Lebanon

Lebanon faces a host of domestic and security challenges, exacerbated by economic crisis and political stalemate. The Israel-Hamas war and related regional instability have increased the fragility of Lebanon's society and institutions. Armed clashes since October 2023 between neighboring Israel and the Iran-backed Shia Islamist group Lebanese Hezbollah (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) threaten to escalate into all-out war. A full-scale conflict between Hezbollah and Israel would likely have devastating impacts on Lebanon and its people, and would pose serious risks to Israel. The United States seeks to reduce conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, in the context of pursuing longstanding U.S. policies to counter the influence of Iran and Hezbollah, and bolster Lebanese state capacity and reform.

Government and Politics

Lebanon's diverse population of 5.3 million people includes Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim communities of roughly comparable size. Political posts are divided among the country's various religious groups, or "confessions," to reflect each group's share of the population—although no formal census has been conducted in the country since 1932. The presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian, the prime minister post for a Sunni Muslim, and the parliament speakership for a Shia Muslim.
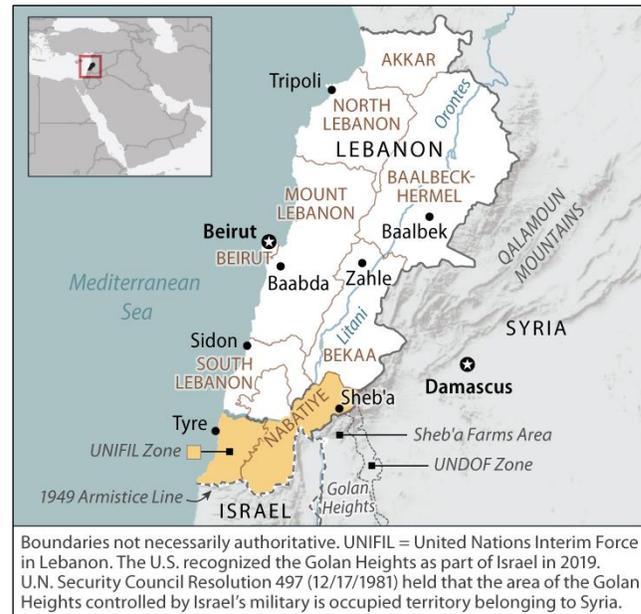
Two rival political coalitions have contested Lebanese politics since they coalesced during demonstrations that took place on different dates in March 2005, when Syria announced an end to its decades-long occupation of much of Lebanon. The **March 8** political coalition includes the Free Patriotic Movement or FPM (Christian), as well as Hezbollah and the Amal Movement (both Shia), and has had ties with Syria and Iran. The **March 14** coalition traditionally has included the Future Movement (Sunni), and the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb (both Christian), and opposes Syrian and Iranian influence.

In the past five years, Lebanese politics has undergone a series of upheavals, but the system has not produced a clear mandate for leadership since 2022. A protest movement that began in 2019 in response to tax hikes forced the resignation of a March 14-aligned prime minister; his successor resigned following an August 2020 explosion at Beirut's port that killed over 200 people and caused massive damage.

May 2022 parliamentary elections, which saw the election of an unprecedented number of self-described opposition members, did not result in a clear majority for either March 8- or March 14-linked groups, contributing to paralysis on issues requiring a majority vote, including government formation. The elections automatically triggered the government's resignation, placing it in a caretaker capacity and necessitating the appointment of a new prime minister and cabinet. Then-President Michel Aoun and caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati did not agree on a new cabinet

before the expiration of Aoun's term in October 2022; the cabinet remains in caretaker status with limited authorities.

Figure 1. Lebanon

Boundaries not necessarily authoritative. UNIFIL = United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. The U.S. recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel in 2019. U.N. Security Council Resolution 497 (12/17/1981) held that the area of the Golan Heights controlled by Israel's military is occupied territory belonging to Syria.

Source: Created by CRS using ESRI and Google Maps.

Presidential Vacancy

Lebanon has not had a president since October 2022, when President Aoun's term expired without the election of a successor (Lebanon's president is elected by the parliament). In case of a vacancy in the presidency, Lebanon's constitution delegates its functions to the cabinet. In twelve rounds of voting from October 2022 to June 2023, Members of Parliament (MPs) failed to select a president—due either to lack of quorum, or to a number of MPs casting blank ballots. The U.S. Department of State stated in October 2023 that "Lebanon's divided parliamentarians" were "putting their personal ambitions ahead of the interests of their country" in failing to elect a president.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated FTO and Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), operates in Lebanon as a militia force, a political party, and a social services provider. According to the Department of State, Iran's government, which played a role in Hezbollah's creation during the 1980s, continues to provide the group with "most of its funding, training, weapons, and explosives, as well as political, diplomatic, monetary, and organization aid." Hezbollah, arguably the most capable of the Iran-backed groups in the Middle East, has repeatedly threatened and engaged in combat with Israel, and has an estimated arsenal of 120,000-200,000 missiles and rockets. It regularly justifies its hostile posture by citing Israel's presence in disputed areas of the Israel-Lebanon-Syria tri-border

region. In 2006, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border operation, sparking a 34-day war in which at least 1,200 people in Lebanon and 158 in Israel were killed.

Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 expanded the mandate of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL, created in 1978 to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces after an earlier incursion into southern Lebanon). UNIFIL's mandate includes assisting the Lebanese government in establishing "an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and UNIFIL" between the Blue Line (the U.N.-demarcated Israel-Lebanon border, which the two countries have not formalized) and the Litani River (around 15 miles north of the Blue Line). Hezbollah's continued presence south of the Litani remains a major driver of Hezbollah-Israel conflict.

Hezbollah has participated in Lebanese elections since 1992; it currently holds 13 of 128 seats in parliament. The group first entered the cabinet in 2005, and has held 1 to 3 posts in each subsequent Lebanese government.

Economic Crisis

According to the World Bank, Lebanon has since 2019 faced one of the world's most severe economic crises, with nominal GDP shrinking from $52 billion in 2019 to $18 billion in 2023. The Lebanese *lira*/pound has lost over 98 percent of its value since 2019, forcing the government to reduce or eliminate subsidies on essential goods. A lack of foreign exchange to finance imports has triggered shortages of medicine, water, and fuel. Due in part to fuel shortages, Lebanon's residents receive an average of four hours of electricity daily. A 2021 natural gas deal with Egypt (as the provider) and Jordan and Syria (as countries of transit) intended to increase the supply of electricity to Lebanon remains stalled as participants seek assurances that they will not be subject to U.S. sanctions. An International Monetary Fund deal to provide $3 billion in loans remains contingent on reforms that Lebanon's caretaker government largely has not implemented. The protracted economic crisis has also fed anti-refugee sentiment in Lebanon, which hosts the most refugees per-capita in the world, including 1.5 million Syrians and about 250,000 registered Palestinian refugees.

U.S. Policy and Assistance

U.S. policy in Lebanon aims to counter the influence of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, secure Lebanon's border, and preserve domestic stability. To this end, the U.S. government has sought to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), generating debate in Congress between those who view the LAF as key to countering Hezbollah and those who argue that U.S. assistance to the LAF risks falling into the hands of U.S. adversaries. Congress has annually placed certification requirements on U.S. aid to Lebanon in an effort to prevent its misuse. U.S. officials have said that the United States seeks to provide short-term aid to buttress state institutions, but that the United States "cannot do the job of the government itself."

Since FY2021, U.S. bilateral assistance to Lebanon has remained fairly stable, averaging around $285 million a year. Most of that assistance is in Foreign Military Financing ($150 million requested for FY2025) to support the LAF, to which the United States has provided $3 billion since 2006, and Economic Support Funds ($117.5 million requested for FY2025). U.S. humanitarian aid to Lebanon since FY2019 has totaled $3.5 billion. In addition to aid for Lebanon, the United States provides support to UNIFIL (around $170 million in FY2024).

Ongoing Conflict and Outlook

Even amidst Lebanon's economic crisis and political paralysis, the country's most urgent threat appears to be a possible full-scale Israel-Hezbollah war. While both sides say they seek to avoid such a conflict, which could have disastrous short- and long-term effects for Lebanon's population, some observers assess that it could happen.

Israel has demanded that Hezbollah be kept back from the border so that roughly 60,000 evacuees can return to northern Israel. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has said that his group's attacks on Israel will continue as long as Israeli operations in Gaza are ongoing.

U.S. officials have sought to help broker an arrangement to defuse tensions and allow the return of displaced persons in both Israel and Lebanon (where 90,000 have reportedly left their homes since October 2023). Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in July 2024 that Hezbollah's stance "underscores why getting that ceasefire [in Gaza] could also be critical to further enabling" diplomacy to resolve the Israel-Hezbollah crisis. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in late June that any diplomatic arrangement "will include the physical distancing of Hezbollah from the border, and we will need to enforce it."

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said in a July 2024 visit to northern Israel, "Even if there is a ceasefire [in Gaza], here [in the north] we continue to fight and do everything necessary," saying that the north and south are "two separate sectors." Gallant stated the previous month that "Hezbollah understands very well that we can inflict massive damage in Lebanon if a war is launched." Nasrallah, in turn, pledged to fight "with no rules and no redlines" in any war with Israel, saying that a Hezbollah invasion of northern Israel was "still on the table."

U.S. officials have reportedly warned Israeli counterparts that a "limited war" might not be possible because of the risk of escalation both in Lebanon and more broadly. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Brown, Jr., said in June that Iran could respond to Israel directly if it felt Hezbollah is "significantly threatened." At the same time, U.S. officials have reportedly conveyed to Hezbollah that the United States would not be able to prevent Israeli military action.

U.S. officials appear to anticipate helping to defend Israel in the event of a large-scale conflict, but General Brown indicated that U.S. help for Israel against Hezbollah's shorter-range projectiles may be less effective than U.S.-Israel cooperation in April against the missile/drone barrage launched over longer distances from Iran. As three U.S. amphibious ships moved into the Mediterranean Sea in June 2024 on a scheduled rotation, the Department of Defense said they were there to "ensure regional stability" and "deter aggression," and could assist in evacuating Americans. The United States evacuated nearly 15,000 U.S. citizens from Lebanon during the 2006 war.

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