

# Lebanon's Collapse, and the Significance for Israel

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**The ongoing deterioration of Lebanon's economy and the country's political chaos have sharpened the dilemma of Israel's new government as it formulates its policy on Lebanon. It appears that in any case, Israel should adopt a more proactive approach, rather than treating the negative consequences of events in Lebanon as preordained, especially in the extreme scenario of a total takeover by Hezbollah, which would turn the country into an Iranian sphere of influence, similar to Syria. Rescinding the sanctions against Iran following a possible return to the nuclear agreement by the United States may accelerate this scenario. At the same time, recent developments in Lebanon provide a potential opportunity for the IDF to deal a more substantial blow to Hezbollah's military capabilities, and quash the attempts to forge a new "deterrence equation" that includes shooting from Lebanon in response to clashes on the Temple Mount and elsewhere in Jerusalem.**

Saad Hariri's return on July 15, 2021 of his mandate to form a government in Lebanon reflects the downward spiral in the country's political system. Civilian distress has worsened, while the country experiences one of its worst-ever economic crises. Difficulties in earning a living have increased, and there is a severe shortage of basic consumer commodities: food, electricity, fuel, water, and medicine. Lebanon lacks the basic infrastructure that a country is supposed to provide for its people. The political system, which has been without a functioning government for a year, is almost completely paralyzed and is unable to take the decisions necessary to deal with the crisis. Lebanon's security elements, headed by the Lebanese army, which is also suffering from the economic distress, cannot operate effectively. Hariri's move likewise demonstrated once again the weakness and ineptitude of the rich and corrupt leadership of all of Lebanon's communities, including Hezbollah. This leadership concentrates mainly on maintaining its power and status, while refusing to make concessions for the benefit of the Lebanese people as a whole.

There is no solution on the horizon, and there are no prospects for external help: Western countries, which have despaired of a positive response to their demand for the formation of a government and implementation of reforms as a condition for aid, are considering the imposition of sanctions against the Lebanese leadership. Russia and China are willing to help, provided they are guaranteed a return on their investment. Nasrallah's hope of aid from Iran has yet to be fulfilled, in part due to fear in Lebanon that accepting such aid will prevent any possibility of obtaining broad international support.

An examination of the possible scenarios for developments in Lebanon provides no grounds for optimism. The most likely scenario right now is a prolonged crisis along the current lines, continued decline into complete collapse, and even a split in the country or the outbreak of a third civil war. Another extreme scenario is a total takeover of Lebanon by Hezbollah and the strengthening of Iran's grip on the country.

How might continuation of the crisis in Lebanon affect Israel? There are two main approaches in Israel to this question:

- The primary one is that a collapse of Lebanon is bad for Israel: This approach, which reflects the assumption that Israel has an interest in a stable pro-Western Lebanon, argues that despite Hezbollah's dominance in Lebanon, it does not hold a complete monopoly on power. Any further decline in Lebanon's internal situation will strengthen Hezbollah, and is therefore liable to change the political balance in Lebanon to Israel's detriment, primarily in the longer term. Nasrallah's vision of turning Lebanon into another Iranian protectorate and an integral part of the Shiite axis will be realized. Already early in Lebanon's long economic-political crisis, Nasrallah argued that the Lebanese economy should be detached from the West, and should look east and develop ties with Iran, Iraq, and Syria. He explained that Lebanon's collapse would lead it into the warm embrace of Iran, and that Lebanon would eventually become another Iranian outpost in the region, like Syria.
- The collapse of Lebanon is good for Israel: Those who take this approach, especially those who claim that Lebanon is already controlled by Hezbollah, believe that if the internal crisis in the country gets worse, Hezbollah will be overcome by ailments (including a state of collapse), find it difficult to give its full attention to the conflict with Israel, and adapt a more restrained

attitude to it. According to this line of thinking, even if Hezbollah is eventually moved to seize power and becomes the official hegemon in Lebanon – a step that it has scrupulously avoided until now because of the advantages in the status quo for preserving its independent military power and behind-the-scenes political influence on events in the country through its allies – this scenario is likely to serve Israel's interests, despite its disadvantages. Furthermore, in this scenario, which implies that the Lebanese state and Hezbollah are one, Israel's freedom of action and legitimacy for operations against Lebanon will be increased, especially in a military conflict or all-out war.

These different approaches on a collapsing Lebanon prompt different ideas on the policy that Israel should adopt. A belief that Lebanon's falling into Hezbollah hands is positive supports a policy of non-intervention; furthermore, Israel's ability to influence events in Lebanon is very limited. Advocates of this policy argue that Israel should refrain from intervening in Lebanese internal developments, and should certainly not help Lebanon, other than through direct or indirect humanitarian aid, because any other aid will strengthen Hezbollah. Israel should therefore continue focusing its efforts on weakening Hezbollah.

The other approach holds that there is no absolute identity between Lebanon and Hezbollah, and that Israel's interest still lies in a stable pro-Western Lebanon. While Hezbollah is currently the strongest military and political power in Lebanon, not all Lebanese support the organization, and the severe crisis afflicting the country has increased criticism of Hezbollah because of its actions in the internal theater. Israel should therefore try to support efforts that seek a way of strengthening the power groups opposing Hezbollah whom it regards as positive in order to prevent a total Hezbollah takeover of Lebanon's state institutions and its population, with Lebanon becoming an Iranian protectorate. This policy, of course, does not mean abandoning the political and military efforts to weaken Hezbollah.

The Israeli government should update its policy on Lebanon according to a long-term perspective, and should consider the consequences of the collapse of the Lebanese state for Israel in particular, and for the region in general. Israel should adopt a proactive approach that regards the current developments in Lebanon as providing an opportunity to influence the country's future, rather than treating Hezbollah's dominance as preordained, especially in the extreme scenario of a

takeover of the country by Hezbollah. This is not a recommendation for direct intervention by Israel in Lebanon's internal affairs, similar to previous attempts that failed, or provision of direct aid to Lebanon. Israel's ability to provide aid is in any case limited, because most Lebanese perceive Israel as an enemy country. All of Israel's offers to aid the Lebanese people, including the offer by Minister of Defense Benny Gantz on July 6 to send humanitarian aid via UNIFIL, were rejected out of hand.

It is therefore necessary to formulate a policy that will support simultaneously Israel's two main interests that can still be advanced: the security interest in dealing with the threat posed by Hezbollah, and the interest in a stable and pro-Western neighbor on Israel's northern border.

In order to promote the interest of a pro-Western Lebanon free of dependence on Iran, Israel needs to spur its partners in the West. This refers mainly to the United States and France, who are involved in the efforts to provide aid to Lebanon, but also Israel's new partners in the Gulf. Israel should urge them to be more active in providing immediate aid designated for the Lebanese people, while demanding close supervision of the transfer of the aid in order to prevent its falling into the hands of Hezbollah and its supporters. At the same time, it is particularly important to coordinate with the United States the obstruction of the channels whereby Iran transfers aid to Hezbollah, if the sanctions against Iran are rescinded following an agreement on a return to the nuclear agreement. Continued strengthening of the Lebanese army is an important interest of Israel (without supplying it with weapons that are liable to jeopardize Israel's security), which has demonstrated until now that it is the sole entity capable of preserving internal order in the country. It is also important to consider ideas for expanding the international presence/involvement by parties that are not members of the Shiite axis (the United States and France on the one hand, and Russia, China, and possibly Turkey on the other).

These efforts should be pursued concurrently with the ongoing effort to weaken Hezbollah. This includes both political undertakings – condemning Hezbollah and consolidating its classification as a terrorist organization in the international theater – and military actions. In the military sphere, the deployment for a possible conflict on the northern border must be continued. In tandem, it is necessary to consider whether the crisis in Lebanon offers Israel an opportunity to deal a more substantial blow to Hezbollah's capabilities, and to act with more determination

to defeat the effort by Hamas, Iran, and Hezbollah to forge a new "deterrence equation" against Israel that links clashes on the Temple Mount and elsewhere in Jerusalem to firing at Israeli territory from the north, as occurred during Operation Guardian of the Walls and in the shooting incident on July 20, following the violent clash on the Temple Mount two days earlier.

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