

Lebanon's Prospects for Leadership, Reform, and Change: A Conversation with Samir Geagea

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Samir Geagea is the leader of the Lebanese Forces party, one of the country's most important and influential political factions.



Brief Analysis

The head of the country's largest parliamentary bloc discusses the ongoing political crisis, the role of U.S. sanctions, how a new president could limit Hezbollah's domestic hegemony, and more.

On June 20, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces party. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his opening remarks and subsequent question-and-answer session with Institute scholars Robert Satloff, Hanin Ghaddar, and David Schenker.

Samir Geagea

Lebanon's unprecedented socioeconomic crisis has profoundly affected its population. The people face soaring inflation, a currency devaluated by 99 percent, and a dramatic increase in unemployment. State institutions have become paralyzed—the country lacks a functioning government, a legislating parliament, and a president. The culprit behind this crisis is a “mafia-militia clique” led by Iran-backed Hezbollah, which employs violence and intimidation to prevent the election of a president, perpetuate corruption, hinder the revitalization of state institutions, and obstruct the implementation of much-needed reforms.

The mission of the Lebanese Forces party (LF) is to establish a real and efficient state. In addition to focusing on good governance and reform, the LF

has been at the forefront of efforts to challenge Hezbollah's hegemony. Despite various difficulties stemming from other factions' reticence to confront this hegemony, the LF secured a victory in the 2022 parliamentary election, displacing Hezbollah's partner—the so-called Free Patriotic Movement—as the largest Christian bloc. As a result, Hezbollah and its allies lost their legislative majority.

Another LF priority is ensuring that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have a monopoly on the use of force inside Lebanese territory. When necessary, however, the LF itself has provided assistance to local communities “aggressed” by Hezbollah, such as during the unfortunate 2021 incident in Tayouneh.

Hezbollah is the primary obstacle to electing an honest, independent president. The group is now determined to elect Sleiman Frangieh, but the LF will continue to oppose his candidacy.

France has sought a solution to this issue, but its efforts have been unsuccessful thus far. The current French proposal suggests acquiescing to Hezbollah's demands and holding a presidential election, but the LF remains steadfast in its opposition to Frangieh or any candidate endorsed by the group. Alternative options will need to be formulated. Meanwhile, Saudi involvement has undergone a paradigm change—Riyadh's new policy is not to take sides at all.

Why is Lebanon important to America? A free, sovereign, democratic, and pluralistic Lebanon—like the country was before being dominated by Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah—exemplified religious tolerance, promoted peace and moderation, and stood against radicalism. The United States played a vital role in ending the Syrian occupation and has provided substantial security, economic, and humanitarian assistance, for which the Lebanese people are extremely grateful. Despite these efforts, however, the local situation continues to deteriorate.

Going forward, U.S. policymakers should focus their political engagement on those actors in Lebanon who are fighting for sovereignty. Although Lebanese are grateful for U.S. support, many see the current administration as an “innocent bystander.” The administration should therefore consider three key steps:

1. Help ensure that Lebanon's next president is committed to reform and respects state institutions and international resolutions.
2. Continue humanitarian support to the Lebanese people as well as assistance to the LAF and the Internal Security Forces (ISF).
3. Counter Iranian influence in Lebanon.

Q&A Session

The presidential horizon. Finding consensus with Hezbollah is difficult on a broad range of issues. The group's current position is that the next president will be Frangieh or no one, and the resultant stalemate cannot be resolved in the manner France has previously suggested. The LF is not opposed to compromise, but it will not accommodate Hezbollah on this issue. LF leaders are now awaiting the arrival of former French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, the new presidential envoy to Lebanon. Le Drian is not bringing another initiative with him; instead, LF will join him in brainstorming other options upon his arrival.

One potential candidate—LAF commander Joseph Aoun—would no doubt spur strong resistance from Hezbollah. Although he is loyal to the group's ally, the Free Patriotic Movement, the general has an independent mind and takes his decisions by himself, which is not acceptable to Hezbollah. Moreover, he would be unwilling to provide the group with the security guarantees it often demands from Beirut.

Skeptics in Washington question whether even a great new president or government would improve Lebanon's trajectory. But Aoun has made a difference in the LAF, and he would make a difference as president. To be sure, this would be evolutionary, incremental change, not revolutionary change. Yet making a difference simply requires new leaders who are willing to act as representatives of Lebanon rather than of Hezbollah; it is not necessary for them to confront the group.

Efficacy of U.S. sanctions. In general, U.S. Treasury Department designations of corrupt Lebanese elites are necessary and help advance U.S. policy, but they are insufficient. As for U.S. designations of banks and Hezbollah accounts, they had nothing to do with the country's financial crisis. The bleak economic and financial situation is the result of Beirut's mismanagement, government decrees, and the performance of the Central Bank. The economy was not affected after the United States designated the Lebanese Canadian Bank in 2011; rather, the financial sector continued to flourish at the time.

How to end the financial crisis. Politics comes first—if you have good politics, you may be able to get everything else right. The opposite is true as well. As for the prospect of an IMF bailout, a loan of several billion dollars would be helpful, but domestic measures could have similar effects. For instance, smuggling costs Lebanon \$1 billion annually, tax evasion at least \$1 billion, and problems in the electricity sector around \$2 billion. With a proper executive branch that resists compromise with Hezbollah and reduces major losses, Lebanon could extricate itself from the crisis.

Impact of a U.S. deal with Iran. The United States can engage with Tehran on the nuclear issue to avoid a devastating war in the Middle East, but this has nothing to do with Lebanon. Washington can still push back on Iranian and Hezbollah influence in Lebanon; these are separate issues.

Accountability. Under the current circumstances, nothing can be done—achieving accountability requires a real state, which requires a president, and Hezbollah will not allow this. The LF tried to move toward reforms and some accountability after the 2022 election, but the mixed parliament prevented progress. Mass protests are unlikely to recur either—the people will not return to the streets because they saw eight months of demonstrations achieve nothing in 2019.

Status of Syrian refugees. Displaced Syrians in Lebanon deserve sympathy given what is known about the Assad regime, and they understandably needed to flee the country when groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS were escalating the revolution. Twelve years later, however, reduced military

activity has created options for refugees to return to various parts of Syria, whether Assad-controlled areas, opposition-held Kurdish areas, or Idlib. Notably, some 200,000 of these refugees voluntarily voted for Assad in absentia during the last Syrian presidential election. And there is no longer a legal basis for Syrians to be recognized as refugees in Lebanon.

The situation for Christians. In the Middle East, the main struggle is usually between Sunnis and Shia. But in Lebanon it is between Shia and Christians, because most Christians reject the domination of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Demography is not the only criterion for measuring this impact; one may talk of Christian birthrates in Lebanon, but the role of Christians is not decreasing.

Prospects of another Israel-Hezbollah war. A war with Israel would not help Hezbollah advance any of its internal schemes or change the rules of Lebanese politics (though Lebanon could benefit from a comprehensive national conference to revise the system, including more moves toward decentralization). The only scenario for another war would be if Israel strikes Iran's nuclear program—in which case Hezbollah will attack Israel.

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