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**Following the Calamity in Beirut: Might the Situation in Lebanon
Change?**

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Following the series of explosions at the Beirut port on August 4, demonstrations in the city resumed, though with more violence than what was seen in previous protests, and on August 10, the Lebanese government formed in January 2020 by the Hezbollah camp resigned. The demonstrators demanded that the current corrupt leadership be replaced and that substantive change be made to the country's political system. Emerging against this background are two trends that may signal prospects for change. The first is the new level of the demonstrations, and the direct blame assigned to Hezbollah in a way that has not been seen for years. The second is the willingness of the international community to mobilize to assist Lebanon. Nonetheless, the road to real change remains long and tortuous. Although Hezbollah's status has been severely injured, the organization will not easily relinquish its dominance in the Lebanese political system. The Western countries that have mobilized to provide assistance and promote an investigation with international involvement will continue to hinge financial assistance on deep political and economic reforms, which are not acceptable to the ruling elite or to Hezbollah. Israel is limited in its ability to influence the situation, but it would be wise to encourage its allies in the West – especially the United States and France – and in the Gulf to offer financial assistance, while also formulating a graduated plan for internal change in Lebanon, in order to prevent the country's collapse into the hands of the Shiite axis, led by Iran and Hezbollah.

The series of explosions that rocked the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, causing numerous deaths and massive destruction in the city, occurred when Lebanon was already in the midst of a tripartite crisis – economic, political, and health – that is one of the most severe in the country's history. Following the blasts, there were noteworthy international moves to provide Lebanon with humanitarian aid, especially on the part of the United States and Western countries. The President of France visited Lebanon immediately shortly after the event and spearheaded an internet conference that raised \$300 million; the money was promised to the victims, to be transferred to them directly. Following the visit of US Undersecretary of State David Hale, it was announced on

August 15 that the United States and France would dispatch teams to help investigate the disaster.

The calamity heightened the anger within the Beirut population, which quickly took to the streets while blaming the corrupt leadership and reiterating the demand, familiar since the beginning of the popular protests in Lebanon (October 2019), for: change in the political system; replacement of the leadership (resignation of the dysfunctional "Hezbollah government" and President Michel Aoun); an international investigation; and punishment of those responsible for the disaster. This time, the demonstrations, which peaked on August 8, were especially violent, and involved the use of cold weapons; destruction and vandalism; displays, including nooses for the necks of the leaders such as the secretary-general of Hezbollah, the President of the state, and the speaker of the parliament; and the storming of the government offices and the parliament building. The President and Prime Minister Hassan Diab did not succeed in calming the enraged masses, who are tired of unfulfilled promises, and the pressure of the masses, in addition to the string of resignations of government ministers and members of parliament, led Diab on August 10 to submit the resignation of the government to the president. When announcing the resignation, he surprisingly blamed corrupt politicians who prevented him from furthering change, and he argued that "the corruption in Lebanon is larger than the state," validating the charges of the demonstrators.

Exceptional here is the public rage, which now is focused directly and more intensely at Hezbollah, including with fundamental and explicit charges that the organization is an "Iranian militia that has taken Lebanon hostage" and that its members are "terrorists." The demonstrators and public opinion shapers are primarily Christians and Sunnis, who appear no longer to fear the anger of Hezbollah (at this stage, there is no evidence of the protest's spread among the Shiite community as well, which has something to lose if it speaks critically against the organization). For his part, Nasrallah has tried to assuage the anger of the masses, and in his first speech in the aftermath of the disaster (on August 7), he denied any Hezbollah involvement in activity at the port or in the explosion, and called for national unity and the formation of a Lebanese – as opposed to international – commission of inquiry. He reiterated these messages during his speech of August 14, which marked the anniversary of the Second Lebanon War, but this time he addressed the possibility of Israeli involvement. According to Nasrallah, although there is no evidence of sabotage by an outside party, if the investigation points to Israeli involvement, Hezbollah will respond with force in accordance with the equation of deterrence that it has established vis-à-vis Israel since 2006. At the same time, he expressed doubt about the veracity of the results of the investigation in light of the US involvement in the inquiry. Nasrallah called again for a "national unity" government, with the hope of using it to maintain his organization's influence.

Nasrallah's claims that Hezbollah had no connection to the disaster and that the organization is not at all familiar with the port only stoked the fury of the masses, who loath Nasrallah's dominant and aggressive standing within the Lebanese system and his concern for the sectoral interests of the organization. The suspicion of Hezbollah is based primarily on the open secret of Hezbollah's presence at all of Lebanon's international borders, its control of the port of Beirut, and its use of the port's warehouses to store weapons. In addition, the intensity of the damage caused by the explosion proved the dangers posed to the civilian population by Hezbollah's intentional strategy of using it as a "human shield" by concealing missile launchers and weapons stores. Although in his speech Nasrallah denied that Hezbollah refrained from blaming Israel for the calamity at the port out of a desire to avoid demonstrating the immense destruction that Lebanon can expect if Hezbollah leads to war with Israel, the very denial of this charge actually serves to support this assessment.

The fierce criticism of Hezbollah embarrasses the organization, which has reached a new low point in the internal Lebanese system and faces a dilemma regarding its conduct down the road. In recent years, Hezbollah has solidified its status as a central actor in Lebanese politics based on its military power and claim that it is "a protector of Lebanon," and it has taken advantage of the weakness of its political rivals. Therefore, Hezbollah can be expected to seek to retain its dual standing as an armed militia and a political movement with dominant status within the Lebanese government. Given Lebanon's critical economic situation, which has grown more acute due to the disaster at the port, Hezbollah, which is interested in distancing Lebanon from the West, will refrain from blocking Western aid to Lebanon in order to prevent its total economic collapse. Yet this acceptance will likely be on condition that it is not forced to pay an unreasonable price – that is to say, as long as its military infrastructure is not detrimentally affected by the mounting call, from within and without Lebanon, for it to disarm – or to relinquish its status as a central axis of the government.

At this early stage of Lebanon's recovery process, and in light of the popular protests in the streets of Beirut, it appears that the main variables that will influence how the situation evolves include:

- a. The willingness of international parties to mobilize to provide widespread economic assistance, beyond humanitarian aid, in order to extricate Lebanon from its current economic-financial plight, and the requirements stipulated in exchange for this assistance.
- b. The strategy that is ultimately adopted by Hezbollah, which has sustained a heavy blow to its stature in face of the internal and external criticism and the demands directed at it. Will it agree to a political settlement that includes the formation of a

- government that reflects a decline in its status – according to the American proposal to establish a government of neutral experts in exchange for considerable Western aid for Lebanon? Or will it insist on maintaining its unique status at any price? Another possibility is that Hezbollah will attempt to use force against the protestors if the pressures on it intensify, which is a measure that could deteriorate into a clash and, in an extreme case, into another civil war.
- c. Resolve by the protestors to continue their struggle, along with a willingness to pay a heavy price or to challenge Hezbollah and provoke it into using force. Thus far, Hezbollah has refrained from using massive force against the demonstrators and has left the task of suppressing them to the Lebanese army and the police within the framework of additional powers they received given the state of emergency that was declared in Lebanon. In the first stage, it appears that Hezbollah will continue this approach, while defending its influence behind the scenes and its image as the main party that tends to the welfare of the Lebanese people and contributes to reconstruction and recovery from the economic dire straits. To this end, Nasrallah can be expected to maneuver among the aid proposals of the Western parties (France, the United States, and the International Monetary Fund) and his desire to avoid both ejection from key decision making roles and damage to Hezbollah's core interests, especially with regard to its military independence. Nasrallah can also be expected to continue his efforts to expand the relationship between Lebanon and the Shiite axis, and Iran and Syria in particular, although he will be hard-pressed to advance this aim in light of Hezbollah's bleak condition. Nasrallah will also take action to rebuff the additional attack on his organization that can be expected with the decision that is supposed to be issued on August 18 by the international tribunal that investigated the murder of Lebanese president Rafiq Hariri, which in 2008 ruled that the murder was carried out by Hezbollah members.

Vis-à-vis Israel: Although Hezbollah suspended additional retaliation following the death of an operative in an IDF attack in Syria (July 20), Nasrallah proclaimed that its time will come, as part of consolidating its deterrence equation vis-à-vis Israel. Thus, Israel should continue its activity against Hezbollah as part of the campaign between wars, and at the same time, as part of the political and public cognitive campaign to denounce Hezbollah as a terrorist organization and emphasize its responsibility for the internal situation in Lebanon and for the confrontation with Israel.

As for the economic aid required by Lebanon, Israel has limited ability to influence directly the aid from the West or the demands for reform of the Lebanese system and the reduced status of Hezbollah that will accompany this aid. However, it will be important for Israel – which has no interest in the collapse of Lebanon in general or in Lebanon

being completely pushed into the hands of the Shiite axis – to take action to convince Western countries, and especially France and the United States, to provide economic aid to Lebanon (which is requesting \$20 billion, part as a loan) that is conditional upon reining in Hezbollah. This is in addition to taking advantage of the new opportunities in Israel's relations with the Gulf states, and most notably the United Arab Emirates, in order to assist Lebanon. The economic weakness of Iran and the fellow members of its axis creates an opportunity for the West to continue to make large-scale aid to Lebanon conditional upon demands for political reform and Hezbollah's curtailed influence and status as an independent military militia.

In any event, a graduated framework should be developed toward political change in Lebanon and economic and infrastructural reconstruction, along with pressure on Hezbollah. Although the goal should ultimately be to disarm Hezbollah, in the initial stage Israel can, for example, focus on normalizing the supervision of the border crossings into Lebanon, which is a demand that is directly linked to the disaster at the port, caused by neglect and lack of supervision over Hezbollah's activity there. Also important is the development of a mechanism to ensure that the economic aid to Lebanon contributes to the economic reconstruction and the improvement of the living conditions of the population, and does not fall into the hands of the corrupt leadership.