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## COMMENTARY

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10 December 2020

### TARGETING LEBANON'S MOST PRECIOUS COMMODITY: HUMAN CAPITAL

In the space of a few months, four of Lebanon's traditionally distinctive features of strength highlighting its unique human capital were severely hit and markedly set back—these are the Beirut harbor and three key sectors: banking, education, and medicine. The port was Lebanon's conduit to the Arab interior and its flagship for Lebanese mercantile prowess and transit trade; the banks were the backbone of its financial vibrancy and the robust attractor of hard currency into the small country; the private schools and universities, many well over a century old, constituted collectively a unique window for the country and the Arab region through which intellectual, scientific, and cultural acquisitions streamed in to help in the formation of a new Arab youthful elite; and the hospitals and medical facilities stood as a trustworthy and accessible source of cutting-edge therapeutic relief for the Arab world from a wide spectrum of ailments. A fifth blow would be added to these four if reports surfacing are true: the Gulf States plan to end the issuing of tourist and possibly other work-related visas to Lebanese. And one cannot overlook the devastating effect the coronavirus pandemic continues to have on Lebanon's strained health-care facilities and buckling hospitals.

Many are the outsiders who stand to gain potentially from these successive Lebanese setbacks. Israel comes to mind as it prepares to build on the recent cascade of normalizations with the Arabian Gulf and other prospective regional candidates. Obversely, Iran is poised to benefit by seeing Lebanon plunged more firmly into its stifling orbit. Opportunists like Erdogan of Turkey could try to fish in the murky waters of Lebanon's disgruntled Sunni community. But whatever is said about outsiders seeking to capitalize on Lebanon's woes it should never be overlooked that many of these afflictions plaguing Lebanon are self-inflicted wounds brought on by a callous and corrupt political class, a veritable mafia, which continues to suck the blood out of the country, its crumbling institutions, and its impoverished people. Thanks to their systematic robbery of the state and its assets, followed by seizure of the holdings of the banking sector that unwittingly lent huge amounts of money from people's private accounts to the successive governments run by these same crooks, Lebanon today is bankrupt, in default of paying interest on its massive debt, and consequently hurtling fast towards failed-state status.

This ruthless mafia of criminal politician-thieves is protected by Iran's proxy militia, Hezbollah. It is this paramilitary organization, serving a foreign agenda, which allegedly hence unconscionably stashed hundreds of tons of highly explosive ammonium nitrate in the Beirut port only to see these explode on August 4, 2020, in a catastrophic fireball that destroyed the port, flattened a third of residential Beirut - the mostly Christian neighborhoods - killed some 200 individuals while injuring over 6000, and caused more than 300,000 people to become homeless. Hezbollah not only turned a blind eye to the ensuing misery for the already suffering Lebanese, they have proceeded to carve out for themselves and their diehard followers an actual state-within-the-state in the areas under their direct control, namely Beirut's southern

suburbs, Shiite villages across South Lebanon, and large swaths of the Bekaa Valley. Their autonomous and heavily armed enclave is complete with its own ATM machines operating outside the country's banking system, stashes of hard currency that has otherwise disappeared from the hands of ordinary Lebanese in the other communities, social services catering exclusively to Hezbollah's loyalists, and the brisk smuggling of goods including fuel and medicines from Lebanon to neighboring Syria while weapons flow in Hezbollah's direction across the porous Syrian border as well as via the airport that they principally control.

It has become all too evident that this mafia-militia cartel now strangling Lebanon stands to gain from the further impoverishment to the point of destitution of both the Lebanese state and people. According to their infernal logic, the poorer the people become and the deeper the state sinks into failure the more dependent the suffering masses will be on meager handouts from this heartless class of former warlords-turned-kleptocrats, thereby ensuring they remain firmly entrenched in the saddles of power. For this reason Hezbollah and its allies among the crooked politicians have resisted all IMF overtures to step in with an austere plan of rescue provided the Lebanese government initiates urgent reforms in many of the country's ailing economic sectors plagued by decades of corruption. No such reforms have been forthcoming from any of the recent Hezbollah-dominated governments.

Moreover, when President Emmanuel Macron of France, using the catastrophe of the port explosion coupled with the occasion of the centenary on September 1 of the creation in 1920 by the French of Greater Lebanon, stepped in laying France's prestige and credibility on the line to press for the formation of a government of technocrats ready and willing to commence serious reforms, the vicious criminal cartel prevaricated thereby stonewalling the attempt. Macron had been willing to convene an international conference of donors for Lebanon to jump-start the country's urgently needed bailout, but when the government he was calling for never materialized French efforts ground to a halt. In parallel, it was also clear that Washington was not very excited about the French initiative succeeding since the Trump administration wanted to push its maximum-pressure campaign against Iran and its proxies and regarded Paris's vagueness on the designation of Hezbollah as both a political party and a military organization as hindering that strategy. Washington's position has since hardened by making it clear to all that a government that includes a member of Hezbollah in any cabinet post will be unacceptable. Thus, as of this writing, Lebanon remains without a government.

Meanwhile, the country continues to deteriorate on every indicator with the already severely depleted reserves of the Central Bank approaching dangerously low levels. This seems perfectly fine with Hezbollah since by blocking any avenue of assistance coming from the West hence accelerating the specter of destitution they will have set the stage for China to throw the exhausted Lebanese a lifeline that would ensure the country's forced orientation towards the East - Syria, Iran, and China - and away from Lebanon's traditional Western-Arab identity markers. This is precisely what is meant when present-day Lebanon is described as a hijacked country by Iran and hostage to its whims.

Two distinct versions of the Middle East appear to be taking shape in the region: a 21<sup>st</sup> century modern, prosperous, affluent, and stable Middle East featuring Israel along with the growing number of Arab states in the process of normalizing relations with it, and a dark-ages Middle East resembling a large Gaza-like prison under Iran's tutelage. For its part, Turkey under Erdogan seems to be charting an uncertain course replete with pitfalls. The popular street uprisings in Lebanon that broke out in October 2019 as an angry response to the emerging collapse of the country at the hands of the thieving politicians and their protectors cut across sectarian lines and united people from all walks of life around basic demands of financial solvency, economic wellbeing and security, and the chance to have their voices heard in the workings of a state not beholden to the Iran-run militia-mafia cartel. Their revolution has not shriveled or died away despite not being out in the streets in large numbers every day; it remains in the hearts and minds of the majority of Lebanese. This steadily expanding majority is itself the true measure of the robust endurance of Lebanon's popular uprising, and it desires nothing less than to join the 21<sup>st</sup> century Middle East now coalescing.

However, there are unmistakable signs of fatigue and attrition, particularly among the youth. Many who have the means are either leaving Lebanon, or seeking to leave to study or work abroad, and some are doing so to emigrate for good. A significant portion of this exodus is composed of Christians with the clear result of upsetting the delicate demographic balance among the various religious communities. The outside world, even if genuinely sympathetic to the plight of Lebanon, rightfully refuses to give the ailing country any assistance unless real reforms are launched across the board. But to expect the very crooks responsible for the country's demise to reform their ways is like expecting the fox to care for the chickens once in the coop with them. Collective punishment of the hapless Lebanese people as a whole seems to be the only game being played, and with no discernible purpose or benefit for anyone except maybe to prolong the life of the culprit cartel. So Lebanon languishes as a result of this circular standoff between outsiders who can help and insiders aided by other malicious outsiders who will not provide the minimum conditions needed for such help to come in. Once government subsidies for basics like fuel, grain, and medicines run out, the country will quickly go over the abyss into chaos with untold impacts on the neighboring area as far away as Europe.

The refrain often heard repeated by some Western envoys and diplomats addressed to the Lebanese people is: no one is going to help you get rid of Hezbollah; you will have to do it by yourselves before anyone else comes to your aid. This is tantamount to incitement to civil war. It is like asking the hostage to free himself from the clutches of his armed captor. Why is this the only option being presented to the Lebanese? The imprisoned Lebanese people, the majority of whom are opposed to what Hezbollah and the gang of crooks they protect have been doing to their country, are simply not going to plunge Lebanon into a bloody and devastating civil war just to "qualify" in the eyes of some for outside help - this is absurd!

Instead, a potent soft power weapon is in the possession of the Americans, and to a lesser degree some of their European allies like France, and Washington at least has begun to deploy it in earnest against the corrupt thieves ruling Lebanon - it comes in the form of effective targeted sanctions that go under the name of the Global Magnitsky Act as passed by the US Congress, and it is bipartisan regardless of which party controls the White House. The beauty of this option is that it is virtually cost-free and does not involve boots on the ground, yet if prosecuted cleverly based on the vast and detailed financial and intelligence information at the disposal of the US government and its agencies, it stands an excellent chance of netting back for Lebanon much of the stolen money, pulling the rug from underneath Hezbollah's feet by weakening their cartel and plunging it into disarray, and it places the US in the driver's seat to refashion a future Lebanon pretty much the way it pleases using Lebanon's own retrieved funds. If done meticulously, it would represent a master stroke and a trump card in the softpower arsenal of Lebanon's good friends abroad. As one after the other in the corrupt ruling class begins to stumble and squirm under the weight of Magnitsky's sledgehammer, the downtrodden people of Lebanon will rise up anew to resume their open defiance directed against the crumbling putrid order. The mafia, a major ally of Hezbollah, will be in terminal trouble also diminishing the militia's ability to continue its hijacking of the Lebanese. The whole nefarious setup of Iran will have begun to unravel.

As a roadmap for Lebanon's salvation this is a pathway fraught with landmines and uncertainties, but surely worth the risk given the high stakes: nothing less than the eventual dislodging of Iran from the Eastern Mediterranean. In parallel, and as a coveted prize, would be the salvaging of Lebanon's precious human capital that has constituted its main gift to itself, to the Arab region, and to the world at large wherever enterprising Lebanese have landed and succeeded. The four damaged sectors of education, health, banking, and trade, plus a reversal of the current wave of emigration - all these stand to experience a rebirth once the cartel is fatally wounded.

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