

Policy Challenges in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict: Iranian Influence Unveiled

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**THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS
LAB**

Empowering Evidence-Based Solutions

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Note from the Lead Author, Samantha Ramay

This International Security Report aims to provide a comprehensive Iran's involvement in the conflict in Lebanon, as well as the impact on international stakeholders. Through rigorous research and analysis, we endeavor to shed light on key trends, challenges, and opportunities in the realm of conflict and security as well as broader policy implications.

We hope that this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, scholars, practitioners, and all those interested in understanding and addressing the complexities of contemporary conflicts.

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About the Author

Samantha Ramay is an undergraduate student in history at Webster University in St. Louis, USA. In the Lab, she has researched and accessed policy scenarios concerning attacks on trade in the Red Sea as well as Iran's conflictual proxy conflicts with Israel. She is also researching the effects of populism on democracy and populist leaders' contributions to democratic backsliding.



About the Global Policy Horizons Research Lab

Webster University's Global Policy Horizons Lab is a policy-focused research entity where students, Lab researchers, affiliated faculty, as well as members of the policy community from across disciplines, can explore national and global security issues, generate original research, as well as produce peer-reviewed policy papers and commentaries. The Lab pursues innovative research focusing on unconventional threats, identity and security, role of technology in security, economic security, as well environmental and food security. The goal of the Lab is to become a knowledge hub that informs national governments and other members of the global policy community on contemporary and future security challenges.



The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.



Executive Summary

Prompted by the October 7th, 2023, Hamas attacks in Israel, Hezbollah entered the fighting in support of Hamas by firing artillery and rockets across Lebanon's shared border with Israel.¹ Iran assists Hezbollah financially and militarily and uses Hezbollah to engage in the "Unity of Fronts" tactic against Israel.² Since the conflict began, almost daily exchanged fire has occurred over the border between Israeli and Hezbollah forces.³ More than a million civilians on both sides of the border have been displaced, and the conflict resulted in the vast destruction of homes and agricultural lands in the area.^{4 5} The exchanges escalated on September 17, 2024, when an Israeli attack prompted the explosion of Hezbollah pager devices in Lebanon, killing multiple and wounding thousands.⁶ As of early November 2024, after continued attacks on both sides that have resulted in thousands of fatalities, a ceasefire agreement between Lebanon and Israel seems to be a viable possibility.⁷

Background

Lebanon underwent a civil war between 1975 to 1990, resulting in around 120,000 deaths.⁸ Syrian and Israeli forces both intervened in the conflict. The IDF did not withdraw from Lebanon until 2000, prompting outrage among local Shiites. This dissent, guided by Iranian influence, led to the creation of Hezbollah.⁹ In 2006, a 34-day war between the IDF and Hezbollah took place because of a cross-border raid.¹⁰ Since then, tensions have not escalated into overt conflict until the October 7th attacks. Hezbollah engaged in the conflict in ideological solidarity with Hamas, a fellow branch of Iran's "Axis of Resistance" that has the shared objective of eliminating Israel.¹¹ ¹² In addition to the current conflict with Israel, Lebanon is struggling with the worst financial crisis in its history, greatly diminishing the quality of life for the Lebanese and the functionality of the Lebanese government.¹³

Primary Stakeholders

Actor	Impact	Effect
Hezbollah (Hizballah) 	Negative	(-) Hezbollah violated the demarcation line set in place by the UN between Israel and Lebanon, repeatedly sending rockets and other artillery into Israeli territory since October 7th, 2023.^{14 15} (-) Hezbollah has taken advantage of the vulnerabilities in the weak Lebanese state institution to act as a placeholder "state within a state," performing as a political organization and providing social services to undermine the abilities of the weakened government.^{16 17}



Actor	Impact	Effect
		(-) Hezbollah has engaged in corruption and human rights abuses, including obstructing federal investigations in Lebanon (for example, concerning the 2020 Beirut port explosion) and killing foreign personnel. ^{18 19}
Lebanese Republic 	Negative	(-) The Lebanese government has made little effort to implement the structural reforms needed to address the country's economic crisis and the resulting widespread poverty among its people due in part to government corruption. ²⁰ (-) Social services and infrastructure have decreased severely in light of the economic crisis, with the government unable to provide consistent, access to food, healthcare, housing, and education. ²¹
Islamic Republic of Iran 	Negative	(-) Iran provides support for Hezbollah, its strongest member of the Iranian proxy system, in the form of funding, weaponry, and training, costing millions of dollars every year ²² (-) Iran conducted the October 1st, 2024 attack consisting of 200 ballistic missiles into Israel (the majority being destroyed before reaching their target) as part of a continued "tit-for-tat" between the nations. ²³
State of Israel 	Mixed/ Negative	(-) Continued Israeli aerial and ground campaigns in the Gaza Strip are inhibiting an ultimate ceasefire agreement. ²⁴ (-) The "pager attacks" in Lebanon caused harm to civilians and demonstrated how vast Israeli intelligence allows for moves towards "high risk, high reward" behavior. ²⁵ (+,-) Engaged in a direct attack on Iran, striking strategic systems that inhibit Iranian ability to export missiles. ²⁶
The United States of America 	Mixed	(+) The US has deployed carrier strike groups to the Eastern Mediterranean in addition to steadily increasing deployments in the region, reflecting the preferred policy of deterrence as Iran is unlikely to engage directly with US forces. ^{27 28}



Actor	Impact	Effect
		(+,-) The US has provided a total of more than \$5.5 billion in assistance to Lebanon to address the economic crisis and resulting security issues. ²⁹ (-) The American presidential election is a factor inhibiting peace talks until the next president enters office. ³⁰

Secondary Stakeholders

Actor	Impact	Effect
Syrian Arab Republic 	Negative	(-) The Syrian civil war has caused over 800,000 Syrians to find refuge within Lebanon's borders, increasing domestic tension within the country ³¹ (-) Syria is an ally of Hezbollah and facilitates the movement of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah ³²
United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) 	Mixed	(+) UNIFIL has operated in Lebanese territory to monitor the cessation of hostilities after the end of the civil war and, with over 10,000 personnel, accounts for the densest deployment of peacekeepers across the globe ³³ (-) Has thus far failed in its commitment to see the disarming of Hezbollah in response to the violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for all Lebanese militias to disband and disarm after the civil war. ^{34 35}



Risk Assessment Indicators

Extremely High Risk

High Risk

Medium Risk

Low Risk

History of Armed Conflict

Level: Extremely High-Risk

Trend: Declining



Destabilizing Factors

Large Refugee Population: Lebanon hosts a population of about 1.5 million refugees, one of the world's largest refugee populations per capita. Roughly 800,000 of these refugees are Syrian, and 500,000 are Palestinian.³⁶

Ongoing Border Disputes: Both the borders Lebanon shares with Israel and Syria remain disputed.^{37 38} The Israel-Lebanon border is separated by the "Blue Line," a demarcation line put in place in 2000 by the UN after the IDF withdrew from Lebanese land.³⁹

Assessment

Lebanon's large refugee population and disputed borders indicate the instability and permeability (concerning displacement) of various actors within the geographical region. Tensions within Lebanon, with expressions of xenophobia and tensions with actors surrounding Lebanon, make borders unclear.⁴⁰ If the current conflicts escalate, the refugees and/or disputed border claims may be the deciding factor in pushing aggression over the edge.

Governance and Political Instability

Level: High Risk

Trend: Declining



Destabilizing Factors

Government Divvied Up by Religion: The Lebanese government, classified as a parliamentary democratic republic, is divided up along the nation's majority religious groups, with Christians overseeing the presidency, Shiites the speaker of parliament, and Sunnis the prime minister.^{41 42} This framework is an effort to maintain equality of religious representation in the government but ultimately makes coming to political agreements difficult.⁴³

Political Vacuum: Currently, the Lebanese government is without a president.⁴⁴ A president is elected indirectly by two-thirds of Parliament members. Since 2023, there have been twelve failed attempts to elect a new president, the majority failing to agree due to the Hezbollah bloc withdrawing support.⁴⁵

Hezbollah's Political Influence: Hezbollah is a fixture in the makeup of the Lebanese government, a functioning political party that possesses elected seats in Parliament. In the areas under Hezbollah control, services such as healthcare facilities, schools, and youth programs are provided to civilians, with Hezbollah taking on the governing role in the absence of the Lebanese government's ability to provide these services and counter Hezbollah's influence.⁴⁶



Assessment

Hezbollah's political influence undermines an already divided government paralyzed by an economic crisis, blocking progress by hindering the parliamentary majority necessitated for a president to be elected.^{47 48} Providing services further reduces the credibility of the Lebanese government and is an attempt to gain support from both Shiites and non-Shiites.⁴⁹ The Hezbollah bloc in the government increases the risk of government corruption and obstruction of federal investigations. This is notably indicated by the fallout of the 2020 Port of Beirut explosion that was attributed to government negligence, but investigations were prevented by Hezbollah.⁵⁰

Militarization	Level: Extremely High-Risk	Trend: Declining 
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Destabilizing Factors

Lebanese Military Capability Weakened by Economic Crisis: The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) contain approximately 73,000 active troops across an army, navy, and air force. In recent years, the United States has been the leading supplier for the Lebanese military, though the economic crisis severely limited its ability to procure weaponry or other militaristic extensions.⁵¹ The crisis has also resulted in a decrease in civil servant salaries, with soldiers' livelihoods relying on international donor assistance.⁵²

Hezbollah's Iran-Backed Military Capability: Hezbollah, part of Iran's "Axis of Resistance," is the world's most heavily armed non-state actor. The forces include an estimated 20,000 active fighters and 20,000 reserve fighters, with an arsenal of various rockets, small arms, drones, and tanks. There are an estimated 150,000-200,000 rockets and missiles in the group's possession. These weapons and more sophisticated, precise weapons that conjure a greater threat (such as anti-armor and anti-ship weapons) have been supplied by Iran.⁵³

Syria's Facilitation of the Movement of Iranian Weapons: Syria reportedly facilitates the transfer of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah.⁵⁴ Hezbollah has been involved (ideologically and militarily) in the Syrian civil war in support of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad since the war's inception in 2011.⁵⁵

Israeli Intelligence: The September 2024 attack in Lebanon that resulted in multiple dead and thousands injured after pagers and walkie-talkies belonging to Hezbollah members simultaneously exploded was due to the efforts of a joint operation between Israel's intelligence service Mossad and the Israeli military. Israeli intelligence is vast, and these attacks would have required complex human intelligence, likely from infiltrating Hezbollah ranks and disrupting their supply chain.⁵⁶



Assessment

The financial crisis has greatly weakened the LAF's capabilities and reliability to function regularly and effectively. While Hezbollah outperforms and out-possesses the LAF militarily, the conflict has exposed weaknesses in the group. Israeli intelligence led to the violent exposure of Hezbollah's vulnerability with the pager attacks and additionally has given Israel the confidence to engage in preventative, preemptive strikes.^{57 58} Israeli intelligence empowers the IDF to engage in higher-risk behavior, which could lead to more acute Israeli aggression. If the Israeli government remains ahead of Hezbollah operations through this gathering of intelligence, the option to engage in kinetic preemptive action increases in likelihood and frequency. Hezbollah also faces the weakness of being part of Iran's militarily supported "Unity of Fronts," with the group feeling bound to its responsibility to Iran's Shiite extensions and acting in solidarity with Hamas, even at the expense of it engaging in a strategically unsound conflict with Israel.

Population Heterogeneity	Level: High-Risk	Trend: Declining 
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Ethnic Diversity: Ethnic Diversity: The population of Lebanon is predominantly Arab (95%), with Armenians accounting for 4% and 1% accounting for trace minorities. The Christian Lebanese do not identify themselves as Arab, preferring to be called Phoenicians.⁵⁹

Destabilizing Factors

Religious Diversity: The Lebanese population contains 67.8% Muslims (31.9% Sunni, 31.2% Shia, and smaller groups of Alawites and Ismailis), 32.4% Christians (with the majority being Maronite Christians), 4.5% Druze, and small numbers of Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. These numbers do not account for the Syrian and Palestinian refugee populations.⁶⁰

Resource-Based Xenophobia: The large population of refugees in Lebanon has led to xenophobic feelings among the Lebanese. These developed with the influx of Syrian refugees escaping the civil war and have escalated in the recent economic crisis that heightened strained social tensions and further limited resources.⁶¹ The Lebanese government opposes the integration of refugees and limits what profession only refugees with legal residency may work in (such as sanitation and agriculture).⁶²

Assessment

Since the civil war, tensions along religious lines have increased with the emergence of Hezbollah in opposition to the Sunnis and Maronite Christians.⁶³ Despite a government that accounts for all the major religious groups, interactions are not indicative of trusting relationships between the groups.⁶⁴ Further divisions and mistrust extend to the large population of refugees, who are seen as parasitic and not viable for integration.⁶⁵ These deep divides in Lebanese society may inhibit efforts to reestablish a peaceful, functioning government at best



and could turn violent at worst. The refugee populations are potentially most at risk for experiencing violence.

Demographic Stress **Level: Medium Risk** **Trend: Stable**

Population: The population of Lebanon is roughly 5,364,482.⁶⁶

Population Density: The majority of the population is urban (89.4%), mostly living along the coast or in and around the capital of Beirut. The Bekaa Valley has a low population density, and the fertile land attracts farmers. In total, Lebanon is 63.3% agricultural land.⁶⁷

Assessment

Lebanon's rugged terrain has historically isolated factional groups.⁶⁸ This is worthy of consideration when observing divided Lebanese society, taking into consideration historical geographical divides. Additionally, the density of the population in urban areas may contribute to a more acute feeling of a lack of resources like housing and job opportunities.

Economic Performance **Level: Extremely High-Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors

Financial Crisis: Lebanon is currently in the worst financial crisis in its history and one of the world's worst financial crises since the 1850s.^{69 70} Factors leading to this crisis include widespread government corruption, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion. Hyperinflation (the 2023 rate of inflation being 221.34%) led the Lebanese currency to severely deplete in value.^{71 72}

Slow Reforms: While the International Monetary Fund and the Lebanese government have come to an agreement that would provide billions in assistance to Lebanon, the government is slow to implement the reforms stipulated to receive the money. Such reforms prompt an increase in financial and political transparency.⁷³

Assessment

Lebanon's financial crisis has weakened the government's credibility, and many have lost trust in the institution. In October 2019, widespread protests against the stagnating economy took place, but any progress that was made was stopped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the financial crisis, more than 80% of the population lives in a state of multidimensional poverty.⁷⁴ To amend this, the Lebanese government needs to enact reforms to become more transparent to regain the trust of the people after corruption damaged the economy and to receive external assistance from the IMF.



Human Development **Level: Extremely High-Risk** **Trend: Declining**

Destabilizing Factors

Widespread Multidimensional Poverty: Over 80% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, meaning they are deprived in more than one dimension (examples of these dimensions include healthcare, employment, housing, etc.).^{75 76} There is a widespread lack of access to food.⁷⁷ The number of those in poverty has doubled to 80% since 2019 due to the current financial crisis.⁷⁸

Refugees At Risk of Abuse: Many of the refugees in Lebanon live in the country's twelve refugee camps. These camps lack a governing body, putting women and children at risk of violence without repercussion. This is in addition to structural discrimination against refugees related to the denial of property ownership and job opportunities.⁷⁹

Risk of Community Violence Due to Discontent: The financial crisis has led to budgetary restraints on the military and police, leading to a rise in community vigilantism and self-policing. Children are at risk of being recruited by local armed groups.⁸⁰

Assessment

With the deterioration of public services and infrastructure, widespread poverty, and increased danger due to discontent, reliance and trust in the government are low. A lack of resources (or perceived threats to these resources – refugees, in the eyes of those with xenophobic ideals) could lead to increased violence at a local level if tensions are high, especially if the government continues to do little to combat corruption and provide meaningful assistance.⁸¹

Environmental Stress **Level: Low-Risk** **Trend: Stable**

Points of concern in Lebanon: pollution of air, pollution of water⁸²

Stabilizing Factors

International Progress Commitments: In Lebanon's National Determined Contributions to the UN on climate change, the country committed itself to make progress in the sectors of forestry, agriculture, and water, in addition to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.⁸³

Assessment

While the current conflict does not have a significant effect on environmental factors in Lebanon, Lebanon's commitments involve "green" solutions aimed at recovering the economy.



Reviving the economy is key to reviving the functionality of the Lebanese government and easing tensions among the population, and green solutions would lead to a cleaner environment in addition to the potential of more jobs.

International Linkages

Level: Medium Risk

Trend: Declining



Destabilizing Factors

Remaining Presence of UNIFIL: The efficacy of UNIFIL has been questioned since it's remained in Lebanon to encourage Hezbollah to disarm.⁸⁴ As UNIFIL largely depends on the goodwill of the population for security, efforts to monitor and report are less effective. The group rarely seizes Hezbollah weapons or investigates sites of interest, such as army depots or other military sites (with Beirut historically disregarding obligations or obstructing the UNIFIL movement). Despite UNIFIL's presence, Hezbollah has grown.⁸⁵

International Financial Assistance: Many of the impoverished in Lebanon are dependent on international humanitarian assistance, and the LAF is reliant on donor funds to operate. The United States is the largest international donor, having sent nearly \$3.5 billion since 2019.⁸⁶ The Lebanese government is slow to enact reforms stipulating IMF assistance.⁸⁷

Assessment

UNIFIL is considered by many to be wholly ineffective and in need of reform. The risk of maintaining a large but ineffective UN force may stir regional tensions but also strain the trust of those contributing to UNIFIL (including the United States and Israel).⁸⁸ Obstruction by Beirut is indicative of mistrust and corruption. While international donor assistance may provide short-term relief, destabilization occurs if the government is unwilling to reform and corruption continues. If things do not change within the government, the economy will not progress to be sufficient to sustain the Lebanese people.

Possible Scenarios for the Next Year

Best Case Scenario

An end to the current conflict may take the form of a plan to initiate a 60-day ceasefire period, which, after the withdrawal of forces, would lead to a permanent ceasefire. Within this ceasefire agreement, United Nations Resolutions 1701 and 1559, calling for a demilitarization of southern Lebanon and the disbanding and disarming of Lebanese militias, would be reinstated.⁸⁹ UNIFIL may remain a presence to oversee these efforts, but reforms would be required to effectively implement these resolutions. These reforms would pressure Beirut against obstruction of UNIFIL peacekeepers and fortify the Syrian border to reduce the influx of Iranian weaponry. The force



itself needs better intelligence units to improve ground reporting.⁹⁰ In the event of a complete ceasefire, the Lebanese government would have the opportunity to begin to enact the recommended reforms by the IMF that would increase accountability and restructure the economy to regain stability and credibility. With the \$3 billion loan package, the government would start to provide vital services to help those in need and reduce Hezbollah's influence. Amidst the restructuring, a new president may be elected, and the government may uphold timely, free, and fair elections.⁹¹

Worst Case Scenario

The worst-case scenario for all parties would be the escalation of the current conflict. Tensions between Israel and Iran may reach a boiling point if Israel, feeling threatened, engages in riskier behavior and potentially aims for Tehran's nuclear facilities. A face-to-face war (as opposed to Iran's preferred engagement through proxies) would likely bring in other countries, including allies like the United States. The worst case for Lebanon would be state collapse following the failure to amend cycles of political dysfunction and the continued economic crisis.⁹² The people of Lebanon would face hunger and a severe decrease in available services. Localized violence would likely increase due to heightened tensions, depleted resources, and lack of governance.

Most Likely Scenario

As of writing, the potential of a ceasefire deal between Lebanon and Israel is likely. The deal, written by the US, would call for a 60-day ceasefire in which Israel would withdraw IDF forces within the first week. Israel and Hezbollah have not commented on this deal.⁹³ Israel's policy has deemed any Hezbollah presence along the border to be a threat and likely will not accept anything less than a full withdrawal from the area. As this aspect will likely not be on Hezbollah's terms, the party may lose credibility in Lebanon but will remain a prevalent party.⁹⁴ Any political strife caused by the weakening of Hezbollah likely will not prompt the drastic reforms needed in the Lebanese government to amend the damage caused by the economic crisis and the current conflict. Most Lebanese people will continue to struggle in impoverished conditions until these reforms are seriously considered.



Endnotes

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