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Statement of

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"What's Next for Lebanon? Examining the Implications of Current Protests"

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Overview

Lebanon, a country of 6.5 million people, has long faced challenges of political divisions, economic instability, and intervention by external actors. The country's 15-year civil war, fought from 1975 to 1990, entrenched a political system based on sectarian identity. The presence of Syrian military forces from 1976 to 2005, allowed Damascus to exert significant influence over Lebanon's foreign and domestic policies and weakened Lebanese state institutions. The presence of Israeli forces in southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000 and the subsequent emergence of Hezbollah resulted in enduring tension in the border area, which is patrolled by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Hezbollah—a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization backed by Iran that operates as both an armed militia and a political party within Lebanon—continues to undermine state authority and engage in periodic clashes with Israel, at significant cost to civilians in both states. As a result of the civil war in neighboring Syria, Lebanon hosts the highest per capita number of refugees in the world, which has placed increasing strain on a national infrastructure that was already weakened by war and inadequate state investment.

Figure 1. Lebanon

Source: CRS.

U.S. policy in Lebanon aims to counter the influence of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, secure Lebanon's border against the flow of weapons and militant groups, and preserve domestic stability. In pursuit of these goals, the United States has sought to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), along with other state institutions.[1] This approach has generated debate within 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. The United States has also used targeted economic sanctions to degrade Hezbollah's capabilities, dismantle its global financial network, and deny it access to the international financial system.[2]

In October 2019, a mass protest movement unifying disparate sectarian, geographic, and socioeconomic sectors of Lebanese society around demands for political and economic reform resulted in the resignation of the Lebanese government. While the movement remains active, its durability—and the ability and/or willingness of the government to implement reforms—is still unknown.

The current political moment in Lebanon appears to present both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, the movement could prompt reforms to a political system widely viewed as ineffective and corrupt, thus bolstering long-term domestic stability and possibly creating new opportunities for U.S.-Lebanese partnership. On the other hand, the movement also risks prompting renewed civil conflict if it leads to large-scale violent confrontations or generates a security vacuum that leads Lebanese citizens to fall back

[1] The United States also has worked to strengthen the capabilities of the Lebanese Ministries of Interior and Justice, Higher Judicial Council, and Internal Security Forces (ISF) to respond to criminal and terrorism offenses that threaten stability.

[2] Testimony of Michael Ratney, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism, October 11, 2017.

on traditional sectarian elites for protection. Protestor demands for the investigation of state corruption and fundamental electoral and constitutional reforms could prompt Lebanese leaders to adopt a zero sum approach to the movement. In addition to steps taken by Lebanon's political elites, decisions by the Lebanese military and security forces—some of whom have a long-standing partnership with the United States—also will likely shape the country's trajectory and the future of U.S. partnership programs.

Politics and Economy of Lebanon: Structural Challenges

The Confessional System

Lebanon's population includes Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shi'a Muslim communities of roughly comparable size.[3] In what is referred to as Lebanon's confessional system, political posts are divided among the country's various religious groups, or "confessions," in proportions designed 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 speaker of parliament for a Shi'a Muslim. The 128 seats in Lebanon's parliament are divided evenly among Christians and Muslims, and Lebanese electoral law has traditionally allocated each seat within an electoral district to a specific religious community. Intra-communal political differences and rivalries add further complexity.

Lebanon's confessional system—shaped by the 1943 National Pact and adjusted and formalized by the 1989 Taif Accords—is widely viewed as contributing to political gridlock, at times paralyzing the government. In October 2016, Lebanon's parliament elected Christian leader and former Lebanese Armed Forces commander Michel Aoun as president, filling a post that had stood vacant since 2014. More than 40 attempts by the parliament to convene an electoral session had previously failed, largely due to boycotts by various parties that prevented the body from attaining the necessary quorum.[4] In May 2018, Lebanon held legislative elections—five years behind schedule.[5] President Aoun reappointed Saad Hariri of the predominantly Sunni Future Movement as prime minister, and charged him with forming a new government. After eight months of political deadlock, Prime Minister Saad Hariri formed a government in January 2019. Like previous Lebanese governments, it included Hezbollah representatives, reflecting the group's presence in parliament. On October 29, 2019, Hariri resigned amid mass protests by civilians across Lebanon's diverse communities.

Economy

In September 2019, Lebanese officials declared what they described as an "economic state of emergency."[6] Lebanon's debt-to-GDP ratio stands at over 150%,[7] and debt servicing consumes almost half of all government revenue.[8] The majority of remaining government revenue is expended on public sector salaries and transfers to the state-owned electricity company, severely limiting the government's

[3] The Department of State's 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom cites Statistics Lebanon, an independent firm, which estimates that 61.1 percent of Lebanon's citizen population is Muslim (30.6 percent Sunni, 30.5 percent Shia, and smaller percentages of Alawis and Ismailis) and 33.7 percent of the population is Christian. An estimated 5.2 percent is Druze.

[4] "Lebanon records 44th failed attempt to elect president," *Daily Star*, September 7, 2016

[5] Lebanon was due for parliamentary elections in 2013. However, disagreements of the details of a new electoral law (passed in June 2017) delayed the elections until May 2018.

[6] This appears to be a policy statement rather than a reference to any existing legal framework.

[7] "Lebanon: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2019 Article IV Mission," International Monetary Fund, July 2, 2019.

[8] "High debt, high deficit: Lebanon's economic woes fueling protests," *Financial Times*, October 31, 2019.

ability to invest in basic infrastructure and public services.[9] The Lebanese government is unable to consistently provide basic services such as electricity, water, and waste treatment, and the World Bank notes that the quality and availability of basic public services is significantly worse in Lebanon than both regional and world averages.[10] As a result, citizens rely on private providers, many of whom are affiliated with political parties, including Hezbollah.

Economic conditions have played a major part in the popular protests that ultimately resulted in the resignation of the Hariri government. According to the World Bank, about a third of Lebanese live in poverty, and this could rise to 50 percent if the economic situation worsens.[11] Prior to resigning, the Lebanese government passed what Lebanese press described as "a raft of unprecedented, radical economic reforms," including privatizations, salary cuts for ministers and legislators, and the establishment of a national anti-corruption commission.[12] However, some analysts argued that Hariri's economic reform package "does not represent a realistic and sustainable fiscal consolidation plan. It also falls short of sufficient details and does not include the structural reforms required to put the country back on track."[13]

Lebanon's economy remains in dire straits. The protests have created uncertainty for investors, and capital flight could undermine Lebanon's currency peg to the U.S. dollar. Fears of a run on the banks prompted Lebanese banks to close for two weeks; banks briefly re-opened in early November with varying restrictions on dollar withdrawals and overseas transfers. This prompted accusations that Lebanon's elite have been permitted to move funds out of the country while smaller depositors have been unable to transfer funds. The shortage of dollars has also led to shortages of key imports such as fuel and medical supplies.[14] The government's sovereign credit rating has been repeatedly downgraded. While Lebanon has never defaulted on its debt, unless the government receives an immediate infusion of external budget support, a default is becoming a growing concern.[15] As of mid-November, banks had re-closed for a week, citing security concerns.

[9] Ibid.

[10] World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor*, Fall 2015, pp. 24-29.

[11] World Bank press release, "Lebanon is in the Midst of Economic, Financial and Social Hardship, Situation Could Get worse," November 6, 2019.

[12] "Under popular pressure, Cabinet approves unprecedented reforms, draft budget," *Daily Star*, October 22, 2019.

[13] "It is time to save Lebanon," Lebanese International Finance Executives (LIFE), as published by the Middle East Institute, October 25, 2019.

[14] "Dollar shortage shakes confidence in Lebanon's banks," *Financial Times*, November 12, 2019.

[15] "Moody's pushes Lebanon's sovereign bonds deeper into junk territory," *Financial Times*, November 5, 2019.

2019 Protests and Government Resignation

On October 29, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation, which under the constitution automatically triggered the resignation of his government. The move followed nearly two weeks of nationwide mass protests–potentially the largest in Lebanese history. Protestors represent a broad economic, political, and sectarian cross-section of Lebanese society, and have continued to call for comprehensive change in national political leadership even after the resignation of the Hariri government. Secretary of State Pompeo has called upon Lebanon's leaders to "urgently facilitate" the formation of a new government, stating, "The Lebanese people want an efficient and effective government, economic reform, and an end to endemic corruption."[16]

Drivers. Protests began on October 17, triggered by a proposed government tax on internet-enabled voice calls, notably Whatsapp. However, the movement reflects broader dissatisfaction with what protestors describe as government corruption, ineptitude, and economic mismanagement. Demonstrators have emphasized the state's failure to provide sufficient access to basic goods and services, including jobs, education, water, electricity, and garbage collection.[17]

Scale & Demands. Unlike in previous protests, Beirut is not the epicenter. Large-scale protests have broken out nationwide, and the pervasive economic concerns driving them also have transcended sectarian divisions. Protestors lack a centralized leadership, and their demands vary. Some have called for specific policy and/or leadership changes, such as early elections, a new electoral law, and the resignation of Lebanese President Michel Aoun (whose term expires in 2022).[18] Other protestor demands have a less clear path towards implementation, such as a change to Lebanon's confessional system, the return of "looted public money," and the removal of the entire political elite.[19]

Next Steps. According to the constitution, Lebanese President Michel Aoun must convene the various parliamentary blocs for consultations on the appointment of a prime minister-designate, who will be charged with forming a new government. Protestors have called for the formation of a government of independent technocrats. However, the formation of a technocratic government would arguably be constrained by the same factors that historically have complicated all efforts at government formation in Lebanon, including the constitutional requirement that all of Lebanon's sects be "fairly represented in the formation of the Cabinet," and domestic political rivalries exacerbated by the involvement of foreign states. President Aoun has stated, "A technocratic government cannot outline the country's policies. I support the formation of a half-political and half-technocratic government. Unless it is a techno-political government, it cannot have political cover from Parliament."[20] Hezbollah, which holds 13 seats in Parliament, reportedly has insisted on being included in the next government. When asked about Hezbollah's participation, Aoun—whose Free Patriotic Movement is politically allied with Hezbollah in Parliament—stated, "No one can force us to remove a party that represents a third of the people."[21]

[16] "Political Situation in Lebanon," Press Statement, Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, October 29, 2019.

[17] "Protests erupt in Hezbollah's heartland of south Lebanon, despite intimidation," *Middle East Eye*, October 21, 2019.

[18] "A need for mediation in Lebanon as the government and protestors reach a standstill," Middle East Institute, October 28, 2019.

[19] "Hariri's Cabinet reshuffle bid hits Bassil snag," *Daily Star*, October 29, 2019.

[20] "Rage as Aoun urges protestors to go home," *Daily Star*, November 13, 2019.

[21] Ibid.

Key Issues in U.S.-Lebanon Relations

Hezbollah

Following its formation in the early 1980s, Hezbollah justified its role within Lebanon as necessitated by Israel's occupation of Lebanese territory. While Israel withdrew in 2000 from areas of southern Lebanon it had occupied since 1982, Hezbollah has used the remaining Israeli presence in disputed areas in the Lebanon-Syria-Israel triborder region such as the Sheb'a Farms (see **Figure 1**) to justify its ongoing conflict with Israel and its continued existence as an armed militia alongside the Lebanese armed forces. Hezbollah and Israel fought a 34-day war in 2006 that killed over 1,200 people, mostly Lebanese, and the prospect of renewed conflict between the two sides threatens to destabilize the broader region. Hezbollah is closely linked to Iran, which provides Hezbollah with significant funding, and which has used Hezbollah as a proxy force to threaten Israel.[22]

According to the State Department's 2018 Country Reports on Terrorism (released in November 2019), Hezbollah "remained the most capable terrorist organization in Lebanon, controlling areas in the Bekaa Valley, southern Lebanon, and south Beirut." The report states that,

> Lebanon remained a safe haven for terrorist groups in both under-governed and Hizballah-controlled areas. Hizballah used the areas under its control for terrorist training, fundraising, financing, and recruitment. The Government of Lebanon did not take significant actions to disarm Hizballah, even though Hizballah maintained its weapons in violation of UNSCR 1701. The Lebanese government did not have complete control of all regions of the country or fully control its borders with Syria and Israel. Hizballah controlled access to parts of the country and had influence over some elements within Lebanon's security services.[23]

The report stated that Lebanese security services collaborated with the United States to deter, apprehend, and investigate terrorism threats, but noted that "Hizballah's role in Lebanon's confessional power-sharing system continued to hinder government actions against the group's terrorist activities."

Hezbollah in Politics. Hezbollah has participated in elections since 1992. The group entered the cabinet for the first time in 2005, and has held at least one seat in each of the six Lebanese governments formed since then. Hezbollah candidates have also fared well in municipal elections, winning seats in conjunction with allied Amal party representatives in many areas of southern and eastern Lebanon. Hezbollah—like other Lebanese confessional groups—vies for the loyalties of its constituents by operating a vast network of schools, clinics, youth programs, private business, and local security. These services contribute significantly to the group's popular support base, however some Lebanese criticize Hezbollah's vast apparatus as "a state within a state."[24] Domestic political rivals arguably constrain Hezbollah, but the group's popular support affords it a degree of political legitimacy that compounds the challenge of limiting its influence over Lebanon's government, economy, and security.

[22] In June 2018, Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Sigal Mandelker estimated that Iran provides Hezbollah with more than $700 million per year. As of 2019, financial pressure on Iran appeared to have reduced its funding for Hezbollah.

[23] "Terrorist Safe Havens," Country Reports on Terrorism 2018, November 1, 2019.

[24] "The resignation of Lebanon's prime minister raises risks in the Middle East," *Washington Post*, November 4, 2017.

United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)

Since 1978, UNIFIL has been deployed in the Lebanon-Israel-Syria triborder area.[25] The United States has supported UNIFIL financially and diplomatically with the aim of bolstering and expanding the authority of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in areas of Lebanon historically dominated by Hezbollah.

UNIFIL's initial mandate was to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, restore peace and security, and assist the Lebanese government in restoring its authority in southern Lebanon (a traditional Hezbollah stronghold). In May 2000, Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon. The following month, the United Nations identified a 120-kilometer line between Lebanon and Israel to use as a reference for the purpose of confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces. The Line of Withdrawal, commonly known as the Blue Line, is not an international border demarcation.

Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, UNIFIL's mandate was expanded via UNSCR 1701 (2006) to include monitoring the cessation of hostilities between the two sides, accompanying and supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces as they deployed throughout southern Lebanon, and helping to ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations. UNSCR 1701 also authorized UNIFIL to assist the Lebanese government in the establishment of "an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL" between the Blue Line and the Litani River.

UNIFIL continues to monitor violations of UNSCR 1701 by all sides, and the U.N. Secretary General reports regularly to the U.N. Security Council on the implementation of UNSCR 1701.[26] The U.N. Security Council has voted annually to renew UNIFIL's mandate.

In 2017, the United States and Israel reportedly pushed for changes that would allow UNIFIL to access and search private property for illicit Hezbollah weapons stockpiles or other violations of UNSCR 1701.[27] Then-U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley argued that UNIFIL had failed to prevent Hezbollah violations of UNSCR 1701, and that its patrols in southern Lebanon were sometimes restricted by roadblocks.[28] The 2017 renewal of UNIFIL's mandate in UNSCR 2373 included limited wording changes, which all sides praised.[29] The new language requested that the existing U.N. Secretary General's reports on the implementation of UNSCR 1701 include "prompt and detailed reports on the restrictions to UNIFIL's freedom of movement, reports on specific areas where UNIFIL does not access and on the reasons behind these restrictions."[30]

Refugees

Following the outbreak of conflict in neighboring Syria, refugees began to stream into Lebanon in 2011. By 2014, Lebanon had the highest per capita refugee population in the world, with Syrian refugees equaling one-quarter of the resident population.[31] In May 2015, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suspended new registration of refugees in response to the government's request. As of October 2019, nearly 920,000 Syrian refugees were registered in Lebanon, according to UNHCR. The

[25] The formal boundaries dividing the three countries remain disputed.

[26] Reports on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) are available at <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/reports-secretary-general>

[27] OSE Report IMR2017090568616406, "Report Says UNIFIL Mission Extended for One Year, Adjustments 'Not Up To Washington's Ambitions,'" September 1, 2017.

[28] Nikki Haley, "Confronting Hezbollah in Lebanon," *Jerusalem Post,* September 5, 2017.

[29] Ibid; "UNIFIL changes provide transparency: Haley," *Daily Star,* September 6, 2017.

[30] UN Security Council Resolution 2373 (2017).

[31] UNHCR, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon surpass 1 million," April 3, 2014; UNHCR Lebanon Factsheet, January 2019.

actual Syrian refugee presence—which includes those unable to formally register—has been estimated at 1.2 million to 1.5 million. Lebanon's prewar population was about 4.3 million. The Lebanese government has been unwilling to take steps that it describes as enabling Syrians to become a permanent refugee population akin to the Palestinians (currently estimated to number 174,422),[32] who have been present in Lebanon for at least 70 years.

Some Lebanese officials have described the country's Syrian refugee population as destabilizing, and have called for Syrian refugees to return home. In May 2018, President Aoun reiterated his call for the repatriation of Syrian refugees, stating that their return would "end the repercussions of this displacement on Lebanon socially, economically, educationally, and in terms of security."[33] Aoun has said that the return of refugees should not be contingent on a political solution to the Syrian conflict.[34] In a September 2019 address to the U.N. General Assembly, Aoun argued that the conditions for the "safe and dignified return" of refugees to Syria have been met, stating, "per international reports, the security situation on most of the Syrian territories has become stable, the military confrontations have become confined to the Idlib region, and the Syrian State has officially declared, time and again, that it welcomes the return of its displaced citizens."[35] Aoun stated that more than 250,000 displaced persons had returned to Syria, and accused some states of trying to hinder refugee return by "sowing fear among the displaced."[36]

In some cases, the return of refugees to Syria has been facilitated by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).[37] It is unclear whether all refugees departed Lebanon voluntarily.[38] UNHCR has continued to assess that conditions are not right for the large-scale return of refugees to Syria.

U.S. Policy

U.S. policy in Lebanon seeks to limit threats to the United States and Israel posed by Hezbollah, to bolster Lebanon's ability to protect its borders, to build state capacity to defeat terrorist threats, and to manage the large influx of Syrian refugees. Iranian influence in Lebanon, the potential for renewed armed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, and Lebanon's internal politics complicate the provision of U.S. assistance. Lebanon remains an arena for competition and conflict among outsiders, as local actors aligned with Syria and Iran vie for power against others that seek support from Saudi Arabia and the United States.

U.S. Assistance to Lebanon

The United States is the largest provider of development, humanitarian, and security assistance to Lebanon. Congress places several certification requirements on U.S. assistance funds for Lebanon annually in an effort to prevent their misuse or the transfer of U.S. equipment to Hezbollah or other designated terrorists. The United States has provided more than $1.7 billion worth of assistance and materiel to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) since 2006.[39] In October 2019, the Administration reportedly decided to withhold $105 million in security aid for Lebanon; no reason was publicly given.

[32] "Census shows there are 174,422 Palestinians in Lebanon," *Associated Press*, December 21, 2017.

[33] "Aoun pleads for Arab intervention in refugee return," *Daily Star*, May 3, 2018.

[34] "Aoun Calls for Gradual Return of Syrian Refugees," *Asharq Al Awsat*, March 8, 2018.

[35] Address by Lebanese President Michel Aoun at the 74th session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 25, 2019.

[36] Address by Lebanese President Michel Aoun at the 74th session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 25, 2019.

[37] "Aoun: Lebanon Could Organize Return of Syrian Refugees with Damascus," *Asharq Al Awsat*, May 4, 2019; "The return of Syrian refugee families from the camps of Ersal to the village of Essal el-Ward in Syria," July 12, 2017, http://www.lebarmy.gov.lb.

[38] Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Authorities must immediately halt deportation of Syrian refugees," August 27, 2019.

[39] "U.S. Security Cooperation with Lebanon," State Department Fact Sheet, May 21, 2019.

Table 1. Select U.S. Foreign Assistance Funding for Lebanon-Related Programs

$, millions, Fiscal Year of Appropriation unless noted

Account/Program	FY2017 Actual	FY2018 Actual	FY2019 Allocated	FY2020 Request
FMF	80.0	104.9	105.0	50.0
ESF	110.0	117.0	112.5	-
ESDF	-	-	-	62.2
IMET	2.6	3.1	2.9	3.0
INCLE	10.0	10.5	10.0	6.2
NADR	5.7	10.8	11.0	11.7
Total	**208.3**	**246.3**	**241.4**	**133.1**

Source: U.S. State Department data, FY2019 estimate and FY2020 Budget Request Materials.

Notes: Amounts include Overseas Contingency Operations funding. Table does not reflect all funds or programs related to Lebanon. Does not account for all reprogramming actions of prior year funds or obligation notices provided to congressional committees of jurisdiction. *FMF = Foreign Military Financing; ESF = Economic Support Fund; ESDF = Economic Support and Development Fund; IMET = International Military Education and Training; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs.*

Outlook

The current protest movement has highlighted shared political and economic grievances and has the potential to fundamentally alter Lebanon's confessional system in which political mobilization is based largely on sectarian identity. However, the movement also faces a number of challenges. It lacks a centralized leadership, and could struggle to maintain momentum as government formation is delayed. It also faces opposition from elites across the political spectrum, who, while publicly praising the movement, have sought to preserve the status quo. And while the protest movement has been largely peaceful, it risks spiraling into violence, which could trigger a forceful state response as well as a descent into a broader civil conflict. Ultimately, the success of the movement may depend on whether it is able to sustain momentum, remain unified, and continue to transcend the interests of any single confessional group. It could also be significantly shaped by the response of the Lebanese military and security services—over which the United States may exert some influence.

There are various ways the United States could respond to the protest movement; all involve some potential risk.

- The United States could endorse protestor demands for systemic political change, condition U.S. assistance on responses, and target corrupt leaders regardless of sect. This could require severing ties with political allies, which could lead former allies to seek partnership with alternative external power brokers, including Iran (which supports maintaining the current status quo). Such an endorsement could also lend support to the Hezbollah accusation that protests are part of a foreign conspiracy. Political elites that came to view protests as an existential threat and no longer felt constrained by the need to maintain a relationship with the United States could decide to employ more heavy-handed security measures to suppress the movement.
- U.S. policymakers could support managed change—encourage reform and civilian protection, but ultimately defer to the policy course set by current Lebanese political leaders, particularly given the lack of a clear alternative power center within the nascent protest movement. This could give Lebanese officials the necessary space to wait out or divide the protest movement, while implementing limited reforms that relieve some pressure on the economy. This approach would

likely preserve the privileges of Lebanon's entrenched elites and could fail to address many of the grievances that originally sparked protests.

- The United States could take a minimalist, security-centered approach to the protests, prioritizing short-term domestic stability. U.S. policymakers could focus on maintaining existing ties to the LAF and Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF), irrespective of domestic policy changes (or the absence thereof). This would likely reduce pressure on Lebanese leaders to implement reforms, and help preserve the status quo. However, without substantial reforms, Lebanon's economy risks collapse—increasing the likelihood of future instability and social unrest.
- The United States could seek to draw on protestor grievances to undermine Hezbollah and Iranian influence in Lebanon. While the protest movement has been critical of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah as part of a broader backlash against political elites, the movement itself is not focused on the role of Hezbollah in the country. Instead, protestors have focused on economic and political grievances that cut across sectarian lines. Efforts to simplify the movement as a reflection of popular discontent with Iran and/or Hezbollah could alienate Lebanon's Shia community and potentially undermine protestor efforts to unify Lebanese around shared demands for reform.
- U.S. policymakers could look to regional and/or European partners to lead the international response to Lebanon's economic crisis and/or protest movement. France, which governed the area of present-day Lebanon from the end of World War I until the country's independence in 1943, has maintained a close bilateral relationship with Beirut. U.S. and French policy towards Lebanon has traditionally differed in some key respects. France, like the European Union, draws a distinction between Hezbollah's military and political wings, designating only the former as a terrorist organization.