have died down due to the pandemic, but are likely to be renewed in light of the intensifying crisis. In these circumstances there is heightened pressure on Hezbollah, which is responsible for the appointment of the current Minister of Health. In frequent recorded public addresses, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has tried to foster an image of national unity, while simultaneously watching out for his organization’s interests. Hezbollah continues to use the border crossings, which are officially closed, particularly the crossing into Syria, and its operatives continue to bring money and weapons into Lebanon. Nasrallah’s speeches also reflect his concern for his fellow members of the Shiite axis, and he has called for lifting the international sanctions on Iran and for an end to the fighting against the Houthis in Yemen. However, for Israel, the coronavirus crisis offers political and military opportunities with regard to Lebanon and Hezbollah.**

Since the confirmation of the first case of coronavirus in Lebanon, the infection has continued to spread. According to the official reports, the source of the infection lies with a group of women who returned from a pilgrimage to Iran on February 24, 2020. Officially there are only a few hundred cases of coronavirus in Lebanon, with a relatively low number of deaths, but apparently these figures do not paint the true picture, and the actual numbers are estimated to be at least five times higher. This is due to the low rate of testing (as of March 29, only 6400 people had been tested); and the fact that sick people avoid the hospitals, which in any case are in very poor condition.

The Lebanese government was quick to take aggressive measures to slow down the spread of the virus. On March 15 a “state of medical emergency” was declared, which was

extended until April 12, and the public was called to join in the struggle. Schools were closed; all non-essential businesses and factories were closed, apart from those supplying food and medicines; and restrictions were placed on traffic at airports as well as land and sea borders. The Association of Banks in Lebanon decided to close its branches, but following a loud outcry against this move from the government and the general public, banks were partially re-opened. A total curfew was imposed at night, and the army was called in to enforce the curfew and traffic restrictions. In addition, the government launched a campaign to raise donations from Lebanese citizens both in the country and abroad, to help fund the struggle against the outbreak. The UNHCR Refugee Agency has also made preparations for the spread of the virus in the densely-populated refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon, although no cases from the camps have yet been reported.

The virus outbreak has exacerbated Lebanon's severe financial and fiscal situation, with some claiming that this is the worst crisis that Lebanon has ever experienced. In recent months the country's credit rating dropped and almost reached insolvency (at the beginning of March it was rated C by the Fitch credit rating agency) following a government decision to stop repayment of debts. Even before the start of the corona outbreak, in November 2019 the World Bank reported that 50 percent of Lebanese were living below the poverty line and unemployment figures were soaring. On March 27, the Lebanese Finance Minister announced that the national debt, which amounts to over \$90 billion, was 178 percent higher than GDP, and that the value of the Lebanese pound had dropped by 40 percent in a few months. He estimated that the coronavirus burden would lead to a decline of 12 percent in GDP and an increase in inflation. Delays are also expected in the ongoing gas exploration at sea.

Clearly Lebanon is in urgent need of outside aid (according to World Bank estimates – some \$25-30 billion dollars for the coming years), but at present there is no party that is willing and able to help, partly because the government has not yet finalized an economic recovery plan or a plan to spread out its debts, which have been presented as conditions for receiving aid.

In recent months, financial distress and the government's helplessness have whipped up popular protests. For the moment the fear of infection has discouraged demonstrations, the streets are now empty, and the security forces are quick to dismantle the protest tents in central Beirut. Yet it seems likely that once the corona crisis ends, the lives of Lebanese citizens will be harder, and mass protests will likely return to the streets.

The severe crisis has also intensified the pressure on Hezbollah. The current government was established at its initiative and is subject to its influence, and Hezbollah was behind the appointment of the Minister of Health. Following the criticism that the coronavirus

came to Lebanon from Iran and rumors that the organization is concealing the extent of Covid-19 in areas under its control and among senior Hezbollah figures, Nasrallah rushed to appear in public (March 13) and avowed to issue frequent addresses during the crisis. So far he has kept this promise, while emphasizing the severity of the situation, which he calls worse than any war. His speeches reflect Hezbollah's commitment to assist the entire Lebanese public, with calls for all sectors and political parties to join the struggle. He has also presented the organization's emergency plan, which is intended to help the government and not replace it, and includes the recruitment of some 24,500 operatives, including 1500 doctors and 3000 nurses and paramedics; the operation of hospitals and lease of hotels; and establishment of medical centers all over the country. In tandem, he is careful to protect the interests of his organization and of the Shiite axis led by Iran, and calls for the international sanctions on Iran to be lifted and for an end to the war on the Houthis.

Expression of Hezbollah's growing distress due to the pandemic (in addition to the existing difficulties experienced by the Shiite axis in recent months) can also be seen in the pragmatic policy it has been forced to adopt on two central issues on the Lebanese agenda: (1) consent to the involvement of the International Monetary Fund in drafting a solution to the Lebanese financial crisis, contrary to its previous opposition to such a move for fear that such involvement would limit its financial independence; (2) its position on the rescue on March 16 of Amer al-Fakhoury, the former head of Khiam prison, who was called "the butcher of Khiam prison," from the American Embassy in Beirut. Nasrallah claimed that he did not know this was going to happen, justifying his failure to use force to stop the American rescue helicopter, and also claimed that the move was made possible by weak elements in the government who were unable to withstand the American pressure and threats. However, it appears that he knew of the intention in advance and agreed to the rescue in return for the silent consent of his government partners to the continued use of the overland crossing to Syria and the airport, in order to ensure the ongoing movement of his people and transfer of money and weapons for his organization.

For Israel, the extremely difficult situation besetting Lebanon and Hezbollah, with the added problems of the coronavirus outbreak, offers both political and military opportunities. Israel can operate behind the scenes to promote the offer of Western aid to Lebanon in return for a demand that Hezbollah's partners in the government limit the organization's influence in state institutions. It is also important to support the continuing buildup of the Lebanese army as a national force to face Hezbollah, and to try and motivate Hezbollah's partners in the government to curb its ongoing acquisition of equipment and development of precision weapons. At the same time, the IDF should continue to use the opportunity to strike Hezbollah forces in Syria and disrupt their efforts to bring weapons into Lebanon. In the current circumstances, the possibility of hostilities between Hezbollah

and Israel, certainly on Hezbollah's initiative, has become more remote, and Hezbollah may also be pushed to reduce its presence in Syria. At the same time, it is still imperative to monitor the organization's force buildup, and maintain a watchful eye on its preparations for hostilities in the more distant future.