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The Lebanon Crisis: A Road to No Destination

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Abstract:

Lebanon is in the midst of a deep crisis that has brought the country to a situation of extreme institutional, economic and security risk. This power vacuum on the part of the state has been the breeding ground for groups and organisations to proliferate in the fields of security, business, healthcare and, of course, organised crime. In the meantime, the sectarianism of Lebanese leaders has prevented the structural reforms that the country urgently needs from taking place. The hardships suffered by the population have been aggravated by the lack of energy supply that has brought the country to the brink of paralysis. To help the Lebanese out of this situation, regional and global powers have devised their own plans, but behind them lie their own interests.

Keywords:

Lebanon, Sectarianism, Hezbollah, Eastern Mediterranean, Gas.

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La crisis del Líbano: Un camino hacia ningún destino

Resumen:

El Líbano vive una profunda crisis que ha llevado al país a una situación de extremo riesgo institucional, económico y de seguridad. Esta situación de vacío de poder por parte del Estado ha sido el caldo de cultivo para que grupos y organizaciones proliferen en los ámbitos de la seguridad, los negocios, la sanidad y por supuesto el crimen organizado. Mientras tanto, el sectarismo de los líderes libaneses ha impedido que se puedan realizar las reformas estructurales que el país necesita con carácter de urgencia. Las penurias que padece la población se han visto agravadas por la falta de suministro energético que ha puesto al país al borde de la paralización. Para sacar a los libaneses de esta situación las potencias regionales y globales han ideado sus propios planes, pero detrás de estos se encuentran sus propios intereses.

Palabras clave:

Líbano, sectarismo, Hezbollah, Mediterráneo Oriental, Gas

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Introduction

Lebanese political forces are focused on the struggle for power, while the country is in need of structural reforms that can lead it out of the terrible crisis in which it finds itself. Sectarianism, the sharing of quotas and the lack of adequate structures have led to confrontation, which is being significantly increased by the existence of certain armed militias aligned with the different ideological currents that permeate Lebanese political life.

Since 2019, the country has been mired in a deep economic crisis, a consequence of its sectarian governance system and the poor governance of its leaders. The situation led to a plummeting pound in an import-dependent country, resulting in runaway inflation, loss of business liquidity and an exponential rise in unemployment. In the autumn of that year, popular protests erupted during the so-called 'WhatsApp revolution', which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri. However, the popular voices were soon silenced by internal dissent and repression, and the subsequent situation resulting from Covid-19 was used to silence the dissenters.

The terrible explosion that levelled part of Beirut's port facilities in August 2020 left a trail of destruction in its wake. It could also be seen as the key indicator that would show the world the frantic decline that has led this Mediterranean state into a situation of poor governance, poverty and insecurity.

In an environment of deteriorating institutions, its leaders have been busy amassing fortunes or creating followers to consolidate its power. In this context, the economy has plummeted and in the absence of security, the population is looking towards organisations for what the state cannot provide. Similarly, the power vacuum has been the breeding ground for criminal groups to proliferate in the shadow of illegal businesses.

International actors are trying to unblock the situation of institutional paralysis in Lebanon, although all of them seek to gain an advantageous position from the actions they take. As a result of these actions, Lebanon will fall into the sphere of influence of certain regional and global powers. However, if these powers miscalculate their decisions, the situation could degenerate into open conflict at least at the regional level.

The beginning of the end. The Beirut port explosion and its investigation.

Hasan Diab began his term as prime minister in early 2020 in a situation of parliamentary weakness, supported by Hezbollah, but with most political forces and influential actors against him¹. The Lebanese government's attempts to negotiate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) failed in July, causing the pound to plummet, which, combined with the closures caused by the pandemic, led to a situation of economic collapse².

The catastrophe in the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 only served to highlight the degeneration of the country's institutions. The resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab ushered in a transitional government, which had to remain in place until the new prime minister, Najib Mikati, was able to form an executive. This was accepted in September 2021 by President Michel Aoun with the support of his son-in-law Gebran Bassil, both Maronite Christians and the latter president of the *Free Patriotic Movement* party.

Mikati, a communications magnate and Sunni, had been appointed to his post earlier in the year due to the distribution of posts among the different Lebanese denominations. However, Mikati's consent to the latter was due to his moderate character and the fact that his two previous experiences in office had led him to have good relations with the Shiite group Hezbollah and internationally with Syria, the Gulf states and the US³. Moreover, this situation could benefit him personally, as he has aspirations of continuity after the three-way elections scheduled for 2022.

However, for those who on 17 September 2019 had supported the so-called 'washup revolution', seeking radical change, the appointment of the new prime minister came as a disappointment. Mikati was seen as just another piece in the system of poor

¹ SEIFEDDINE, Wassim. 'Lebanon: Is Hassan Diab gov't clinically dead?' Anadolu Agency, 15.07.2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/lebanon-is-hassan-diab-govt-clinically-dead/1911127> (accessed on 26/12/2021)

² International Crisis Group. "Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises". Report 228 / Middle East & North Africa. 28 October 2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/228-managing-lebanons-compounding-crises> (accessed on 27/12/2021)

³ GHADDAR, Hanin. "Mikati Government Will Not Save Lebanon". The Washington Institute, 28 July 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mikati-government-will-not-save-lebanon> (accessed on 03/01/2022)

management and widespread corruption, which had even negatively affected him on previous occasions⁴.

Bassil, for his part, may have acted under pressure from Hezbollah and Iran and his intentions may have been to pave the way for next year's presidency to fall to him. To do this, he needed to avoid confrontation with the rest of the political class, which could hold him responsible for the deteriorating situation⁵. Furthermore, Bassil is sanctioned by the *Magnitsky Act* that the US applies to corruption cases, so his interests may be more focused on his rehabilitation than on the problems that the population may have⁶.

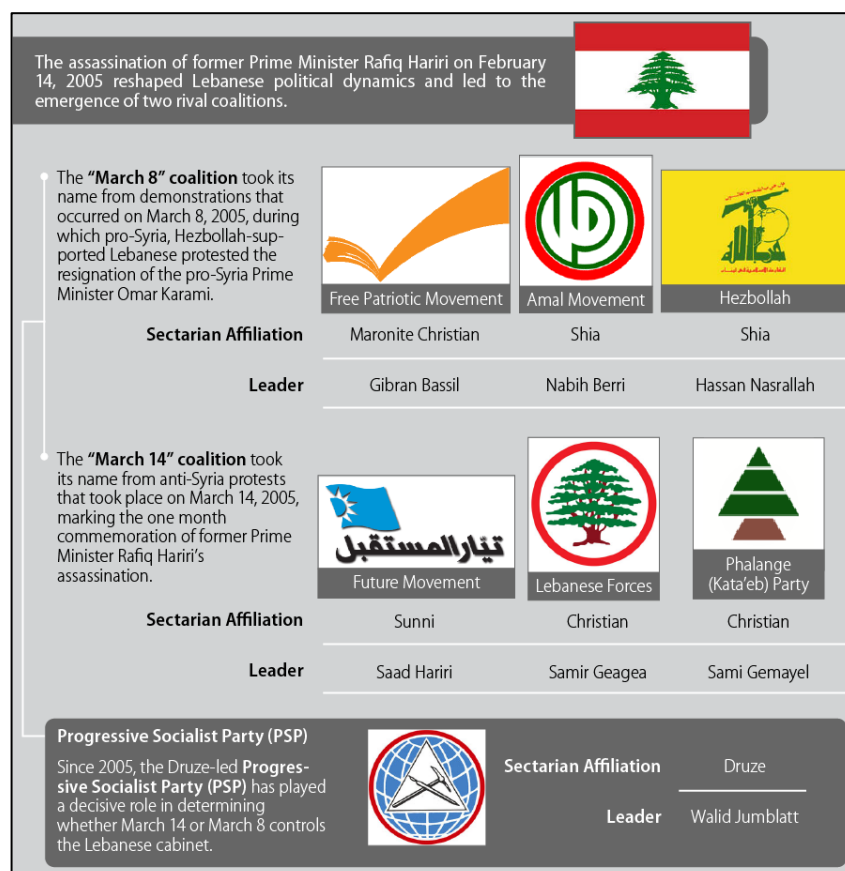


Figure 1. Main Lebanese political coalitions. Source: HUMUD, Carla E. Lebanon. *Congressional Research Service*. R44759, 21 April 2021. Washington D.C. p. 7.

⁴ PAREDES, Norberto. "Najib Mikati, el hombre más rico del Líbano encargado de sacar a su país de una de las peores crisis de su historia" BBC News Mundo, 14 September 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-58545226> (accessed on 06/12/2021)

⁵ YOUNG, Michael. "Najib Mikati Has Formed a New Lebanese Government". Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 10 September 2021. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/85316> (accessed on 06/12/2021)

⁶ SZAKOLA, Albin. "The US sanctions Bassil in the first blacklisting of a Lebanese politician under the Magnitsky act" L'Orient Today, 06 November 2020. <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1239879/the-us-sanctions-bassil-in-the-first-blacklisting-of-a-lebanese-politician-under-the-magnitsky-act.html> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

In the meantime, it is possible that the economic measures the country needs will not be taken until next year when the electoral forecasts of the current ruling elite are confirmed. However, the population is still suffering the effects of the crisis without finding a solution for their problems. One of the biggest complications is the shortage of electricity, which normally provides no more than two hours of supply per day. In early October 2021, there was a nationwide blackout due to the failure of the administration to renew the supply contract provided by the Turkish company Karpowership⁷.

One situation resulting from the economic crisis is the lack of security due to the shortage of salaries for members of the police and military. Lack of financial resources leads them to drop out or at best to seek moonlighting in order to be able to feed their families. The lack of resources and personnel means that the units in charge of security are on the verge of collapse, as in the conditions in which they have found themselves since the port explosion they have had to face demonstrations, riots and clashes between armed political factions, control subsidised basic necessities, prevent the hoarding and smuggling of fuel and fight against drug gangs⁸.

As the role of the state has continued to weaken, its power vacuum has been filled by other actors, such as groups or organisations. In this regard, the role of the Shiite organisation Hezbollah has been key, drawing on its multiple fields of action and external contacts, ranging from humanitarian assistance to security.

However, the role of non-state actors has meant that the rule of law has been severely undermined in Lebanon. One of the most significant recent examples occurred when on 14 October 2021 the main Shi'a organisations, Hezbollah and Amal, organised a demonstration in Beirut inside the mainly Christian neighbourhood of Tayouneh. Groups of these Shiites went to the courthouse to demand the dismissal of Judge Tarek Bitar, who is in charge of the investigation into the explosion in the port. The incident resulted in the shooting of the demonstrators with seven fatalities, almost all from Hezbollah, who

⁷ MROUE Bassem. "Turkish company halts power supplies to crisis-hit Lebanon. AP News, 1 October 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/business-middle-east-lebanon-beirut-07429c4a33c544bd6994a749c745834d> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

⁸ International Crisis Group. "Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises". Op. Cit.

attributed the deaths to snipers from the so-called 'Lebanese Forces', a Christian-based political faction who in turn have denied such accusations⁹.

These serious incidents have done nothing more but put Mikati on the ropes, because if he yields to Hezbollah's pressure he would be seen as a mere transmission belt for the Shiites. The Shiites claim that the investigation is biased and that three former Shiite ministers implicated in the port tragedy should not be called to testify, and the new Shiite ministers are threatening not to attend executive sessions¹⁰. Disagreements have reached such an extent that during the visit of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, he had to meet separately with Prime Minister Mikati and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, as the two could not reach an agreement¹¹. It should be noted that Berri is a leader of the Shiite Amal movement.

After a period of suspension by a Beirut court, Judge Bitar has been authorised to continue the investigation despite the Shi'a claims. This does not mean that if new demands were to be made, the process would be halted again¹². However, the handover would be a demonstration that the rule of law in Lebanon is in the hands of a sectarian elite, calling into question possible support from countries and institutions to alleviate Lebanon's severe economic crisis.

Meanwhile, it seems that Lebanon's only solution for now is to reach an agreement with the IMF, but the Lebanese administration, led by Deputy Prime Minister Saade Chami, has not presented a plan to come to the negotiating table. On the IMF side, it is expected that there will be a proposal for banking sector reform and an audit of the central bank. This could be a first step towards gaining the confidence of other donors and investors such as the World Bank or the Arab Gulf states. However, the Lebanese proposal, to be

⁹ International Crisis Group. "Violence Threatens Fraying Rule of Law in Lebanon". 18 October 2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/violence-threatens-fraying-rule-law-lebanon> (accessed on 06/12/2021)

¹⁰ The Middle East "The government is walking, but the cabinet is not". Wednesday, 1 December. <https://middleeast.in-24.com/News/amp/458010> (accessed on 23/11/2021)

¹¹ Al Jazeera. "UN's Guterres calls on Lebanese leaders to respond to grievances". <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/21/uns-guterres-calls-on-lebanese-leaders-to-respond-to-grievances> (accessed on 26/12/2021)

¹² Reuters "Beirut blast probe judge cleared to continue investigation" 7 December 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/beirut-blast-probe-judge-cleared-continue-investigation-2021-12-07/> (accessed on 15/12/2021)

signed by the government, has yet to happen due to internal disputes over the investigation into the port explosion¹³.

In this tangle of relationships, it should be noted that Chami is a Greek Orthodox Christian who belongs to the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which advocates the union of the territories of the so-called 'fertile crescent'.

The regional impact

Lebanese territory has been the mirror of the rifts between the two main rivals in the region, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi-Lebanese relations have been troubled since Michel Aoun was elected president in 2016, largely because of his affinities with Hezbollah, an organisation protected by the Iranians. However, Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) is not prepared to lose what he has invested in Lebanon, and is eager to regain the spheres of influence that make his country a regional power. The Lebanese scenario is allowing MbS to reappear on the international scene, where he can use it to bring France and especially the US closer together, after the start of the Biden administration was not exactly favourable for him¹⁴.

Although the Saudis lost much of their political influence in Lebanon since the break with the Sunni bloc under former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, they still possess a significant economic asset and were hoping to use it to their advantage. It should be taken into consideration that the Lebanese depend on Gulf oil, mainly Saudi oil. In addition, the Lebanese diaspora in the Gulf countries exceeds half a million people, who send significant remittances to their families in Lebanon, injecting capital into Lebanon's ailing economic system. In addition, 10 percent of Lebanese exports are destined for Saudi Arabia¹⁵.

The opportunity to re-exert Saudi economic pressure arose when the former communications minister, Maronite George Kordahi of the Marada Movement (pro-

¹³ France 24. "Slow progress as Lebanon awaits IMF economic deal". 29/12/2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211229-slow-progress-as-lebanon-awaits-imf-economic-deal> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

¹⁴ DAOU, Marc. "Crise entre Riyad et Beyrouth : quelles conséquences politiques et économiques pour le Liban ?" RFI, 02/11/2021. <https://www.france24.com/fr/moyen-orient/20211101-crise-entre-riyad-et-beyrouth-quelles-cons%C3%A9quences-politiques-et-%C3%A9conomiques-pour-le-liban> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

¹⁵ Ibid.

Hezbollah), made statements against Saudi intervention in Yemen. Kordahi claimed that Yemeni Houthi rebels, allied with Iran, were “defending themselves against foreign aggression”. The Gulf countries’ response came in the form of the withdrawal of their ambassadors in Beirut and the expulsion of Lebanese ambassadors in Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait and Bahrain. In addition, the Saudis banned Lebanese imports¹⁶.

Kordahi finally resigned from his post in early December 2021, possibly under pressure from Prime Minister Mikati, in an attempt to have some chance of reconciliation with the Saudis before French President Emmanuel Macron embarked on a tour of the Gulf countries that month¹⁷.

In this bloc of regional relations, Egypt’s support could be counted on to alleviate the Lebanese energy crisis. Following a US-backed deal to channel Egyptian gas through the Red Sea to Jordan and then Syria, the AGP (Arab Gas Pipeline) could be in place before the 2022 elections. This project would be complemented by a connection to the Jordanian electricity grid, but would not be a definitive solution, as power could only be supplied for several hours a day¹⁸.

Paradoxically, Israel, which sends gas to Egypt through the *Peace or EMG* (East Mediterranean Gas) pipeline, linking its Ashkelon terminal with the Egyptian receiving station at Al-Arish, could paradoxically enter this energy rescue mechanism. Once in Egypt, the Israeli gas would be mixed with Egyptian gas before being exported¹⁹.

In addition to Israeli gas from Ashkelon, northern Jordan is also supplied from Israel’s Leviathan field. Once in Jordan, some of the gas is shipped to Syria. To spare the

¹⁶ Al Jazeera. “Lebanon wants ‘best relations’ with Saudi Arabia, GCC, Aoun says”. 30 Nov 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/lebanon-wants-best-relations-with-saudi-arabia-gcc-aoun-says> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

¹⁷ Reuters. “Lebanon’s information minister quits to ease Saudi dispute”. 3 December 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-information-minister-resigns-ease-saudi-spat-2021-12-03/> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

¹⁸ NGWY, Abigail. “Egyptian gas should start flowing to Lebanon in the next 3 months, U.S. energy envoy says. CNBC, 30 Nov 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/30/egyptian-gas-may-flow-to-lebanon-in-a-few-months-us-energy-envoy.html> (accessed on 30/12/2021)

¹⁹ KOLEILAT KHATIB, Dania. “Will Lebanon’s energy crisis be solved by Israeli gas?” Arab News, 6 December 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1981861> (accessed on 30/12/2021)

Lebanese the embarrassment of buying Israeli gas, the proposed solution would be for the Syrians to consume Israeli gas, while their own gas would be sent to Lebanon²⁰.



Figure 2. Status of gas pipelines for supply to Lebanon. Source: Oxford Analytica. 'Middle East: The Arab Gas Pipeline'. Thursday, 16 September 2021. <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/GI264146/Middle-East-The-Arab-Gas-Pipeline> (accessed on 30/12/2021)

To this end, the US mediator in the indirect talks between Israel and Lebanon, Amos Hochstein, assured that for this project the countries and companies involved would not be subject to the *Caesar Law*, which sanctions Syria for acting against its population²¹. In a broader context, one has to wonder whether this initiative by the Americans might be a message to bring Iran to the nuclear negotiating table, after several rounds of indirect talks that have already taken place in Vienna.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Egypt Today. 'Project of delivering Egyptian gas to Lebanon not subjected to Caesar Act: US'. Thu, 21 Oct 2021. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/109104/Project-of-delivering-Egyptian-gas-to-Lebanon-not-subjected-to> (accessed on 31/12/2021)

Iran, for its part, has a strong hold over the Hezbollah organisation, which has an important political and institutional representation in Lebanon, as well as a significant armed militia. Hezbollah's position on the Lebanese energy crisis further aggravates the country's management paralysis.

For this group, there is no possibility of dealings with its 'Zionist' enemy Israel, which means that the Lebanese are unable to explore whether there is gas in the vicinity of their territorial waters. In this regard, maritime demarcation talks between Lebanon and Israel are at a standstill because, in order to draw a maritime border and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the neighbouring countries must rely on the point where the line begins, which is usually the land border and the direction the dividing line will take in the sea. Both concepts are in dispute²².

Faced with this undefined scenario, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned the Israelis at the end of October 2021 not to prospect in the disputed area until the dispute was clarified and that if they did so Hezbollah would take action²³.

²² HENDERSON, Simon. 'Lines in the Sea: The Israel-Lebanon Maritime Border Dispute' The Washington Institute, 3 May 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lines-sea-israel-lebanon-maritime-border-dispute> (accessed on 30/12/2021). For a more detailed study of the controversy over gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, we suggest reading SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Felipe. Gas geopolitics and the militarisation of the Eastern Mediterranean. IEEE Analysis Paper 05/2019. https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA05_2019FELIPE-Mediterraneo.pdf

²³ Reuters 'Lebanon's Hezbollah warns Israel against drilling in disputed maritime border area'. 22 October 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-hezbollah-says-israel-mistaken-act-it-wants-disputed-maritime-border-2021-10-22/> (accessed on 30/12/2021)



Figure 3. Maritime area in dispute between Lebanon and Israel. Source: MENAFM. 'Lebanon, Israel sea dispute stuck over a gas field'. 04/12/2021. <https://menafn.com/1101900799/Lebanon-Israel-sea-dispute-stuck-over-a-gas-field> (accessed on 30/12/2021)

Through Hezbollah, Iran has a strong presence on Lebanese territory. However, Iran's intentions are not only to support its co-religionists in Lebanon. From an economic point of view, the existence of a corridor linking Tehran to Beirut would provide the Iranians with a communication route to the Mediterranean²⁴. Moreover, it could lend support to Hezbollah's armed wing, containing its Israeli rival on its doorstep in the event of Israeli intervention against Iran. However, the Iranians must measure their efforts in Lebanon against a possible agreement in future nuclear negotiations with the US^{25,26}.

²⁴ For a more detailed study of Iranian expansion into the Mediterranean, see CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. The importance of land corridors (II): Iran's race to the Mediterranean Sea IEEA Analysis Paper 26/2021.

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26_2021_JOSCAS_Iran.pdf

²⁵ GARCÍA-FRAILE HERNÁNDEZ, Miguel Ángel. 'La proyección iraní en Líbano: Hizbulá' Atalayar, 10 April 2021. <https://atalayar.com/index.php/content/la-proyecci%C3%B3n-iran%C3%AD-en-l%C3%ADbano-hizbul%C3%A1> (accessed on 31/12/2021)

²⁶ MANDEL, Eric R. 'America's next crisis may be Lebanon — not Ukraine or Taiwan' The Hill, 12/26/21. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/586262-americas-next-crisis-may-be-lebanon-not-ukraine-or-taiwan> (accessed on 31/12/2021)

Moreover, Iranian infiltration of Lebanese institutions has meant that after the port catastrophe and Hezbollah's obstructions to its investigation, Lebanese perceptions of Iran have deteriorated²⁷. The Iranians are therefore trying to clean up their image by shipping fuel to Lebanon, while acting as a counterweight to the US Arab gas project. Although the delivery of the Iranian energy products was not approved by the Lebanese government, they entered the country through the Syrian border²⁸. Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahia, during his visit to Lebanon in early October 2021, offered the possibility of building two power plants in less than 18 months and rebuilding the port of Beirut²⁹.

Reactions from international powers

France has always had a special interest in Lebanon and its oil company TOTAL, together with Italy's ENI, is involved in the exploration of the Lebanese onshore gas fields³⁰. Apart from a 'moral commitment' as a former colonial power, the French and also the Greeks view with concern how Turkey is establishing itself in Akkar and Tripoli, as part of a scenario in which the US is leaving a power vacuum after its turn towards the Asia-Pacific region. In the background, the issue is a contest over who controls the energy deposits off the Lebanese coast in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean³¹.

In the aftermath of the Beirut explosion disaster, one of the first international reactions came from President Macron, who called for "profound change" and "a new political order" during his visit to Lebanon on 6 August 2021. Macron emphasised the need for an audit

²⁷ ABOUAOUN, Elie. 'Iran grapples with Hume's paradox in Iraq and Lebanon' The Arab Weekly, 29/12/2021. <https://thearabweekly.com/iran-grapples-humes-paradox-iraq-and-lebanon> (accessed on 31/12/2021)

²⁸ SABAGHI, Dario. 'How the US and Iran compete to fuel Lebanon' DW, 23.09.2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-us-and-iran-compete-to-fuel-lebanon/a-59259429> (accessed on 31/12/2021)

²⁹ ROGERS, David. 'Iran offers to build two power stations in Lebanon, and rebuild Beirut's port'. Global Construction Review, 08.10.21. <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/iran-offers-to-build-two-power-stations-in-lebanon-and-rebuild-beirut-port/> (accessed on 02/01/2022)

³⁰ Total Energies. 'Total strengthens its position in the Mediterranean region by entering two exploration blocks offshore Lebanon'. 02/09/2018. <https://totalenergies.com/media/news/press-releases/total-strengthens-position-in-mediterranean-region-by-entering-two-exploration-blocks-offshore-lebanon> (accessed on 02/01/2022)

³¹ HALAWI, Dana. 'News Analysis: Economic, geopolitical factors behind France's interest in Lebanon'. Xinhua, 2020-09-04. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/04/c_139342894.htm (accessed on 31/12/2021)

of the Lebanese central bank and for aid to be provided to organisations working on the ground, rather than to the Lebanese authorities directly³².

An international donor conference managed to raise 280 million euros in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, but a year later the French president stated that the situation had worsened, estimating that 357 million euros were needed to cover the basic needs of the population³³.

However, the French plan had serious problems in terms of implementation. Firstly, it did not have US support because President Biden did not agree with French relations with the Iranian government's pro-Iranian Hezbollah. Moreover, Iranian meddling in support of its Lebanese ally was impeding French plans. But perhaps the worst difficulty of all was that the French had once again placed their trust in Lebanese elites instead of imposing severe sanctions on them for driving their country into misery³⁴.

The US administration seems to agree to delegate to France the burden of initiative in Lebanon and, while doing just enough to keep the country from total collapse, is negotiating energy supplies and putting Israel's security at the top of its agenda³⁵.

The US seeks to mediate between Israelis and Lebanese on the issue of the maritime demarcation separating the two countries. Therefore, the aforementioned US representative, Amos Hochstein, hopes that talks can be resumed in the same format as they were held at the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) headquarters in Naqura during 2020³⁶.

US interests could be quite pragmatic considering that Israel, through the Greek firm Energean, awarded a drilling contract in the North Karish offshore field to the US oil exploration group Halliburton. The Lebanese government has therefore sought an

³² BBC News. 'Beirut explosion: Macron calls for 'deep change' in Lebanon after blast'. 6 August 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53686563> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

³³ COFFEY, David. 'A year after Beirut explosion, France targets \$357 million at aid conference' RFI, 03/08/2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20210803-a-year-after-beirut-explosion-france-targets-357-million-at-aid-conference-lebanon-politics-human-rights-watch-world-bank> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

³⁴ VOHRA, Anchal. 'Lebanon's Failure Is Partly Macron's Fault'. Foreign Policy, 23 June 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/23/lebanons-failure-is-partly-macrons-fault/> (accessed on 29/12/2021)

³⁵ VOHRA, Anchal. 'The United States Has No Plan to Save Lebanon'. Foreign Policy, 15 September 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/15/the-united-states-has-no-plan-to-save-lebanon/> (accessed on 31/12/2021)

³⁶ Reuters 'Lebanon's Hezbollah warns Israel against drilling in disputed maritime border area'. Op. Cit.

explanation as to whether the allocated area is in the disputed area, with Prime Minister Mikati asserting that “we will not back down on this issue and we will not give up Lebanese rights”³⁷.



Figure 4. Location of Field 72 (Karish North) in Israel's submarine block system. Source: STEVENSON, Peter. 'Israel: Karish Dispute Overshadows Bid Round' MEES, Issue: 63 / 27, 3 Jul 2020. <https://www.mees.com/2020/7/3/geopolitical-risk/israel-karish-dispute-overshadows-bid-round/4e251040-bd2c-11ea-ba6a-8fc56cf95846> (accessed on 30/12/2021)

Russia's naval forces in the Mediterranean are supported from the Syrian base at Tartus, less than 50 kilometres from Tripoli.

Russia's generic interests in this sea are significant and it can use Turkish influence in Lebanon and Syria to its advantage. In this case there could be a Russia-Turkey cooperation to offset the France-Egypt-Greece-Israel axis and thus use Turkish territory as a transit point for gas to Europe³⁸.

³⁷ GNANA, Jennifer. "Lebanon seeks clarification after Israel's offshore award to Halliburton". The National, 19 Sept 2021. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/energy/2021/09/19/lebanon-seeks-clarification-after-israels-offshore-award-to-halliburton/> (accessed on 30/12/2021)

³⁸ TASHJIAN, Yeghia. 'Russia's Interests in Lebanon: Fulfilling a Middle Eastern Dream' The Armenian Weekly, 2 June 2021. <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/06/02/russias-interests-in-lebanon-fulfilling-a-middle-eastern-dream/> (accessed on 15/01/2021)

Russia has applied to extract gas from the Lebanese coast through the company Novatek³⁹. To do so, it would be in its interest to have a scenario in which Iran was sufficiently controlled and to gain Israeli confidence, so that the Russians would be seen as a counterweight to Iranian power.

As a result, Israeli strikes on the Syrian port of Latakia on 7 and 28 December 2021 would not be countered by the Russian anti-aircraft umbrella at their Khmeimim airbase. Massive quantities of ammunition that the Iranians intended to send to Lebanon were reportedly held at this port. In the Syrian-Lebanese theatre, Russian and Iranian interests may not converge, as the Russians may want a Syrian regime with its own capacity, while the Iranians would seek a satellite government in Syria to serve as a major base of operations for further expansion into Lebanon⁴⁰.

While everyone is moving the tree, China is waiting patiently to pick the fruit. The Lebanese are desperate enough to seek any solution to their disastrous situation, meaning that the alternative to the IMF bailout could be a Hezbollah-backed Chinese investment programme⁴¹.

In the aftermath of the Beirut port disaster, Chinese blue helmets in the area served as a base for Chinese foundations involved in the rescue efforts, and Chinese entrepreneurs have begun to look for business opportunities. These have focused on infrastructure and subsequently provided the Lebanese with medical aid and COVID vaccines, in addition to donations. However, this system is not without its trade-offs, as the Chinese may want to cash in on their investment in raw materials and political influence in the same way as they have done in Nigeria, the Philippines or Jordan⁴².

³⁹ KHURRAM, Abdullah. 'The Growing Russian Interest in Lebanon'. Australian Institute of International Affairs. 04 JUN 2021. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-growing-russian-interest-in-lebanon/> (accessed on 02/01/2022)

⁴⁰ FRANTZMAN, Seth J. 'The Latakia doctrine puts Russia in a bind'. The Jerusalem Post, 29 December 2021. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-690061> (accessed on 02/01/2022)

⁴¹ VOHRA, Anchal. 'China Wants to Be Lebanon's Savior'. Foreign Policy, 9 July 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/09/china-wants-to-be-lebanons-savior/> (accessed on 02/01/2022)

⁴² JAIN, Sakshi. 'China in Lebanon: A Mirage of Help'. The Geopolitics, 21 April 2021. <https://thegeopolitics.com/china-in-lebanon-a-mirage-of-help/> (accessed on 02/01/2022)

Conclusions

The 1990s Lebanese model of sectarian power-sharing in the aftermath of the civil war has reached exhaustion. The main cause has been that the leaders of the different factions have had a narrow view of the country's comprehensive needs, thus leading it to ruin. Apart from that, these Lebanese elites have not even been able to represent the groups they claim to support, but have been more concerned with their own self-interests than with serving the population, and have been more concerned with hoarding personal wealth and political power.

When the state model creates a power vacuum, it allows other actors to take its place. It is therefore understandable that organisations such as Hezbollah have established their own institutional, economic and security structure in parallel to the ailing state institutions. However, such meddling undermines the rule of law to the benefit of the actors involved; a typical example being the obstruction of the investigation into the Beirut port explosion.

While the Lebanese population is experiencing this accelerated decline, external actors are positioning themselves to shape the environment to their advantage. At the regional level, the Iranians, supported by Hezbollah, are trying to expand their area of influence by consolidating their presence in Syria, from where Israel is threatened. In turn, the Iranian presence in Lebanon constitutes a threat to the Israelis.

For its part, Saudi Arabia wants to exert control in order to manage its influence in Lebanon. At the same time, it must maintain a balance of power with the security problem it faces in Yemen, where Iranian-allied Houthis have attacked Saudi territory on several occasions.

In the great power arena, the role of France as a former colonial power has regained an important role, while the US has to some extent left it to the French to represent Western interests on Lebanese territory.

Russia sees in Lebanon a need for containment of the main regional actors that could affect it. Potential rivalries with Turkey in the Mediterranean could be defused if in the energy sphere they worked together to supply gas to Europe. On the other hand, the Russians perceive that Iran's expansionist ambitions must be contained so that they cannot be a counterweight to Russia's power in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile,

China has quietly infiltrated Lebanese markets and is playing an increasing role in donations and aid, most likely in the form of influence and raw materials.

The Lebanese energy problem runs parallel to the power interests of the states, organisations, groups and individuals involved. Getting the resources needed to restart the Lebanese machine requires an infrastructure and supply in which there seem to be two opposing blocs. One side would include the Americans, French, Saudis and Israelis, while the other would be the Russian-controlled Turks and Iranians. Power interests can also be perceived in the possible exploitation of gas resources off the Lebanese coast.

It is difficult to see how this web of problems and tensions can be resolved, but it seems that external actors with a genuine interest in Lebanon's recovery should help strengthen state institutions before the situation deteriorates to the point of humanitarian tragedy and serious unrest that could lead to open conflict.

Maintaining the country's infrastructure, so that it can be put back on track, is essential and should be a priority. Similarly, the strengthening of security institutions such as the police and armed forces is crucial for other non-state actors to fill their power vacuum.

While all this is going on, a contingent of Spanish soldiers integrated into UNIFIL is involved in monitoring the line of separation between Israel and Lebanon and assisting the population, as the situation worsens before their eyes.

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