



# Lebanon Reborn? How Saudi Reengagement Can Restore Lebanese Sovereignty and Purge Hezbollah

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For arguably the first time since the Lebanese Civil War, Lebanon is presented with the opportunity to strip the Shi'a political party and militia Hezbollah of its economic, social, and political power. Yet can the Lebanese government exercise enough political will to limit Hezbollah's influence and prevent a revival? Will legitimacy in Lebanese state institutions be restored? Until recently, most analysts approached such questions with profound skepticism, and with good reason. Over the last several decades, Lebanon had served as both an example and victim of Iranian power in the region, as Tehran capitalized on the chaos in Lebanon to wield influence through its proxy, Hezbollah.<sup>1</sup> Lately, however, a stunning reversal has occurred, as Hezbollah's war with Israel has rendered it more vulnerable than at any other point since the Lebanese Civil War concluded in 1990. Although Lebanon itself must capitalize upon Hezbollah's weakened capacity, which international actors, if any, should play a prevalent role in eradicating Hezbollah's power in Lebanon and reviving Lebanese sovereignty? The answer to that is not solely, or perhaps even predominantly, the United States and its most important ally in the region, Israel. It is also Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi kingdom has a long and deep involvement in Lebanon. After the civil war, Saudi provided billions in funding to help Lebanon's reconstruction and worked closely with its political allies within the country's Sunni community, most notably with Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and 2000 to 2004, who possessed dual Lebanese-Saudi citizenship.<sup>2</sup> In the last two decades, however, that relationship atrophied, as Hezbollah's power consolidated in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> After years of reaping minimal return on decades of investment, Saudi all but resigned Lebanon to the Iranian sphere of influence.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond achieving little success in limiting Iranian power in Lebanon, Saudi's disengagement also flowed from the 2017 ascension of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) to the position of

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crown prince. Since his appointment, MBS has steadily consolidated and centralized power in the kingdom, becoming prime minister in 2022. MBS's rule recalibrated the political and economic priorities of the kingdom. The clearest way to understand these domestic and foreign policy shifts is through the lens of Saudi Vision 2030, MBS's crown jewel development initiative that began in 2016.<sup>5</sup> The central goal of Vision 2030 is to help Saudi navigate the global clean-energy transition through a variety of economic diversification initiatives, mostly through massive investments in non-oil sectors such as entertainment, artificial intelligence (AI), and sports. This new Saudi approach and its focus on Vision 2030 caused Lebanon to fade into the kingdom's periphery throughout the past decade, as Saudi's own economic and domestic policies superseded the troublesome issues of its small Levantine neighbor. Finally, the escalating conflict with the Houthis in Yemen further diverted Saudi attention away from Lebanon, as the kingdom responded to the growing threat at its southern border.

Such a dynamic, where Lebanon warranted minimal Saudi involvement, most likely would have persisted in the absence of the escalation of Hezbollah's conflict with Israel. Hezbollah's military capabilities and political influence have declined dramatically since the outset of its war with Israel. The recent election of Joseph Aoun as president, and the subsequent appointment of Nawaf Salam as prime minister, both of whom are staunchly anti-Hezbollah politicians, have also signaled that Lebanon might be on the cusp of purging Hezbollah from its economic, political, and social fabric.

Nevertheless, international actors will be pivotal in helping Aoun and Salam pursue their agenda. While the United States will be a central player in this process, this brief explores the critical role that Saudi Arabia must play in ensuring a successful reconstruction process and the reestablishment of Lebanon's state institutions. It not only considers how Saudi may help end Lebanon's decades-long political and economic crisis but also argues that such steps can advance Saudi's interests and the realization of its strategic vision. In doing so, it advances four political and economic reengagement policies for Saudi Arabia in Lebanon. Specifically, Saudi should provide monetary support to Lebanon's reconstruction process, renew military support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), increase Lebanese imports and lift the travel ban, and heighten cooperation with the new Aoun-Salam administration. In turn, Lebanon must commit to instituting reforms centered on implementing previous UN resolutions and ceasefire agreements, purging Hezbollah from the political sphere, and restructuring its economy to warrant Saudi reengagement after years of failed involvement.

This brief proceeds in five parts. The first part delves into Saudi's past political involvement in Lebanon since the conclusion of the civil war. It explains why previous attempts to wield influence in the country failed. The second part turns to the economic support that Saudi has provided to Lebanon, highlighting the past failures of Riyadh's financial interventions. The next part examines why Saudi has incentives to increase its involvement in Lebanon. The final sections elaborate on policy recommendations for both the specific form that renewed Saudi political and economic engagement in Lebanon should take and the terms for Lebanon to abide by to warrant further Saudi support.

## SAUDI'S FAILED POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON: 1990-2025

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Following the 1990 Taif Agreement ending the civil war, Saudi provided millions of dollars to Lebanon for reconstruction purposes in a bid to counter growing Iranian influence in the country.<sup>6</sup> Due to Saudi's privileged relationship with Rafik Hariri during both of his terms as prime minister, Saudi largely realized its plans for Lebanon's reconstruction and financial sector growth. The Saudi-sanctioned Hariri administration was politically and economically liberal in its attempt to bolster Lebanon's ties to the West through its close relations with France as well as through initiatives that welcomed globalization. At the same time, however, Taif had put in place privileged relations between Lebanon and Syria that allowed Syria to establish a de facto protectorate over Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as Syria's president in 2000, Syria assumed a far more antagonistic position toward Hariri.

After Hariri's assassination in February 2005, Saudi Arabia and the international community placed responsibility for the killing on Syria and Hezbollah, causing Saudi to end bilateral relations with Syria.<sup>8</sup> In April, Syria finally adhered to international demands to withdraw its forces from Lebanon, as stipulated under the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which sought to strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nevertheless, for Lebanon's Sunni community, Hariri's assassination was an outrageous offense. Suspicions of Hezbollah's involvement heightened sectarian tensions. Not only did a series of subsequent political assassinations paralyze Lebanese politics, but after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006, Hezbollah's self-proclaimed "divine victory" allowed the party to establish itself as a regional force.<sup>9</sup> In spite of these shifts, Saudi continued to support Lebanon's economy by pledging US\$1.1 billion to strengthen the volatile Lebanese lira and financial credibility among prominent state institutions.<sup>10</sup>

To counter Syrian and Iranian influence, in March 2005 the March 14 Alliance was formed, which has traditionally comprised the Future Movement, Lebanon's dominant Sunni political party at the time, alongside the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, both of which are Christian. Saudi Arabia initially provided substantial political and financial support to the coalition in hopes that Hariri's son Saad Hariri, who had recently become head of the Future Movement, would continue his father's agenda.<sup>11</sup> However, March 14 only achieved narrow parliamentary majorities in both the 2005 and 2009 elections and was unable to secure definitive political power.<sup>12</sup>

To Riyadh's disappointment, Hezbollah's political influence continued to grow. By 2007, the party and its allies' coalition was large enough to prevent the election of any presidential candidate that they did not back. Following the 2009 parliamentary elections, not only was Hezbollah included in Hariri's "national unity" government, but Hariri had acceded to its demand that the parliament incorporate enough opposition ministers to veto potential cabinet appointments.<sup>13</sup> Known as the "blocking third," the Hezbollah-backed opposition coalition wielded substantial political power. In 2016, after the opposition had prevented the election of a president for twenty-nine months, their chosen candidate Michel Aoun

became president. Moreover, Saad Hariri supported Aoun's candidacy in order to become prime minister again. Although this concession arguably offered the only way to end the political deadlock, Hariri's actions demonstrated Saudi's inability to counterbalance the power of Hezbollah.<sup>14</sup>

Following his presidential appointment, Aoun allowed Hezbollah to increase its power. In November 2017, after arriving in Saudi, Hariri issued a shocking statement from Riyadh in which he announced his resignation as prime minister and criticized Iran and Hezbollah for undermining Lebanon's sovereignty. MBS, exasperated with Hariri's repeated yielding to Hezbollah's demands, had seemingly orchestrated the kidnapping of Hariri upon his arrival and forced his resignation.<sup>15</sup> Notably, Hariri's surprise resignation occurred the same day that Saudi Arabia had intercepted a Houthi missile near Riyadh. At this time, Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen was a major point of contention between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

For MBS and Saudi leadership, Hezbollah's alleged assistance in training, financing, and equipping the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels was unacceptable.<sup>16</sup> Hassan Nasrallah, the then-leader of the party, had championed the anti-Saudi cause in several speeches and boasted of Hezbollah's help in delivering and launching missiles into Saudi territory.<sup>17</sup> Two days after Hariri's assassination, Saudi announced that it would treat the Hezbollah-dominated Lebanese government as if it had "declar[ed] war" on Riyadh.<sup>18</sup>

Ever since MBS's ascension to the position of crown prince in June 2017, he had signaled that Saudi would not accept the Lebanese government's coexistence and accommodation with Hezbollah.<sup>19</sup> While Hariri's resignation came as a surprise, it signaled the culmination of years of the kingdom's frustration with Lebanon allowing Hezbollah to set an agenda that facilitated Iranian expansion and conflicted with Saudi security concerns.<sup>20</sup> At this point, Riyadh was no longer invested in propping up what little remained of the March 14 coalition.<sup>21</sup>

## **SAUDI'S INEFFECTIVE ECONOMIC STRATEGY IN LEBANON**

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Beyond failed attempts to intervene in Lebanon's domestic politics, Saudi's past involvement included substantial economic support. Since the end of the civil war, Saudi has provided billions in grants, loans, and donations to bolster Lebanon's economy.<sup>22</sup> In 2002, for instance, Rafik Hariri secured \$700 million in loans from Saudi, the most that any single country offered at the time. Later, during the 2006 Israeli war with Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait deposited \$1.5 billion in the Lebanese central bank, followed by an additional Saudi deposit of \$1 billion in 2008. These funds were critical for maintaining the Lebanese pound's peg to the dollar, which had come under increasing pressure.<sup>23</sup>

By the early 2010s, however, Saudi and other Gulf states were no longer offering Lebanon the same level of financial support. While Saudi's cash reserves were limited due to a steep decrease in global oil prices, the disappointing 2009 Lebanese parliamentary elections

and Hezbollah's enhanced political power combined to propel Saudi to disengage from Lebanon.<sup>24</sup>

In February 2016, Saudi's punitive economic measures against Lebanon first began when Riyadh declared its intention to halt both a \$3 billion grant to the Lebanese Armed Forces and a \$1 billion grant to the Internal Security Forces, citing concerns that such weapons would find their way to Hezbollah.<sup>25</sup> This announcement followed the Hezbollah-backed Lebanese foreign minister Gebran Bassil's abstention on an Arab League resolution that condemned Iran for not intervening in the storming of the Saudi embassy in January 2016 by Iranians protesting the execution of Saudi Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr.<sup>26</sup>

This declaration also marked Saudi's leading role among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states seeking to impose informal sanctions against Lebanon, and particularly Hezbollah. Saudi closed several Beirut branches of its AlAhli Bank and issued an official advisory against travel to Lebanon for its citizens, an act that was followed by Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The advisory set off alarm bells within Lebanon, as the stability of its economy was largely tied to its expatriate community living in the Gulf states. Not only did tourism account for 7.5 percent of Lebanon's GDP at the time, but remittances sent by Lebanese expats working in Gulf countries were crucial to the Lebanese economy, particularly since it was experiencing extraordinary pressure due to the arrival of over one million Syrian refugees.<sup>27</sup> Lebanese Gulf workers sent \$5 billion in remittances back home, which comprised 70 percent of Lebanon's total remittances and 11 percent of its GDP. Beyond the practical implications that the Saudi-led Gulf economic retrenchment had on the Lebanese economy, the symbolic effect proved more powerful, as it indicated the Gulf states' acknowledgment that their economic support did not possess the same purchasing power as Iranian aid.<sup>28</sup>

Saudi's economic pressure against Lebanon culminated in October 2021 when Riyadh issued a blanket ban on Lebanese imports and gave the Lebanese ambassador forty-eight hours to leave the kingdom in response to a Lebanese minister's comment that criticized Saudi's war in Yemen. This announcement had followed a previous Saudi ban on Lebanese agricultural produce, issued in April, due to an alleged increase in drug smuggling via fruits and vegetables from Lebanon.<sup>29</sup> As Saudi had been Lebanon's third-largest export market in 2020, this ban had significant effects on the Lebanese economy. In January 2023, for instance, Saudi's Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan declared during the World Economic Forum that the kingdom's financial aid support would be conditional moving forward and Riyadh would no longer be giving "direct grants and deposits without strings attached."<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to this pattern of disengagement, it is important to note Saudi contributions to Lebanon following October 7, 2023. In July 2024, Saudi Arabia provided \$10 million to support development projects throughout Lebanon to address the economic costs of its war with Israel.<sup>31</sup> Although not a particularly significant sum, it did represent the first time Riyadh was willing to send economic support to Lebanon in several years.

## INCENTIVES FOR SAUDI TO REENGAGE WITH LEBANON

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In recent years, Lebanon's political stalemate and economic crisis have not been significant priorities for Saudi Arabia. Under MBS, the kingdom has emphasized economic issues through Vision 2030, which requires an ambitious restructuring of the Saudi economy.<sup>32</sup> With regard to Lebanon, it is not expected that Saudi will return to its previous "open checkbook" policy.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Saudi reengagement in Lebanon will promote its current policy priorities for three key reasons: Reengagement furthers Saudi's desire for a stable Middle East; it provides the kingdom with the chance to meaningfully flex its diplomatic muscles on the global stage; and it offers an opportunity to minimize Iranian influence and definitively sideline Hezbollah.

A stable Middle East aligns with Riyadh's top domestic priority, Vision 2030. Although Vision 2030 is domestically focused, its foreign policy implications cannot be overlooked. Even before MBS's ascension to power, one of Saudi's primary foreign policy objectives has been to limit instability in the region in order to minimize risks to the free flow of oil exports from the kingdom and facilitate the country's domestic economic development.<sup>34</sup> Despite the dramatic shift in Saudi's strategic vision, in foreign policy the primary motive has remained unchanged: Contain regional revolutionary movements that might threaten the fulfillment of domestic economic goals. While Hezbollah's growing presence and influence in Lebanon never seriously put Vision 2030 at risk, as an extension of Iranian power it represented a failure of the kingdom to create a regional environment that looked favorably upon its leadership. This is partially why Saudi has become one of the United States' closest partners in regional stabilization.

In the last half decade, the kingdom has expended significant effort toward resolving regional disputes and asserting itself as a key regional and global diplomatic player. In 2020, Saudi founded the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, comprising all states bordering the body of water; in 2021 it ended its almost four-year isolation of Qatar; and in 2023, with Qatar, it resumed a diplomatic relationship with Iran and became a "dialogue partner" with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a Eurasian economic, political, and security organization founded in 2001 by Russia and China.<sup>35</sup> Saudi has also facilitated talks concerning the resolution of global wars in Sudan and Ukraine, with the kingdom hosting US and Russian officials in February 2025. As the kingdom is furthermore interested in expanding its economic relationships on a global stage to attract foreign investment, 2023 and 2024 saw Riyadh host summit after summit with the United States, China, and the GCC.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the Saudi government has always viewed regional events through the lens of the expansion of Iranian power in the region. For decades Iran has attained a substantial strategic advantage due to the dominance of Hezbollah in Lebanon. In the past, neither Hezbollah nor Iran supported the Lebanese government and army maintaining strong relations with Saudi or the United States, as they understood that such ties would threaten their standing in the country.<sup>37</sup> If MBS takes inventory of the Middle East and perceives his own country in peril of being trapped between an Iranian-dominated Yemen and an Iranian-dominated Iraq with

an Iranian-dominated Lebanon to the north, then Iranian influence will have prevailed among its Arab neighbors. The current diminished standing of both Iran and Hezbollah provides an opportunity. As the Houthis in Yemen currently appear to have survived the post-October 7 disruptions largely intact, it is in Saudi's best interest to confront Iran where it is currently most fragile: Lebanon.

When tensions between Israel and Hezbollah began to rise in 2024, the party incorrectly assumed that Israel would want to avoid further escalation at its northern border, given the situation in Gaza.<sup>38</sup> By September 2024, however, Israel detonated thousands of explosives in paggers used by Hezbollah's members, killed three of the party's living founders—Ali Karaki, Ibrahim Aqil, and Fuad Shukr—and, most notably, assassinated its leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Responsible for turning Hezbollah into a formidable military and political force over his forty-year leadership, Nasrallah had become one and the same with Hezbollah, and he was widely perceived to be the father figure and protector of Lebanon's Shi'a community. Through his assassination, Israel therefore dealt a heavy blow to Hezbollah's leadership and morale, a matter exacerbated by the apparent ineffectiveness of its new head, Naim Qassem.

Beyond decimating the ranks of Hezbollah's top leadership, Israel has greatly diminished the military strength of Hezbollah: Following its invasion of southern Lebanon on October 1, 2024, Israel took out thousands of the organization's weapons arsenals and killed hundreds of its militants, leaving the group with less than 25 percent of its previous military capabilities. Furthermore, following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria on December 8, Hezbollah found itself without a critical ally. With Assad in power, Hezbollah was able to bring in billions of dollars through the smuggling of the illicit drug Captagon, an alternative to amphetamine and methamphetamine, while Iran also smuggled weapons to Hezbollah through Syria.<sup>39</sup> With the regime's collapse, both the Captagon trade and weapons smuggling will most likely be curtailed. Simply put, Hezbollah is at its weakest point since its inception. Saudi involvement in Lebanon in ways that rehabilitate Lebanese state institutions and its economy and eradicate or marginalize Hezbollah's political power would advance Saudi's regional strategies.

## A POLICY FOR SAUDI REENGAGEMENT

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Given the complexity of the problem, Saudi Arabia's reengagement in Lebanon must feature both economic and political components. What follows describes a path for Saudi economic and political engagement, including specific measures and reforms that Saudi should seek from Lebanon in return.

### **POLICY 1: PROVIDE MONETARY SUPPORT TO LEBANON'S RECONSTRUCTION PROCESS**

Lebanon has an opportunity to unwind the relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shi'a community. Under Hezbollah's social contract with the Lebanese Shi'a, the party offers political recognition and security in return for recruits and votes.<sup>40</sup> Yet, for more than a decade, Shi'a support for Hezbollah has been diminishing. Tensions first surfaced when

Hezbollah chose to assist the Assad regime in the Syrian Civil War in 2011 rather than support its domestic constituents, heightening further after Lebanon's economic crisis in 2019. Shi'a dissatisfaction toward Hezbollah was significantly exacerbated following Israel's October 1 invasion, which led to the destruction of many Shi'a villages and the deaths of thousands of Lebanese.<sup>41</sup> Contrary to previous clashes with Israel, during which Hezbollah was perceived as successfully warding off Israel, Hezbollah was seen in the most recent conflict as responsible for dragging Lebanon into an unnecessary and destructive war. As a result of such losses, Hezbollah will be unable to distribute the compensation and reconstruction money that the Shi'a community has come to expect following conflicts with Israel.

As the primary victims of Hezbollah's war with Israel, the Shi'a are not receiving the same financial assistance they received in 2006. Following the war with Israel in that year, the southern portion of Lebanon was devastated and Hezbollah's capabilities were called into question. Iran intervened, providing Hezbollah with critical financial support, which allowed the organization to lead reconstruction efforts and maintain its credibility.<sup>42</sup> This time, however, Iran is not financially able to fund Hezbollah to the same degree, providing Lebanon's state institutions with the opportunity to manage the reconstruction process.

To decisively sway the Shi'a away from Hezbollah, the Lebanese state, under the leadership of Aoun and Salam, must be tasked with rebuilding. Such a feat, however, cannot be left up to the Lebanese state alone. Given both the continuing economic crisis and the relatively weak state of its political institutions—Lebanon's two-year executive vacuum only concluded in January 2025—financial support from Saudi Arabia that is exclusively managed by the Lebanese state would be pivotal in ensuring that Hezbollah is not offered a role in Lebanon's reconstruction process. With costs of the war estimated at \$10 billion, Lebanon's government is in no position to absorb such costs. On January 23, 2025, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan visited Lebanon to begin a "new phase" in the two nations' relationship, the first trip by the kingdom's foreign minister to Beirut in fifteen years.<sup>43</sup>

As a condition of Saudi assistance, they will want to ensure that Hezbollah is excluded from the process and demand strict monitoring of the use of its funds. All financial support should be distributed directly from the government to the beneficiaries, circumventing Hezbollah-dominated bodies such as Jihad al-Binaa, the construction wing of the organization.<sup>44</sup> Through these efforts, Saudi Arabia can demonstrate that the Lebanese state can effectively serve all its citizens, including the Shi'a. Aiding in Lebanon's reconstruction would also allow the kingdom to rehabilitate its own reputation in the country.

## **POLICY 2: RENEW MILITARY SUPPORT TO THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES**

Security assistance for the Lebanese Armed Forces is key to strengthening Lebanon's sovereignty and countering the capabilities of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah. Saudi must allocate financial assistance specifically to the LAF to expand their capacity as the sole legitimate defender of the country's sovereignty and enable the LAF to ensure the disarmament of Hezbollah, a key component of its 2024 ceasefire agreement with Israel. Saudi has not offered financial assistance to Lebanon's military since the 2016 suspension of the \$3 billion grant

to the LAF to purchase weapons from France. Other countries, particularly the United States and Qatar, have remained more consistent donors to the LAF. Since 2006 the US has invested more than \$3 billion in the LAF to help counter regional threats, such as the expansion of ISIS and al-Qaeda in Lebanon, and to reduce instability following the 2019 economic crisis.<sup>45</sup> More recently, in June 2023, the US and the UN began cash distributions to the LAF under the “Livelihood Support Program” that disbursed \$55.5 million over the course of six months through \$100 monthly payments to more than seventy thousand LAF personnel.<sup>46</sup> Qatar, meanwhile, provided the LAF with a three-month \$15 million grant for fuel through the Qatar Fund for Development beginning in October 2024. This grant followed a \$20 million “donation” from Qatar to the LAF in July of the same year.

As the LAF will be critical to reestablishing the Lebanese state’s ability to provide military security, the LAF must be equipped with the necessary resources and personnel. The disarmament of Hezbollah must be accompanied by a renewed presence of a capable, resilient LAF. For far too long Hezbollah has justified its own militarization by claiming that the LAF lacks the capacity to protect the Lebanese people. A strong LAF will underscore how little Hezbollah can offer the Lebanese people. Since Saudi benefits from a stable Lebanon that is purged of any military presence of Hezbollah, providing meaningful financial support to the LAF aligns with the kingdom’s interests.

### **POLICY 3: HEIGHTEN COOPERATION WITH THE AOUN-SALAM ADMINISTRATION**

As a functioning, effective Lebanese state represents the best mechanism for limiting Hezbollah’s influence, Saudi must work with state institutions to maintain stability while pressuring them to constrain Hezbollah’s extraconstitutional activities.<sup>47</sup> Saudi has not maintained a reliable relationship with Lebanon since the days of Rafik Hariri, primarily due to the absence of effective Sunni leadership and the rise of Hezbollah and its coalition. The Aoun-Salam administration, however, seems poised to take advantage of Hezbollah’s weakened state. President Aoun, the former commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, has both promised that the LAF will reassert their presence in southern Lebanon and called for the full disarmament of Hezbollah so that it acts as a typical political party instead of a shadow state supported by its own military. Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, former president of the International Court of Justice, has similarly pledged to disarm Hezbollah and reassert the authority of the Lebanese state.<sup>48</sup> Under Salam, in February 2025 Lebanon formed its first cabinet of twenty-four ministers after two years of a caretaker government that is set to last until May 2026. With respect to the new cabinet, Hezbollah and its Shi’a ally the Amal Movement were able to choose four of the new cabinet members. Most notably, Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, who has acted as Hezbollah’s primary partner in creating the new government, insisted that the position of finance minister be given to Yassine Jaber, a move presumably sanctioned by Hezbollah.<sup>49</sup> However, for the first time since 2008, these two parties are not in possession of more than one-third of total cabinet seats, the “blocking third” mechanism that they have formerly used to paralyze government action. The cabinet also excluded Hezbollah’s non-Shi’a partners such as the Free Patriotic Movement and the Marada Movement.<sup>50</sup>

Notably, Saudi has been closely monitoring these political developments. After the election of Aoun, Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Waleed al-Bukhari described the election as “an important step towards Lebanon’s revival and reconstruction . . . so that it can regain the trust of the Arab and international community,” and stressed that “Saudi Arabia will stand by Lebanon, its people, and president.”<sup>51</sup> Aoun’s election also prompted the first trip to Beirut by Saudi’s foreign minister in fifteen years, a visit that included meetings with Aoun and Salam.<sup>52</sup> In early March, Aoun then visited Saudi Arabia in his first official visit abroad since he assumed office. During this trip, Aoun notably met with MBS and participated in discussions concerning potential trade agreements between the two countries and opportunities to collaborate in the agriculture, education, and finance sectors.<sup>53</sup> Maintaining close ties with Aoun and Salam will allow Saudi to promote reforms that will be benefit regional political and economic stability. During the political vacuum period in Lebanon, France and Qatar assumed more active roles in attempting to resolve the presidential impasse, while Saudi avoided backing any specific candidate or supporting a specific course of action.<sup>54</sup> Saudi is now able to actively support the new government and monitor the reconstruction process to ensure that the government adheres to its commitment to marginalize Hezbollah.

#### **POLICY 4: INCREASE LEBANESE IMPORTS AND LIFT TRAVEL BAN**

Building on the previous policy recommendation to deepen cooperation with the Aoun–Salam administration, two specific issues that remain priorities for the Lebanese government concern Riyadh’s 2021 ban on Saudi citizens traveling to Lebanon and its restriction of Lebanese imports in the same year. While the travel ban has been largely symbolic, Saudi’s ban against Lebanese imports has had a devastating impact on the Lebanese economy, costing it around \$220 million per year with the most significant impact on the agricultural sector.<sup>55</sup> In 2020, Lebanese agricultural exports to the Gulf states had hit \$145 million, approximately \$23 million of which went to Saudi Arabia. In 2023, although the blanket ban had been slightly relaxed, Lebanon exported only \$1.65 million to Saudi; between 2018 and 2023, exports from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia had decreased at an annualized rate of 63.1 percent, from \$241 million to \$1.65 million.<sup>56</sup> As Lebanon’s economy has not recovered from the 2019 crisis and faces setbacks as a consequence of its war with Israel, export-driven growth will provide immediate benefits to the Lebanese state. Saudi has notably already signaled its willingness to enact these two measures, as following President Aoun’s meeting with MBS during his March visit to Saudi Arabia, the state-run Saudi Press Agency released a joint statement that noted both sides agreed to study the “obstacles” to resuming Lebanese imports and lifting the ban on Saudi nationals visiting Lebanon.<sup>57</sup> The kingdom should therefore commit to ending both bans, thereby initiating a more amicable political and economic relationship with Lebanon.

#### **FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR SAUDI ARABIA: PERVERSE AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

Before concluding the Saudi policy recommendation section, it is worth noting the potential unforeseen implications of Saudi involvement in Lebanon. Specifically, in the process of effecting such political and economic intervention, is there a hazard of Saudi creating fiercer opposition from Hezbollah that could be contrary to both their internal goals and those for

the Lebanese state? Hezbollah has longed used the rhetoric of resistance to both justify its existence and garner greater popular support. While such rhetoric has traditionally been employed against Israel, particularly during times of Israeli occupation, Hezbollah and its allies might seek to cast Saudi Arabia as an unwelcome foreign force seeking to meddle in Lebanese affairs. Clear differences between the proposed Saudi intervention and previous Israeli actions toward Lebanon nevertheless exist. Whereas Israel intervened militarily, Saudi involvement would be exclusively economic and political. Furthermore, the kingdom would work jointly with the Lebanese government to improve its economic situation and create a stable political system, as opposed to operating unilaterally. Public sentiment has already looked favorably upon Lebanon's recent rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, as Aoun's visit to Riyadh was positively received. Although any political and economic intervention is followed by unintended consequences, Saudi Arabia's actions are unlikely to produce extreme backlash either at home or in Lebanon.

## **LEBANESE REFORMS AS CONDITIONS FOR SAUDI INVOLVEMENT**

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For Saudi Arabia to reengage, Lebanon must commit to implementing and adhering to a series of reforms. Given past failed efforts, the kingdom will not become involved in Lebanon again without adequate assurance that a foundation is being built that is markedly different from its past. MBS has made clear that the kingdom will no longer provide support "without strings attached," as he has no intention of reengaging in Lebanon in a manner that enables Hezbollah to dominate the Lebanese state or use it as a breeding ground for conflict and terror in the Middle East on Iran's behalf.<sup>58</sup> To warrant Saudi aid, Lebanon should commit to the following policies:

### **POLICY 1: FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 1701 AND THE 2024 ISRAEL-LEBANON CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT**

The new government must commit to the full implementation of both UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 and the most recent ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah. Adopted in 2006, the resolution sought to end hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah, demanding that Israel withdraw its forces from southern Lebanon and calling for the creation of a buffer zone between the Litani River and the "Blue Line," a temporary line of withdrawal set by the UN in 2000 after the end of Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon.<sup>59</sup> There are several crucial clauses in UNSCR 1701 that, if fully implemented, could both empower Lebanon's state institutions and weaken Hezbollah and its allies. Specifically, the resolution states that the only armed groups in the buffer zone should be the LAF and UN peacekeeping forces (UN Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL). The resolution also provides the LAF with the authority to halt the entry of unauthorized weapons into the country and destroy any weapon-making facilities.<sup>60</sup>

Hezbollah's continued militarization is a clear violation of not only UNSCR 1701, but also the Taif Accord and UNSCR 1559 (2004), which similarly required the disarmament of all armed

groups in Lebanon. The 2024 ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah explicitly pointed to the failed full implementation of UNSCR 1701, stating that the agreement reflected “steps to which Israel and Lebanon are committed in order to implement fully UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, recognizing that UNSCR 1701 also calls for full implementation of its predecessor UNSC resolutions, including ‘disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon.’”<sup>61</sup> The ceasefire largely reiterates the demands of UNSCR 1701, such as the withdrawal of Israeli forces south of the Blue Line and the deployment of the LAF along Lebanon’s borders. For the last two decades, as the Lebanese government has refrained from providing the LAF with a clear mandate to eliminate the military arm of Hezbollah, the army has failed in its responsibility to maintain the borders and largely refrained from intervening in Israel’s conflicts with Hezbollah. If Lebanon is serious about reestablishing legitimacy in its state institutions and exercising full sovereignty over its territory, the government must oversee the disarmament of Hezbollah and adhere to the terms of UNSCR 1701. Saudi Arabia should require that any political and economic assistance is contingent upon Lebanon’s commitment to full implementation of UNSCR 1701 and the 2024 ceasefire deal.

## **POLICY 2: SIDELINE HEZBOLLAH FROM LEBANESE POLITICS**

The striking political developments that have occurred in Lebanon since the start of 2025 signal Hezbollah’s current weak position. Not only did the organization fail to prevent Aoun’s election as president, but a clear majority of parliament ignored Hezbollah’s lobbying for their prime ministerial nominee, Najib Mikati, and instead chose Salam.<sup>62</sup> Now that a new Lebanese government is in place, international actors such as Saudi Arabia must monitor whether that government’s members are willing to act decisively against Hezbollah. Beyond Yassine Jaber’s appointment to the role of finance minister, three critical appointments are worth highlighting: Brigadier General Rodolphe Haykal as head of the LAF, Karim Souhaid as governor of Banque du Liban, and Brigadier General Hassan Choucair as head of the General Security Directorate.

As the LAF commander will be responsible for securing the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement and Hezbollah’s disarmament, Haykal must make it clear that the Lebanese military will institute a state monopoly on weapons. Souhaid as the central bank governor must refrain from using state funds to Hezbollah’s advantage and at its direction, as previous state policy of favoring spending that uniquely benefits Hezbollah and Amal is no longer acceptable.<sup>63</sup> Since the General Security Director is one of the two most powerful positions within the Shi’a political sphere in Lebanon, Choucair must resist partnering with Hezbollah’s security head, Wafiq Safa. As each of these three positions is vital in ensuring Hezbollah’s disarmament and restricting the organization’s cash flow and smuggling operations, it is imperative that the government sideline Hezbollah from wielding influence over these posts. Throughout the course of the next year the new government will also fill vacancies in hundreds of additional positions, thereby shaping the future direction of state institutions.<sup>64</sup>

Although Lebanon has taken a step in the right direction with the election of Aoun, the appointment of Salam, and the formation of a new government, the extent to which the

government will deliver on its pledges and refuse to make financial and military appointments that are concessions to Hezbollah remains to be seen. Saudi Arabia should continue to monitor whether Hezbollah and its allies still influence critical political and security decisions. If there are signs that the government is unwilling to confront Hezbollah, Saudi should make clear that it will refrain from a policy of reengagement.

### **POLICY 3: ENSURE JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE AND FAIR ELECTIONS**

Crucially, Lebanon needs an independent, accountable, and impartial judiciary. Arguably the clearest example of judicial interference in Lebanon lies in the stalled investigation following the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Although four and a half years have passed since the explosion, no one has been held responsible, due to the judicial system's lack of transparency and accountability and judicial deadlocking. Hezbollah has also sought to exercise its influence in the judicial realm by politicizing the Lebanese judiciary.<sup>65</sup> Through targeting political opponents and shielding its allies from facing judicial consequences, Hezbollah has undermined the independence and legitimacy of Lebanon's judicial system. According to the Rule of Law Index published by the World Justice Project, in 2024 Lebanon placed 108th out of 142 countries; specifically, Lebanon ranked 109th for absence of corruption, 116th for criminal justice, and 104th for regulatory enforcement.<sup>66</sup> Lebanon's new government must oversee judicial reforms, protect judges, and shield journalists from becoming political targets. Although Lebanon has historically held some of the strongest press freedoms and civil liberties in the Middle East, over the last two decades such protections have withered. Since the onset of the financial crisis, civil liberties have become increasingly stifled, as evident in recent lawsuits against the media platforms Megaphone and Daraj.<sup>67</sup>

Ensuring the legitimacy of upcoming elections will also be crucial to strengthening Lebanon's state institutions. With municipal elections scheduled for May 31 and parliamentary elections set to take place in 2026, implementing fair electoral processes and guaranteeing that voting occurs smoothly are critical. The ensuing elections are particularly important for Hezbollah: After suffering financial and military losses, the party will look to protect its political power in both parliament and within the municipalities.<sup>68</sup> Judicial reforms must therefore prevent Hezbollah from intimidating voters or repurposing money intended for reconstruction. The judiciary must also be willing to intervene against Hezbollah if it attempts to use its weapons against Lebanese citizens, as it did in May 2008.<sup>69</sup> Given the extent to which Hezbollah has used the judiciary in the past to consolidate its power, Saudi Arabia will want to see evidence that the judiciary is not subject to influence by political actors, upholds the rule of law, and supports free and fair elections.

### **POLICY 4: IMPLEMENT A CREDIBLE ECONOMIC REFORM PACKAGE THAT MEETS IMF'S STANDARDS**

Only after Lebanon implements reforms in line with the standards of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will Saudi Arabia, and potentially other international donors, be willing to provide the financial assistance necessary to rebuild Lebanon's economy and the infrastructure losses sustained because of the war with Israel. During formal IMF discussions in 2020,

then-Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government approved a crisis-response proposal, which featured a plan to recapitalize Lebanon's failing banks, among other "painful steps."<sup>70</sup> After it met vigorous opposition, however, the plan was withdrawn. In April 2022, another agreement was reached with the IMF that would unlock US\$3 billion. Government inaction and delays have prevented its implementation.<sup>71</sup> Since the proposed reforms would restructure Lebanon's economy and demand transparency in financial transactions, which threaten years of illegal agreements among Lebanon's elites, many elites have opposed these reforms.<sup>72</sup>

Following a visit by the IMF to Lebanon in May 2024 to assess economic reforms, the ensuing IMF report noted that the lack of a "credible and financially viable strategy for the banking system continues to hamper economic growth and deposit recovery, while giving rise to an increasingly cash-based and informal economy and larger risks of illicit activities."<sup>73</sup> Current IMF policy recommendations for Lebanon include reforms to enhance transparency and strengthen the anti-corruption framework, restructure the financial sector (which would require recognizing losses at both private banks and Banque du Liban), implement a credible monetary and exchange rate system that is temporarily accompanied by capital controls, and create a fiscal strategy that uses debt restructuring and other reforms to renew credibility in the country's fiscal policy.<sup>74</sup> Lebanon's government must accept these fiscal and economic reforms, particularly those that regulate the banking sector, in order to prevent the illicit activities that sparked its collapse in the first place.<sup>75</sup> As economic reforms are critical for a strong, enduring economic recovery, Saudi Arabia should also condition its reengagement on evidence that the Lebanese government is taking concrete steps to implement an effective reform package.

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR LEBANON: THE FUTURE OF HEZBOLLAH AND THE LEBANESE SHI'A**

When discussing the necessity of excluding Hezbollah from Lebanon's political sphere, the logical next step concerns determining the future of the organization and its traditional support base, the Lebanese Shi'a. Is it possible to eradicate Hezbollah, or must they be split and co-opted in some fashion? How can the Lebanese state cleave off former Hezbollah supporters and integrate them into Lebanese politics so that its Shi'a community maintains political representation? Although a total elimination of Hezbollah in one fell swoop might be unrealistic, the Lebanese government cannot maintain its previous policy of continued engagement with Hezbollah through dialogue and negotiation. Hezbollah has a long history of welcoming "national dialogues" as a delay tactic, during which time they regroup and strengthen their support.<sup>76</sup> Lebanon's new government must act swiftly and decisively against Hezbollah politically, before regional dynamics shift in such a way that either enables Syria to serve as a weapons and drug land bridge or allows Iran to provide financial support.

Although the government must be uncompromising in its stance toward Hezbollah's political leaders, it cannot neglect the Shi'a, nor can it assume that the Shi'a community is intrinsically a part of Hezbollah. Beyond merely providing for the Shi'a in the reconstruction process, the new government must cultivate Lebanese political Shi'a groups beyond the Amal Movement and Hezbollah to serve as a legitimate source of Shi'a representation within the political system.

Without support of the Lebanese Shi'a, Hezbollah's political standing and military capabilities will crumble. Integrating the Shi'a into the political system will therefore be critical to ensuring Hezbollah's end.

## CONCLUSION

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Lebanon is now in a position to extract itself from the grip of Hezbollah and once again act as a functioning state. As Hezbollah reels from losses sustained from its conflict with Israel—losses that not only decimated its leadership and military capabilities but also threw into question its ability to protect the Lebanese people and otherwise strained its relationship with the Shi'a community—the new government under Aoun and Salam must act quickly to ensure that the group and its affiliates remain paralyzed and contained. Failure to do so will allow the organization to regroup and reassert its power. As part of these efforts, the government must cut Hezbollah out of the reconstruction process and ensure that the party's allies are excluded from the most senior government positions.

For these efforts to succeed, the international community, and Saudi Arabia in particular, must play a critical role in supporting the Lebanese government. Although Saudi has recalibrated its priorities to focus on domestic issues, it would be shortsighted to ignore the foreign policy dimensions of its new Vision 2030 strategic vision. Not only is the kingdom deeply invested in creating a stable, regional environment to attract foreign investment and facilitate its economic growth, but as it seeks to redefine itself as a prominent and reliable force on the global stage, Saudi has also expanded its role in both regional and global issues. Supporting a Lebanon that is independent of Hezbollah and no longer subject to decisive Iranian influence serves Saudi interests.

Given the decades of Saudi's ineffective involvement in Lebanon, the kingdom must devise a new approach, supporting its Levantine neighbor by conditioning assistance on transparent and tangible results and reforms. If Lebanon can adhere to such measures, then the government will have effectively signaled its commitment to pivot from Hezbollah and Iran and restore independence and legitimacy to its state institutions. As Lebanon is faced with this rare opportunity, Saudi Arabia is well positioned to reinitiate meaningful political and economic relations with the country, while also minimizing Iranian influence and promoting regional stability.

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