

Enhanced Russian Involvement in Lebanon?

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The political deadlock and severe economic crisis in Lebanon have prompted political leaders in the country to search for political backing from Moscow, and to invite Russian companies to invest in infrastructure and energy projects in Lebanon. At the very least, they seek to use their dialogue with Russia to improve their bargaining power while requesting aid from the West. Against the backdrop of the crisis in Lebanon, the stream of visits to Moscow by Lebanese politicians raises the question of Russia's interests in the country and its ability to contribute to Lebanese stability. It appears that Russia is interested in expanding its influence in Lebanon, which it regards as a direct continuation of its interests in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. Moscow is capable of helping Lebanon solve specific problems, for example, in energy investments and vaccinations. It is clear, however, that it cannot solve Lebanon's underlying problems. Israel would do well to include the Lebanese issue in its dialogue with Moscow, especially the threat to Lebanon and to regional stability posed by Hezbollah, with which Russia has official ties. Israel should also consider the effect of Russian entrenchment in the Lebanese energy sector on the plans for transporting Israeli gas to Europe, while at the same time continuing its dialogue on Lebanon with partners in the West.

Contacts between Russia and senior figures in Lebanon appear to have expanded recently. On April 15-16, 2021, Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri visited Moscow, where he held a video talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin and met with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Mishustin called for improvement in bilateral trade, which plunged 38 percent in 2020 to \$320 million, and emphasized that Beirut should create attractive conditions for Russian investments. Hariri invited Russian companies to invest in the Lebanese economy, and asked for a donation of Sputnik V vaccines (beyond the symbolic donation that Russia has already given to Lebanon). Russian investments in the reconstruction of Beirut Port, construction of power stations, extraction of minerals, and infrastructure projects were also reportedly discussed.

Other significant meetings preceded Hariri's visit to Moscow. Lavrov and Hariri met in Abu Dhabi on March 9, and on March 14-19, a Hezbollah delegation headed by Lebanese

MP Mohammad Raad was hosted in Moscow. The delegation discussed the political crisis in Lebanon and the situation in Syria with representatives of the Russian Foreign Ministry and parliament. The delegation was received by Foreign Minister Lavrov – the highest-ranking Russian leader to ever meet with representatives of the organization. The preceding visit of a Hezbollah delegation to Moscow in 2011, also headed by Raad, had a much lower profile.

Given Russia's dominance in the Syrian theater, Lebanon constitutes an area where Russia can readily promote its interests. From Russia's perspective, Syria and Lebanon are "interrelated tools" in security and economics, so that instability in one affects the other. Russia has a range of tools for influencing the situation in Lebanon, in part because the Russian military forces in Syria, which in recent years have operated along the Syria-Lebanon border, are relevant to the security interests of Lebanon itself.

Hariri's visit to Moscow is probably a desperate attempt on his part to obtain international support for his efforts, to date unsuccessful, to form a government. From his perspective, the Russians delivered the goods, as can be seen from the announcement by Hariri's advisor on April 18 that President Putin supports Hariri's position on the formation of a government. Furthermore, it appears that the Lebanese, who are aware of Russia's limited ability to contribute to their economy, are utilizing their talks with Russia as additional leverage toward obtaining the aid promised them by the West, which until now has been contingent on the formation of a government that would institute reforms.

In recent years, Russia has maintained an ongoing dialogue with all of the political forces in Lebanon (Sunnis, Shiites, Druze, and all the Christian communities) on both official and informal channels (churches, channels attending to the Russian-speaking community in Lebanon, and Muslim religious organizations). Moscow wants Beirut to cooperate in returning 1.5 million Syrian refugees to their homes in Syria with international funding. Lebanon is participating in conferences held by Russia on the subject of repatriating the refugees, while the Western countries have boycotted these events.

Russia's relations with Hezbollah are a complicated mixture of competition and cooperation with the organization (like Russia's relations with Iran, Hezbollah's patron, which according to one source encourages Russian involvement in Lebanon). On the one hand, Russia became "Hezbollah's shield" in the UN Security Council over the past decade by blocking resolutions critical of Hezbollah and giving Hezbollah legitimacy by meeting with it and contending officially that Hezbollah is an important political force in Lebanon. In Syria, Russia cooperates with Hezbollah forces fighting to maintain Assad's regime. Following the recent visit to Moscow, Hezbollah MP Ammar Moussawi stated that everyone knows that the organization's members are present at the Russian base at

Khmeimim in Syria. On the other hand, there has also been friction between the Russians and Hezbollah over the years. Moscow does not favor the efforts by Hezbollah and Iran to entrench themselves in Syria, especially along the border with Israel, and Moscow calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria (except for the Russian forces).

For its part, Hezbollah regards Russia's support as important. Russia provides Hezbollah with legitimacy as a political actor in the Lebanese system, despite the increasing number of countries that regard it as a terrorist organization, including both its political and military wings. Furthermore, the organization has a clear interest in strengthening Lebanon's ties with groups that are neither Western nor pro-Western (such as the Gulf states).

In the economic sphere, Russia is not an important trade partner for Lebanon, but has a clear interest in gaining a foothold in the Lebanese energy sector, which is in desperate need of outside aid. In this framework, Russian gas company Novatek won a tender, as a junior partner (together with companies from France and Italy), to produce natural gas in Block 4 in the Mediterranean, part of which is located in territory claimed by both Israel and Lebanon. Russian state oil company Rosneft invested in an oil storage terminal in Tripoli, Lebanon, and in recent months, Russian companies obtained a franchise in Syria for natural gas exploration in the Mediterranean in the area of the Syrian-Lebanese maritime border, which is also a subject of dispute. At the same time, given the array of tough American sanctions against Syria and parts of the Lebanese financial system, Russian companies, which are already subject to sanctions, and are accustomed to operating in the gray sphere, have potential advantages for Lebanon, particularly in transactions that include Syria.

Until now, Moscow has not been perceived as a leading actor in Lebanon, in contrast to France, the United States, or Saudi Arabia. The economic collapse of Lebanon and the paralysis of its political system have prompted leading actors in Beirut to consider aid from Russia as well, despite Western opposition and perhaps because of that opposition. It appears that there are different attitudes in the deeply divided Lebanese system toward developing the connection with the Russians, but that all parties share the assessment that Lebanon needs external aid from any possible source. In addition, a request to the Russians could be a means of exerting pressure on the West to grant aid to Lebanon.

At the same time, the Russians also have an interest in a foothold in Lebanon. This convergence of interests makes it likely that the Russians will play a more significant political and economic role in Lebanon in the coming years, but without any intention of giving Lebanon carte blanche. Russia has much experience in its relations with small countries in a state of crisis. It can sometimes solve important specific problems (for

example, it recently supplied all the vaccination needs of San Marino) if this serves its interests and does not incur large costs for Russia.

Significance for Israel

Monitoring the Russian involvement in Lebanon is not enough for Israel; it is also necessary to bring up the subject of Lebanon in the existing dialogue between Jerusalem and Moscow. Until now, Jerusalem has considered Moscow a relevant address only for the Syrian theater, while political handling in the Lebanese context has been conducted through the United States. It is therefore important to expand the dialogue with the Russians to include Israel's concerns about the situation in Lebanon and the negative role played by Hezbollah – in the internal order in Lebanon, the increasing tension with Israel along the Lebanese border, and its entrenchment in Syria – which are liable to boil over and spark an outbreak in the northern theater. Russia, which has formal ties with Hezbollah, can also serve as a channel for delivering messages to the organization.

An additional issue to consider is whether and how Moscow's critical interest in preserving its share of the European natural gas market fits in with the ventures for transporting gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe, in which Israel is a partner. At the same time, Jerusalem should also extend its dialogue about the situation in Lebanon and its consequences for the region with its partners in the West, with an emphasis on the United States, France, and Britain.