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Lebanon

Lebanon's parliament ended a years-long political stalemate in January 2025 by electing a new president, though the country continues to face domestic and security challenges, including a historic economic crisis. Armed clashes that broke out in October 2023 between Israel and the Iran-backed Shia Islamist group Lebanese Hezbollah (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and major political actor in Lebanon) in relation to the Israel-Hamas war battered already fragile social and political institutions. Other developments in late 2024—including Israeli blows against Hezbollah, a subsequent Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire, and the ouster of Bashar al Asad from Syria—may boost long-standing U.S. policies to counter the influence of Iran and Hezbollah and bolster Lebanese state capacity and reform.

Government and Politics

Lebanon's diverse population of 5.3 million people includes Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim communities of roughly comparable size. Political posts are divided among the country's various religious groups, or "confessions," to reflect each group's share of the population—although no formal census has been conducted in the country since 1932. The presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian, the prime minister post for a Sunni Muslim, and the parliament speakership for a Shia Muslim.

Two rival political coalitions largely dominated Lebanese politics after coalescing during demonstrations that took place on different dates in March 2005, when Syria announced an end to its decades-long occupation of much of Lebanon. The **March 8** political coalition includes the Free Patriotic Movement or FPM (Christian), as well as Hezbollah and the Amal Movement (both Shia), and has had ties with Syria and Iran. The **March 14** coalition traditionally has included the Future Movement (Sunni), and the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb (both Christian), and opposes Syrian and Iranian influence.

Since 2019, when Lebanon's economic crisis began (see "Economic Crisis"), Lebanese politics has undergone a series of upheavals. A protest movement that began in 2019 in response to tax hikes forced the resignation of a March 14-aligned prime minister; his successor resigned following an August 2020 explosion at Beirut's port that killed over 200 people and caused massive damage.

May 2022 parliamentary elections did not result in a clear majority for either March 8- or March 14-linked groups, contributing to paralysis on government formation. The elections automatically triggered the government's resignation, placing it in a caretaker capacity and necessitating the appointment of a new prime minister and cabinet. Then-President Michel Aoun and caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati did not agree on a new cabinet before the expiration of Aoun's term in October 2022. In twelve rounds of voting from October 2022 to June 2023, Members of Parliament (MPs) failed to select a president. The U.S. Department of State stated in October 2023 that

"Lebanon's divided parliamentarians" were "putting their personal ambitions ahead of the interests of their country" in failing to elect a president.

Figure 1. Lebanon



Source: Created by CRS using ESRI and Google Maps.

Presidential Election

After over two years of deadlock, Lebanon's parliament elected Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) chief Joseph Aoun (no relation to Michel) as president in January 2025. Following weeks of maneuvering, Hezbollah's preferred candidate dropped out and endorsed Aoun in January 2025. Aoun ended up winning with 99 of 128 votes (including at least some from Hezbollah). During his leadership of the LAF from 2017 until his election as president, Aoun generally garnered commendations from U.S. officials. Aoun is the fourth consecutive Lebanese president to have previously served as head of the LAF. In the wake of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, Aoun's election might signify greater influence in Lebanon for countries reportedly supporting him, including the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia. Saudi officials, who previously held sizable sway in Lebanese politics but had largely stepped back in the past five years, reportedly pledged to help finance post-conflict reconstruction if Aoun was elected. President Aoun appointed Nawaf Salam as prime minister after a majority of MPs endorsed Salam; Hezbollah had backed Mikati.

Hezbollah

Overview. Since its establishment in the 1980s, Hezbollah has been one of the most powerful actors in Lebanon, operating as a militia force, a political party, and a social services provider. It also has remained a terrorist organization with transnational reach. Hezbollah has participated in Lebanese elections since 1992; it currently

holds 13 of 128 seats in parliament. The group first entered the cabinet in 2005, and has held one to three posts in each subsequent Lebanese government.

According to the Department of State, Iran's government, which played a role in Hezbollah's creation during the 1980s, has long provided the group with "most of its funding, training, weapons, and explosives, as well as political, diplomatic, monetary, and organization aid." Hezbollah, long seen as the most capable Iran-backed group in the Middle East, has repeatedly threatened and engaged in combat with Israel, including a 34-day war in 2006 in which at least 1,200 people in Lebanon and 158 in Israel were killed. It has justified its hostile posture by citing Israel's presence in disputed areas of the Israel-Lebanon-Syria tri-border region.

Following that war, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 expanded the mandate of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL, created in 1978 to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces after an earlier incursion into southern Lebanon). UNIFIL's mandate includes assisting the Lebanese government in establishing "an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and UNIFIL" between the Blue Line (the U.N.-demarcated Israel-Lebanon border, which the two countries have not formalized) and the Litani River (see **Figure 1**). Hezbollah forces reportedly remained in the area.

2023-2024 conflict and ceasefire with Israel. In October 2023, Hezbollah began firing into Israel in stated solidarity with Hamas, and said it would continue doing so until Israel halted military operations in Gaza. Attacks and threats on both sides killed dozens and displaced tens of thousands. In September and October 2024, after Israel's cabinet made returning evacuated Israelis an official war objective, Israeli operations escalated. Israeli air operations killed most of Hezbollah's leadership, including longtime Hezbollah head Hassan Nasrallah, and hundreds of fighters before Israel launched ground operations against the group in southern Lebanon. In late November 2024, the United States and France brokered a ceasefire in which the Lebanese government agreed to prevent Hezbollah from attacking Israel, and to deploy 10,000 LAF soldiers to southern Lebanon; for its part, Israel agreed to withdraw its ground forces by late January 2025. A reported U.S. 'side letter' to Israel expresses U.S. support for Israeli reconnaissance flights over Lebanon and Israeli military action in response to possible ceasefire breaches.

Economic Crisis

Lebanon has since 2019 faced one of the world's most severe economic crises, with nominal GDP shrinking from \$52 billion in 2019 to \$18 billion in 2023. The World Bank estimates Lebanon has suffered \$5.1 billion in economic losses and \$3.4 billion in physical damage from conflict since October 2023.

The Lebanese *lira*/pound has lost over 98% of its value since 2019, forcing the government to reduce or eliminate subsidies on essential goods. A lack of foreign exchange to finance imports has triggered shortages of medicine, water, and fuel. An International Monetary Fund (IMF) deal to provide \$3 billion in loans remains contingent on reforms that Lebanon's caretaker government largely did not implement. The protracted economic crisis has also fed

anti-refugee sentiment in Lebanon, which hosts the most refugees per-capita in the world, including about 250,000 registered Palestinian refugees and over a million Syrians. 125,000 Syrians returned in the month after the December 2024 fall of the Asad regime, as some Asad supporters (including senior officials) reportedly fled to Lebanon.

U.S. Policy and Assistance

U.S. policy in Lebanon aims to counter the influence of Iran and Hezbollah, secure Lebanon's border, and preserve domestic stability. One U.S. priority has been to strengthen the LAF, generating debate in Congress between those who view the LAF as key to countering Hezbollah and those who argue that U.S. assistance to the LAF risks falling into the hands of U.S. adversaries. Congress has annually placed certification requirements on U.S. aid to Lebanon in an effort to prevent its misuse. U.S. officials have said that the United States seeks to provide short-term aid to buttress state institutions, but that the United States "cannot do the job of the government itself." The United States committed in the 2024 ceasefire to "work with the international community to support the LAF" to boost "its deployment levels in Lebanon, and to improve its capabilities."

Since FY2021, U.S. bilateral assistance to Lebanon has averaged around \$285 million a year, mostly in Foreign Military Financing (\$150 million requested for FY2025) to support the LAF, to which the United States has provided \$3 billion since 2006; and Economic Support Funds (\$117.5 million requested for FY2025). U.S. humanitarian aid to Lebanon since FY2019 has exceeded \$3.5 billion. In addition to aid for Lebanon, the United States provides support to UNIFIL (around \$170 million in FY2024).

Ongoing Conflict and Outlook

The 2024 Israel-Hezbollah war had immense economic and human costs in Lebanon. The weakening of Hezbollah, along with the fall of the Asad regime in Syria (a Hezbollah ally that actively engaged in Lebanon for decades), could facilitate improvement in Lebanon's economic and political situation; the January 2025 election of President Aoun may be one possible sign of progress. In a readout of a call with the newly-elected Aoun, the White House said President Biden "has full confidence President Aoun is the right leader to guide Lebanon through this moment of challenges and opportunities."

Upon taking office, Aoun called for a national security strategy "to enable the Lebanese state – I repeat, the Lebanese state – to remove the Israeli occupation and deter its aggression." The Lebanese government committed in the November 2024 ceasefire to deploy the LAF in traditional Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon; Hezbollah appears weakened, but such deployments could spark political contention or armed clashes. While continued Israeli military operations in Lebanon past January 2025 might impede Hezbollah's recovery, they could also fuel domestic political support for the group and its calls to resist or oppose Israel. Lebanon's new leaders will likely face challenging decisions related to internal security and possible economic reforms.

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