



# Containing Domestic Tensions in War-hit Lebanon

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**What's new?** Even as a fragile ceasefire holds, Lebanon is grappling with questions raised by the devastating 2023-2024 Israel-Hizbollah war. These include how hard Hizbollah's opponents will press the weakened group to disarm, as the truce requires, and whether intra-communal tensions provoked by the displacement crisis will subside or flare again.

**Why does it matter?** Lebanon has just emerged from two years with no president and only a caretaker government. The new leadership faces enormous economic challenges, including post-war reconstruction, and can ill afford a return to either political paralysis or domestic strife.

**What should be done?** The country's competing camps should move carefully and gradually rather than risk confrontation over Hizbollah's disarmament. Foreign countries should no longer meddle in this debate. Instead, they can bolster Lebanon's stability by financially supporting the cash-strapped army and organisations serving the tens of thousands who remain displaced.

## I. Overview

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In November 2024, a ceasefire ended fourteen months of hostilities between Hizbollah and Israel that the Shiite party-cum-militia had launched the preceding 8 October – one day after Hamas's fateful attacks on Israel from Gaza. Yet the tensions sparked by the conflict in Lebanon remain. Israel dealt Hizbollah withering blows, emboldening the group's adversaries in the Lebanese political system. Some are now bringing the long-running, contentious debate over disarming Hizbollah – a requirement of the ceasefire – back to the forefront. Meanwhile, most of the approximately one million Lebanese uprooted by the war have returned to their home districts, but tensions generated by the displacement could flare up again if the ceasefire collapses. Given Hizbollah's residual strengths, Lebanon's political leaders should work toward its disarmament through negotiation rather than confrontation. Outside actors should support ceasefire implementation, help bolster the Lebanese armed forces and steer clear of Lebanon's domestic politics.

In Lebanon, war-related frictions linger, despite the truce that ended fighting between Israel and Hizbollah. The ceasefire provided that, with the end of hostilities, the Lebanese army would work to ensure that Hizbollah no longer had military facil-

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ities and men under arms. Israel undertook to withdraw its remaining troops from southern Lebanon by late January. The deal created conditions that allowed many but not all of the people displaced from southern Lebanon to go home. Although the truce has held, it is fragile. Hizbollah and Israel have accused each other of violations throughout the last three months. In late January, Israel delayed its withdrawal past the deadline specified in the agreement. Its soldiers then fired upon Lebanese trying to re-enter areas still under occupation, killing dozens and wounding well over 100.

But while the world's attention focuses on whether the ceasefire will hold, the war has created several other consequential challenges for Lebanon. One set of issues concerns the tensions uncorked by the displacement of hundreds of thousands of mostly Shiite residents during the war. The truce alleviated, but did not eliminate, simmering hostility to these people among some non-Shiites – which will likely re-surface should the truce collapse.

Separately, the war has kicked off domestic debates over what role Hizbollah's military wing will play in post-war Lebanon. At the war's end, two opposing narratives have taken hold that prefigure protracted division among Lebanese politicians. On one side, Hizbollah has declared itself victorious, claiming that Israel accepted the ceasefire agreement because it had failed to destroy the movement, despite its huge technological advantages. On the other, Hizbollah's opponents say the party-cum-militia recklessly cast Lebanon into a ruinous conflict before accepting onerous ceasefire terms when its military campaign became untenable. Calling themselves "sovereignists" – because they seek to reallocate power from Hizbollah to the state – they demand that the group honour the truce accord and surrender its weapons.

Lebanon's newly appointed executive must find a way to contain these tensions while carrying out the ceasefire agreement's terms and much-needed reforms. In early 2025, Lebanese politicians elected a president, the army commander Joseph Aoun, and endorsed a new cabinet under Nawaf Salam, who was serving as president of the International Court of Justice. The appointments ended a double executive vacuum, stretching back to November 2022, during which the country had no president and only a caretaker government. Aoun pledged in his inauguration speech on 9 January that he will assert the state's monopoly on bearing arms. Hizbollah grudgingly supported him after years of stonewalling, with Lebanese leaders facing intense international pressure to choose a president. Aoun also promised to make headway on tackling Lebanon's crippling economic crisis, which has wracked public finances since October 2019.

While many Lebanese greeted Aoun's reform agenda enthusiastically, Hizbollah and its allies may not play along. Hizbollah has occupied a unique space in Lebanon's political and security landscape since the civil war (1975-1990), during which it emerged as a major part of armed resistance to Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Since then, with Iran's patronage, it has built up both military and political muscle inside Lebanon. After the drubbing the group took from Israel, its military strength is diminished, but many Lebanese still consider it a formidable fighting force, at least vis-à-vis its domestic rivals. Before the war, Hizbollah likely had up to 50,000 fighters (half of them reservists) and tens of thousands of short-range rockets. Plenty of both remain, even if Israel's claims that it killed over 3,000 fighters and eliminated 80 per cent of the rocket stockpile are correct.

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On the political side, Hizbollah and its key ally, the Amal Movement, retain firm footholds in parliament and Salam's new cabinet, despite having made striking concessions. Combined with Hizbollah's residual military strength, the two parties thus have an array of tools for obstructing the political process, or even wielding veto power, under the country's sectarian power-sharing system.

For the most part, sovereignists acknowledge that, if push comes to shove, Hizbollah remains powerful enough to overmatch any coalition of domestic adversaries militarily. Nevertheless, they think the odds of armed confrontation are low. They see the party-cum-militia as hemmed in by its disastrous (if unacknowledged) loss to Israel and thus unlikely to resort to violence – lest it trigger a resumed war with Israel or jeopardise inflows of post-war reconstruction aid. With the group on the back foot, they view the current moment as an opportunity they might not have again to deny Hizbollah its privileged access to arms.

But Hizbollah is unlikely to acquiesce to aggressive attempts aimed at forcing its disarmament. Even short of violence, Hizbollah could react in destabilising ways. When previously faced with perceived political strong-arming, Hizbollah has staged street protests – some of which turned ugly – and according to its opponents also resorted to assassinations. Right now, the group may not be at its most popular, given the war's brutal toll on Lebanese Shiites in particular. But if it looks like other sectarian parties are pulling the rug out from under Hizbollah, Shiites may rally to the group's side, increasing the risk of inter-communal violence. A major fight over Hizbollah's future could also spark conflict among Shiites.

As Lebanon's new political leadership, Hizbollah and outside actors decide how to play their hands, the key will be to consolidate the truce, while moving cautiously with respect to those elements that relate to disarmament. While the ceasefire has largely held, both belligerents have allegedly violated its terms. It is not yet clear how the Trump administration, which has upended longstanding U.S. policy in other areas, will approach Lebanon. For the sake of all those with interests in regional security (including Israel and itself), the U.S. should continue supporting the army, notwithstanding slashes to foreign aid, and use its position as chair of a committee created to monitor the ceasefire to press both sides to fulfil their obligations. The mid-February news that Israel will retain strategic positions in southern Lebanon indefinitely will make that challenge all the greater.

Lebanon's political leaders should capitalise on the war's end by probing to see if the war's upheaval has created a margin for negotiation between the country's political camps. A central objective will be convincing Hizbollah that disarmament need not amount to the party's complete demise. That could be a long, slow path, but it has better odds of success than the alternatives. Finally, outside actors should bear in mind that if they join in efforts to box out Hizbollah, they risk shoring up its domestic support. The better way to build respect for the state and its institutions is to invest in the Lebanese army, which has suffered years of severe budget cuts amid the country's financial collapse. In tandem, external partners can work with the new government to provide humanitarian relief and support reconstruction.

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## II. Upending Lebanon: The Israel-Hizbollah War

On 27 November 2024, after more than a year of fighting, Lebanon welcomed the ceasefire agreed upon between Israel and Lebanon as a much-needed respite from the increasingly disastrous conflict between Israel and Hizbollah. Yet as the embattled Lebanese people scramble to rebuild their shattered towns and villages, their leaders may be setting the stage for a showdown that could deepen the country's troubles.

### A. *From War to Ceasefire*

Hizbollah suffered severe blows during the war, despite efforts to keep the conflict contained. On 8 October 2023, the group launched rockets at Israeli forces in the disputed Shebaa Farms area.<sup>1</sup> The operation was in support of Hamas, Hizbollah's ally in the Iran-led "axis of resistance", after Hamas's attack on Israel the previous day. For nearly a year, the group and Israel traded gradually increasing yet still limited cross-border fire, with both appearing keen to avoid full-scale war.<sup>2</sup> Hizbollah repeatedly stressed that it was providing a "support front" for Hamas, aimed at diverting the Israeli military's attention from Gaza, rather than seeking a wider confrontation.<sup>3</sup>

The exchanges of fire still imposed significant costs. Tens of thousands on both sides of the border were forced from their homes, and Israeli bombardment caused considerable damage, especially in southern Lebanon. As the conflict approached its one-year anniversary, its intensity and territorial scope continued to increase.<sup>4</sup> Displaced residents of northern Israel maintained pressure on the Netanyahu government to knock out Hizbollah's arsenal of missiles and rockets, so that they could feel comfortable going home, and Israel carried out increasingly severe strikes on targets inside Lebanon.

Against this backdrop, in mid-September 2024, Israel escalated dramatically after making its displaced citizens' safe return an official war objective. In a series of operations, some of which appeared to have been years in the planning, it killed and maimed thousands of Hizbollah cadres with booby-trapped electronic devices, before launching airstrikes that wiped out many senior party figures, including long-time leader Hassan Nasrallah. The Israeli air force also bombed vast swathes of southern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley and Beirut's southern suburbs, home to many

<sup>1</sup> Israel occupied the Shebaa Farms in the 1967 war, when most of the area was controlled by Syria, yet Lebanon claims sovereignty there. Asher Kaufman, "[Who Owns the Shebaa Farms? Chronicle of a Territorial Dispute](#)", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2002); and "[UNIFIL Press Kit](#)". The UN considers the Shebaa Farms part of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, pending a formal border demarcation between Lebanon and Syria. "[Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 425 \(1978\) and 426 \(1978\)](#)", UN, 22 May 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Heiko Wimmen, "[Deterrence between Israel and Hizbollah Must Hold](#)", Crisis Group Commentary, 14 October 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Heiko Wimmen and David Wood, "[Diplomacy Must Prevail in Israel-Hizbollah Conflict](#)", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 December 2023.

<sup>4</sup> "[Israel claims it killed Hezbollah top commander in south Beirut airstrike](#)", *The Guardian*, 30 August 2024.

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Hizbollah supporters. In October, Israel invaded southern Lebanon, where it claims its troops destroyed numerous tunnels, fortifications and weapons caches.<sup>5</sup>

Losses in Lebanon were staggering. The government has so far confirmed over 4,000 dead and 16,000 injured, with the numbers mounting during the ceasefire as it recovers corpses buried under rubble.<sup>6</sup> These casualties came on top of around one million people displaced at the conflict's height. Some of the displaced secured rental accommodation in areas considered to be safer from Israeli attack, while many others were put up in overcrowded and poorly equipped public shelters.<sup>7</sup> The displacement crisis weighed particularly heavily on women and girls (more than half of the displaced), who were often exposed to gender-based violence while taking charge of daily survival.<sup>8</sup> While most of the displaced have now returned to their places of origin, even if the ceasefire holds, many people will remain stranded outside their destroyed homes for a long time to come.

While the conflict affected all Lebanese, the Shiite community faces a particularly hard road to recovery. Israel focused its aerial assaults on majority-Shiite areas where Hizbollah has its greatest political support, in what Israel claims were targeted strikes on the group's hidden military assets.<sup>9</sup> The bombardment killed hundreds of civilians and rendered many villages uninhabitable.<sup>10</sup> Shiites from these areas welcomed the ceasefire, while also wondering how they will rebuild their lives.<sup>11</sup> The state, already mired in economic crisis, cannot support the many displaced, let alone fund the country's post-war reconstruction.<sup>12</sup> In November 2024, the World Bank assessed Lebanon's losses at \$3.4 billion in destroyed buildings alone.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ["Israeli army claims they found weapons depot, tunnels in southern Lebanon school"](#), *L'Orient Today*, 19 October 2024.

<sup>6</sup> ["The untraceable number of missing in Lebanon from the Israel-Hezbollah war"](#), *L'Orient Today*, 22 December 2024.

<sup>7</sup> ["No cookers, showers or gas – displaced people shelter in Lebanese schools"](#), *Al Jazeera*, 3 October 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interview, women's justice organisation representative, Beirut, 19 November 2024. Other problems included lack of access to basic supplies and health care. A UN official reported that some displaced women had resorted to improvising menstrual pads from cloth, for lack of proper supplies. Women-headed households tended to struggle disproportionately to find proper shelter, with some women reportedly forced to exchange sex acts for rental accommodation. Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, 6 December 2024. See also ["Material losses from Israeli aggression impacted women's lives in Lebanon"](#), *al-Diyar*, 12 December 2024 [Arabic]; and ["UN Women calls for urgent action to address the needs of crisis-affected women and girls in Lebanon"](#), UN Women, 2 October 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamad Fawaz, ["On the ground with Lebanon's displaced population"](#), Diwan (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 October 2024.

<sup>10</sup> ["The demolitions clearing Israel's 'first belt' in Lebanon"](#), *Financial Times*, 2 November 2024.

<sup>11</sup> ["Resentment among Hizbollah's constituency"](#), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 16 December 2024 [Arabic].

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°228, ["Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises"](#), 28 October 2021.

<sup>13</sup> ["Lebanon interim damage and loss assessment"](#), World Bank, November 2024. In January, Lebanon's caretaker deputy prime minister noted that the World Bank's estimate did not cover the war's final month. "The government does not have the financial resources for reconstruction", he said. ["Lebanese whose homes were destroyed in the war want to rebuild: Many face a long wait"](#), Associated Press, 12 January 2025. In February, Lebanese media reported that the World Bank's revised estimate had risen to \$14 billion. ["World Bank assessment estimates Lebanon's damages"](#)

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The Israel-Lebanon ceasefire of 27 November 2024 echoes the conditions of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the last major cross-border conflict in 2006.<sup>14</sup> The terms require that Israel withdraw from southern Lebanon; that no armed non-state actor remain south of the Litani River; that the Lebanese army deploy there in force; and that the Lebanese government get rid of any unauthorised military infrastructure or facility for storing, producing or importing arms anywhere in the country.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. and France, which brokered the November deal, are participating in a newly formed monitoring mechanism tasked with addressing infractions of the truce's terms. To date, the ceasefire is holding, despite each side accusing the other of violations and Israel receiving a three-week extension of the original deadline for its troop withdrawal.<sup>16</sup>

## B. *Two Tales of War*

Lebanon's competing factions perceive the country's involvement in the war in starkly different terms. Hizbollah's opponents blame it for dragging Lebanon into a destructive conflict. As a parliamentarian who stridently opposes Hizbollah put it, "As Lebanese, the Palestinian issue is dear to our hearts – but not dear enough to allow Lebanon to be destroyed".<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Hizbollah asserts that the war was inevitable: even if Hizbollah had not attacked, Israel would have seized on another pretext to weaken the group and change the region's strategic balance.<sup>18</sup>

The two camps also have contradictory perspectives on the war's outcome. When the ceasefire came into effect on 27 November 2024, the party faithful returned to what in many cases were devastated homes and villages amid triumphant celebrations. On 29 November, Secretary-General Naim Qassem, who replaced the late Nasrallah, declared a "victory greater than in 2006". Later, he elaborated, claiming that Hizbollah had forced Israel to accept a truce by inflicting heavy losses on Israeli troops and disrupting daily life in Israel through persistent aerial attacks.<sup>19</sup>

Hizbollah's opponents contend, by contrast, that the group has been soundly defeated, even if not destroyed militarily. Hizbollah's detractors feel further emboldened by the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. For decades, Syria had served

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[and losses at \\$14 billion, with \\$12 billion in additional needs: Sources to LBCI](#)", LBC Group, 20 February 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Heiko Wimmen, David Wood and Mairav Zonszein, "[Can the Hizbollah-Israel Ceasefire Hold?](#)", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 December 2024. "[Beyond a ceasefire: A comparative analysis of UN-SCR 1701 and the 2024 ceasefire agreement](#)", Issam Fares Institute for Policy and International Affairs (Beirut), 31 January 2025.

<sup>15</sup> "[Decision of the Council of Ministers to #1 of 27 November 2024 to reaffirm the renewed commitment to the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701, including all relevant implications and commitments](#)", Lebanese Council of Ministers, 27 November 2024 [Arabic], posted on the Facebook Account of the Council of Ministers, attaching the original English agreement text bearing the signature of the prime minister.

<sup>16</sup> "[Israeli and Hezbollah strikes test limits of ceasefire](#)", BBC, 3 December 2024; "[Israel and Lebanon extend truce, with IDF troop withdrawal deadline moved to Feb. 18](#)", *Times of Israel*, 27 January 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 12 November 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior party official, Beirut, 12 December 2024.

<sup>19</sup> "[Speech of Sheikh Naim Qassem](#)", *al-Ahed News*, 14 December 2024 [Arabic].



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as a supply channel for Hizbollah to receive equipment from its patron, Iran. After Assad's flight from Damascus on 8 December 2024, the leader of the Lebanese Forces party, Samir Geagea, declared that it was "game over for Hizbollah".<sup>20</sup> This view's proponents believe that Hizbollah will now have no choice but to disarm.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Three Post-war Visions of Hizbollah's Domestic Role

After the war, Lebanon's political factions ended the country's protracted double executive vacuum by agreeing upon a new president, prime minister and government. For well over two years, Lebanese parliamentarians failed to elect a successor to former President Michel Aoun, whose term ended on 31 October 2022. Throughout that period, Lebanon had only a caretaker cabinet in place, led by interim Prime Minister Najib Mikati. On 9 January, the legislature at last voted to elect Joseph Aoun (no relation to Michel), Lebanon's army commander, as president. Four days later, lawmakers chose Nawaf Salam, the International Court of Justice president and a former diplomat, to become prime minister and form a new cabinet. On 8 February, Salam unveiled his new ministerial line-up. He reached this point after leading three weeks of intense negotiations, in which various political groups nominated some of the ministers in his largely technocratic government.

Now, Lebanon's new executive must keep factional tensions at bay while addressing the volatile debate over Hizbollah's military wing, which has divided Lebanese politicians for more than two decades. After its previous war with Israel, in 2006, Hizbollah increasingly came to dominate Lebanese politics. Wall-to-wall electoral support from the Shiite community and nimble political tactics allowed the party to block unfavourable decisions, including with respect to its disarmament. Lebanon's political system, in which each camp has ways to obstruct the other's plans, also worked in the group's favour.<sup>22</sup> Thus, with notable exceptions, the party's clout rendered it unnecessary to deploy its military assets to prevail in domestic political contestation over issues like its disarmament – though, according to the group's opponents, an implicit threat of violence loomed over all contentious deliberations.<sup>23</sup>

The question facing Lebanon's leaders is whether that has changed in a way that could presage a change in Hizbollah's prerogatives. Beyond the ceasefire terms, which require Hizbollah's disarmament, the pummeling that the group took in the

<sup>20</sup> "[A diminished Hezbollah is made even weaker by the toppling of Assad in Syria](#)", Associated Press, 15 December 2024.

<sup>21</sup> A parliamentarian opposed to Hizbollah said, "Hizbollah represents a significant part of Lebanese society and should be part of the political equation. We don't ask from them anything more than what we accepted for ourselves a long time ago: hand in our weapons and start competing in politics". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 13 December 2024.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°160, [Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies](#), 20 July 2015. Lebanese power-sharing conventions deem it unacceptable to exclude any of the country's major sects from key decisions, conferring an informal veto power on each of these groups in many situations.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, [Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward](#), 15 May 2008. Critics accuse Hizbollah of assassinating scores of activists and politicians opposed to the group and its erstwhile backer, the Assad regime in Syria. "[Lebanon's growing list of assassinations: A historical perspective](#)", Al Arabiya, 7 February 2021.

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most recent round of conflict with Israel has prompted even centrist actors to anticipate a shift in power dynamics. A political source close to Mikati, who took a moderate line toward Hezbollah, predicted, “None of the political parties will accept the return of Hezbollah’s military capacity [after the war]”.<sup>24</sup>

Aoun and the Salam government will encounter a range of visions for the future of Hezbollah’s military wing. The pro-Hezbollah camp projects confidence that it can largely preserve its pre-war position and resist disarmament. Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s most vocal opponents view the group’s weakening as a unique opportunity to transform the status quo, forcing the group to surrender its arms swiftly. In the middle are centrists who propose seeking a gradual rebalancing of Hezbollah’s military and political power through negotiation.

#### A. *Vision 1: Resisting Disarmament*

Hezbollah rejects suggestions that the war’s outcome will boost the agenda of its domestic opponents.<sup>25</sup> Party representatives emphasise that Hezbollah will comply with the ceasefire agreement and withdraw from lands south of the Litani, but that it will not disarm. Secretary-General Qassem has stressed that the truce applies to that area only, even though its terms require Lebanon to dismantle unauthorised military facilities throughout the country.<sup>26</sup> In December 2024, a senior Hezbollah official said:

Israel will not get through an agreement what it failed to get through war. We can count on 50 MPs [including Hezbollah’s non-Shiite allies] to support the resistance. We will be part of any future government, so there will be no such instructions for the army. And even if the army were to receive orders to take away these weapons, they won’t be able to carry them out. There will be no clashes between the army and the resistance [Hezbollah]; there will only be coordination.<sup>27</sup>

Hezbollah justifies retaining its military program as necessary for Lebanon’s national security.<sup>28</sup> Party officials argue that Israel seeks to reshape the regional balance of power in its favour, as evidenced by its attacks on Syria after the Assad regime’s demise. They reason that, due to Israel’s massive military advantage, only asymmet-

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 23 October 2024. Representatives from nearly all major political parties, except Hezbollah and Amal, shared this view. Crisis Group interviews, October 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Qassem said, “Those who banked on Hezbollah’s weakening failed in their calculations”. [“Speech of the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, His Eminence Sheikh Naim Qassem, on the occasion of the great victory”](#), *al-Ahed News*, 29 November 2024 [Arabic]. For speculation about Hezbollah’s political problems, see Michael Young, [“An old Lebanese habit”](#), Diwan (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 November 2024.

<sup>26</sup> [“Lebanon cannot exist without the Resistance anymore: Naim Qassem”](#), *L’Orient Today*, 4 January 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 12 December 2024.

<sup>28</sup> [“Back to the beginnings: Preserving sovereignty is guaranteed by the army, people and resistance equation”](#), *al-Akhbar*, 26 November 2024 [Arabic].



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rical warfare – as practised by Hizbollah and its allies – can effectively protect Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

To safeguard its interests in the political sphere, Hizbollah still relies on support from Amal, its Shiite ally. Together, the two groups – known as the “Shiite duo” – monopolise parliamentary representation of the Shiite community, which has traditionally given them a de facto veto in Lebanon’s power-sharing system.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Amal chief Nabih Berri, through his position as parliament speaker, wields the crucial prerogative to convene the legislature. The alliance’s importance has grown greater still as non-Shiite forces, notably Hizbollah’s erstwhile partner the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a major Christian party, shy away from the group following the war.<sup>31</sup>

Amid rising pressure, Berri has steadfastly supported Hizbollah. He handled ceasefire negotiations on Hizbollah’s behalf, and he later paid tribute to the group’s self-proclaimed victory.<sup>32</sup> During the war, Hizbollah’s opponents suggested that discontent among Shiites would motivate Berri to distance himself from Hizbollah, but he did not.<sup>33</sup> Concerning Hizbollah’s weapons, a senior adviser to Berri floated revisiting a proposal, first discussed back in 2006, to integrate Hizbollah’s armed wing into the Lebanese army.<sup>34</sup> But Amal supports this idea only if agreement upon it is reached through long-term dialogue about Lebanon’s national defence strategy, not if it is an immediate condition imposed on Hizbollah.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior party official, Beirut, 12 December 2024. A parliamentarian opposed to Hizbollah objected: “Arms cannot defend Lebanon from Israel; only international legitimacy will”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 13 December 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Together, Amal and Hizbollah hold all the 27 parliamentary seats reserved for Shiites (of 128 seats altogether). As a result, they typically expect to select all the Shiite ministers in Lebanese governments.

<sup>31</sup> In October 2024, FPM leader Gebran Bassil declared his party’s eighteen-year alliance with Hizbollah over, blaming the group for dragging Lebanon into the Gaza war. See [post on X](#) by Gebran Bassil, @Gebran\_Bassil, 12:17pm, 22 October 2024. Since the war’s end, some of the pro-Hizbollah camp’s Druze and Sunni members have qualified their support for the party. See [“Wahhab declares support for normalisation with Israel”](#), *L’Orient Today*, 16 December 2024; and [“Has Nasrallah’s death and Assad’s fall freed Sunni MPs from their commitments?”](#), *al-Modon*, 18 December 2024 [Arabic]. Most senior leaders from non-Shiite communities chose not to attend Nasrallah’s large public funeral on 23 February.

<sup>32</sup> [“Return to your land, even if it means living atop the rubble”, Berri tells the displaced](#), *L’Orient Today*, 27 November 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Despite Berri’s public displays of support, some Hizbollah critics speculate that he may be subtly seeking ways to gain separation from his long-time ally. [“Amal freed from Hizbollah: a minister with American citizenship”](#), *Nida al-Watan*, 29 January 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>34</sup> Martin Wählich, [“The Lebanese National Dialogue”](#), Berghof Foundation, March 2017. A senior Hizbollah representative expressed openness to such ideas as part of a “national defence doctrine” that defines Israel as Lebanon’s primary enemy. He said it would guarantee that the army would be capable of defending Lebanon from Israeli attack. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 12 December 2024. A politician opposed to Hizbollah said, “Individual Hizbollah members can volunteer, but integrating entire Hizbollah units is unacceptable. This would destroy the army from the inside”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 13 December 2024. A Lebanese strategy consultant who has worked directly with the army also foresaw prohibitive obstacles to Hizbollah’s integration. Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 December 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amal official, Beirut, 24 October 2024. Asked whether the integrated Hizbollah units would then answer to the Lebanese government or Hizbollah, the official replied,

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Despite its firm stance on disarmament, Hizbollah has made several key concessions relating to Lebanon's newly minted executive. The Shiite duo fell into line behind electing Joseph Aoun as president, after having insisted on their own candidate, Suleiman Frangieh, for over two years. The election took place under considerable external pressure; before the vote, U.S. and Saudi envoys encouraged a wide range of parliamentarians to back Aoun's candidacy.<sup>36</sup> Hizbollah's parliamentary bloc leader justified the Shiite duo's voting for Aoun as an effort to preserve the "national consensus", while calling on the country's leaders to "prevent foreign interference in ... internal affairs".<sup>37</sup>

After Aoun's election, Hizbollah initially objected to Salam's designation as prime minister, before eventually agreeing to submit names of people to join his cabinet.<sup>38</sup> Crucially, Hizbollah and its allies relinquished key levers within Salam's government that they insisted on holding in prior cabinets. The pro-Hizbollah camp no longer holds one third of the ministerial portfolios, a share that in the past allowed it to block executive decisions and make plausible threats to bring down the government entirely. Nor did Hizbollah and Amal choose all five Shiite ministers, as they have previously done, meaning that they cannot claim to be the sole representatives of the Shiite community in Salam's cabinet. Berri did demand to nominate the new finance minister, and Salam acceded.<sup>39</sup> The finance minister countersigns any executive decree with a budgetary component, which in effect gives the person in this post a procedural veto in such matters.<sup>40</sup> The duo's footholds in parliament and government, along with Hizbollah's remaining military capacity, could help them push back against attempts at disarmament.

## B. *Vision 2: Swift Disarmament*

Hizbollah's fiercest rivals view the group's military losses as an unprecedented chance to break its military power and weaken its political influence. These include opposition Christian parties like the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, as well as several prominent Sunni parliamentarians, all of whom have long insisted that Hizbollah surrender its weapons and end its dominance in Lebanese politics.<sup>41</sup> These actors

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"This would be a domestic, Lebanese issue, and no concern for outside actors". In mid-February, Amal chief Berri affirmed this position. ["Berri sets it straight: The weapons north of the Litani are a domestic issue"](#), *al-Milaffat*, 13 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>36</sup> Maha Yahya, ["Joseph Aoun has been elected president of Lebanon"](#), Diwan (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 January 2025.

<sup>37</sup> ["Raad says 'protected national consensus' by voting for Aoun"](#), *Naharnet*, 9 January 2025. Over two rounds of voting, several parliamentarians submitted votes protesting external interference with the election. One ballot read "Joseph Amos bin Farhan", in reference to U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein and Saudi official Yazid bin Farhan, both of whom met with parliamentarians before the vote.

<sup>38</sup> Hizbollah reportedly believed it had received guarantees that in return for supporting Aoun for president, its adversaries would let Mikati, its preferred candidate for prime minister, be reappointed. ["Lebanon's Nawaf Salam to be designated PM, angering Hezbollah"](#), Reuters, 14 January 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Reportedly, Salam accepted Berri's choice for finance minister in exchange for Aoun and Salam nominating the fifth Shiite minister (with Berri's consent). ["How the Salam government was finally formed"](#), *L'Orient Today*, 9 February 2025.

<sup>40</sup> ["Why the Shiites care so much about the finance ministry"](#), *L'Orient Today*, 16 September 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Viette, ["Opposition rallies against Hezbollah"](#), France 24, 13 March 2011.

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demand fulfilment of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004), which calls for the disarmament of all non-state actors in Lebanon, a demand that both Resolution 1701 and the ceasefire agreement reaffirm. They propose to achieve this outcome by relying on a “sovereignist” president and government with a clear mandate to tackle Hizbollah. By “sovereignist” (*siyadi* in Arabic), they mean an executive that will stop Hizbollah from usurping key elements of Lebanese state sovereignty – chiefly, the state’s monopoly on bearing arms and making decisions about war and peace – on behalf of its patron, Iran.

“Sovereignists” generally greeted Aoun and Salam’s appointments as positive steps, but they have voiced concern that these men are too willing to compromise with Hizbollah. For that reason, Aoun was not these factions’ first choice for president. They do generally view him as enjoying political independence from Hizbollah, however, additionally arguing that he has a strong mandate to confront the group’s military wing under the ceasefire deal.<sup>42</sup> The sovereignist camp backed Salam over Hizbollah’s preferred candidate for prime minister, Mikati, but some have criticised Salam for making concessions to the Shiite duo in forming the new government.<sup>43</sup> Hizbollah’s rivals variously called for excluding the group from the cabinet altogether or granting it only minor portfolios. In the end, Salam handed four ministries to Shiite duo nominees, including the crucial finance post, which some sovereignists fear could become a platform for blocking executive action.<sup>44</sup>

Groups claiming a “sovereignist” outlook still tend to envisage an important role for foreign countries in their quest and they have lauded those who helped advance it. A sovereignist politician pointed out that Hizbollah had yielded control of Beirut’s airport during the war to the Lebanese army – a longstanding demand of his party – under U.S. and Israeli pressure.<sup>45</sup> Shortly before Salam announced his new cabinet, a Lebanese Forces parliamentarian endorsed calls by U.S. officials to exclude Hizbollah from the government and voiced hopes of getting similar foreign backing for future efforts to corral the group.<sup>46</sup> Some also look to Saudi Arabia, Iran’s long-term adversary, to marshal parliamentary coalitions against Hizbollah and demand major

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lebanese Forces parliamentarian, Beirut, 30 January 2025. Crisis Group interview, sovereignist party official, Broumana, Lebanon, 29 January 2025.

<sup>43</sup> “[Questions for Lebanon’s government](#)”, *Nida al-Watan*, 11 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>44</sup> “[The finance ministry is not for thieves](#)”, *Nida al-Watan*, 1 February 2025 [Arabic]. Before Salam formed his government, a Lebanese Forces parliamentarian said Hizbollah should not get a key portfolio like finance or health. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 30 January 2025. In the end, an Amal nominee got the finance ministry and a Hizbollah nominee got health. A newspaper critical of Hizbollah also suggested that the group might try to divert aid provided to the environment ministry, whose new head Amal helped choose. “[Hizbollah’s strategy to support itself financially](#)”, *Nida al-Watan*, 3 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 13 December 2024. See also “[Are Beirut’s port and airport finally ‘distanced’ from Hezbollah?](#)”, *L’Orient Today*, 12 October 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 30 January 2025. “[Letter from Congressmen Darin LaHood and Darrell Issa to President Donald Trump](#)”, 28 January 2025. The day before Salam announced his cabinet, U.S. envoy Morgan Ortagus said Hizbollah should be excluded, describing its participation as a “red line” for Washington. “[U.S. demands Hezbollah be omitted from Lebanese government](#)”, Al Jazeera, 7 February 2025. Earlier, a prominent Shiite journalist and Hizbollah opponent had expressed hopes that outside powers would maintain pressure on Lebanese politicians to make genuine reforms. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 January 2025.

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political concessions from the group before releasing post-war reconstruction funding.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, sovereignist politicians often predict that regional developments will militate in favour of their ambitions to rein in Hizbollah. Some predicate their hopes for Hizbollah's defanging on an anticipated U.S.-led campaign to force Iran to curtail its regional power projection, including Tehran's support for Hizbollah.<sup>48</sup> They also expect that Israel will maintain military pressure on the group unless it cooperates in carrying out the ceasefire deal's terms. Prompted by a question about how to overcome Hizbollah's refusal to disarm north of the Litani, an opposition politician said, "Either Hizbollah disarms voluntarily, or Israel and the U.S. will do it for them".<sup>49</sup> Yet such views tend to discount other possibilities. For example, Iran might decide to reinforce its most important regional ally, coming to Hizbollah's aid, or an Israeli breach of the ceasefire terms might boost the group's support inside Lebanon. Other risks are explored in Section IV.

### C. *Vision 3: Gradual Disarmament and Rebalancing*

Between the two poles are centrist Lebanese politicians. They say Hizbollah cannot be allowed to retain its current posture but warn that change should proceed gradually. This view's proponents, including former caretaker Prime Minister Mikati and veteran Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, fear that Hizbollah's local and foreign opponents might push the group too hard, too soon. In these circumstances, the result could be direct confrontation between Hizbollah and its foes, which could descend into violence, as it has in the past.

Such concerns loom especially large as Hizbollah's supporters may be sensitive to what they see as attempts by their rivals to sideline the party and the Shiite community writ large on the back of Israel's onslaught. During the war, an independent Christian member of parliament, who has worked closely with Hizbollah, summarised this perspective:

It is dangerous how opposition parties are now hurrying to attack Hizbollah [politically]. They [Hizbollah] have been damaged badly; the community has suffered tremendously; the "resistance" narrative is in tatters. There is a big wound in the Shiite community. Right now, they are turning that anger on Israel. We would not want them to turn it back on Lebanon.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> During the war, two senior Sunni politicians expressed hope that Saudi Arabia would lean on Sunni parliamentarians to vote for a president willing to confront Hizbollah. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, October 2024. Saudi officials likewise expressed cautious interest in re-engaging in Lebanon. Crisis Group interviews, Saudi officials and experts, Riyadh, February and December 2024.

<sup>48</sup> A Lebanese Forces official called for an international decision to ban Iranian weapons shipments to groups like Hizbollah in order to curtail Iran's "axis of resistance" project. Crisis Group interview, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon, 15 October 2024. Hizbollah's opponents generally avoid explicit endorsement of Israel's military campaign against the group but emphasise that its successes have undermined Hizbollah's domestic standing.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 13 December 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 14 October 2024.

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After the ceasefire took effect, many political parties refrained from publicly challenging Hizbollah's victory narrative, and today most anticipate that the group will continue to play a meaningful political role.<sup>51</sup> Based on this reasoning, such actors stress the need for a negotiated arrangement. In October 2024, the head of Kataeb, Sami Gemayel – an avowed opponent of Hizbollah – described an “ideal scenario”, whereby Hizbollah would first peacefully surrender its weapons to the state and then enter a national dialogue about Lebanon's future. Gemayel said the Shiite community might even receive benefits following Hizbollah's disarmament, such as greater executive representation.<sup>52</sup> A Lebanese Forces parliamentarian dismissed the idea of offering political concessions to encourage disarmament as “ridiculous”, given the weakened position of Hizbollah and its regional allies.<sup>53</sup>

To be sure, striking a deal through negotiation would be enormously challenging, necessitating lengthy, complicated discussions. Even if talks were to yield a settlement that Hizbollah and its opponents could accept, Hizbollah's patron Iran might thwart plans for disarmament, depending on its own regional priorities. But if there is to be progress toward disarmament, such a bargain should not be excluded as a way to achieve it, particularly given the risks that would be entailed should Hizbollah's opponents seek to impose concessions at what they feel is an opportune moment.

#### **IV. The Risks of Confrontation**

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A confrontation between Hizbollah and its domestic opponents could generate dangerous amounts of friction, dragging Lebanon into turbulent waters. The pro-Hizbollah camp, despite its recent concessions, could use its footholds in state institutions to paralyse government action, including on disarming Hizbollah. As noted, the Shiite duo chose four ministers in Salam's cabinet, including the finance minister, Yassine Jaber, who wields the “fourth signature” on all executive orders involving public expenditure. Previous finance ministers aligned with Hizbollah and Amal have faced accusations that they cynically blocked policy changes by refusing to sign

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<sup>51</sup> A parliamentarian belonging to Jumblatt's group, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), said, “Those who banked on [Hizbollah's] decisive victory didn't get it right, and neither did those who banked on a massive defeat”. [“Abou Faour to al-Nahar: Hizbollah has placed itself and the country before a massive challenge”](#), *al-Nahar*, 2 December 2024 [Arabic]. Lebanese social media users shared content deriding Hizbollah's victory narrative. See, for example, [“Lebanese MP mocks coalition's claims of Hizbollah 'victory'”](#), *Erem News*, 29 November 2024 [Arabic].

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bikfaya, Lebanon, 8 October 2024. Similarly, Jumblatt's PSP favours finding a way to bring Hizbollah “inside the state”, whereby the security forces would absorb its fighters and the party would engage strictly in politics. Crisis Group interview, PSP parliamentarian, Beirut, 30 October 2024. The politician pointed out that several Lebanese parties, including the PSP, had undergone a similar transformation after the civil war ended in 1990.

<sup>53</sup> The parliamentarian argued that Hizbollah's incentive to surrender its weapons should be nothing more than securing its own political survival. “If Hizbollah participates in the next government and avoids implementing the ceasefire, then Lebanon risks being isolated again. Hizbollah will need to take this opportunity – or else other Shiite groups will emerge to take its votes”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 30 January 2025.



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decrees.<sup>54</sup> Jaber has stressed that he enjoys independence from all political parties and will not obstruct government business – but the duo’s opponents are unconvinced.<sup>55</sup> Outside the cabinet, Hizbollah and Amal will continue to monopolise the Shiite community’s parliamentary representation, at least until the next legislative elections, which are scheduled for May 2026.

Hizbollah might also push back against government policies outside state institutions. In the past, Hizbollah has instigated popular demonstrations, some of which turned violent, to protest executive action. For instance, in November 2006, Hizbollah contested the legitimacy of Fouad Siniora’s government after the cabinet’s Shiite ministers, who had been fielded by Hizbollah and Amal, collectively resigned.<sup>56</sup> The government tried to continue, but there was considerable disruption as Hizbollah organised large street protests and sit-ins that shut down central Beirut for more than a year.<sup>57</sup> In May 2008, that crisis led to an armed showdown, in which Hizbollah and its allies invaded parts of Beirut.<sup>58</sup> Hizbollah’s opponents have accused it of deploying unruly mass protests on other occasions, and sometimes ordering assassinations, to achieve political goals.<sup>59</sup>

In mid-February, a government decision to ban flights from Iran – reportedly, after Israel threatened to attack Beirut’s airport to prevent cash transfers reaching Hizbollah in this way – prompted Hizbollah-aligned protesters to temporarily block the airport road, attack a UN convoy and clash with the Lebanese army.<sup>60</sup> In the aftermath, a prominent Hizbollah-aligned intellectual warned that pressure on the Shiite community could lead to formation of militant groups outside the control of Hizbollah or Amal.<sup>61</sup>

Hizbollah’s main foes play down the possibility that the group could revive such violent scenarios in the current circumstances. Unlike in 2006, the Shiite duo did not choose all the Shiite ministers in the Salam government, making it difficult for them to recycle the argument they raised then, namely that a cabinet without Shiite representation has no constitutional legitimacy.<sup>62</sup> In any event, Hizbollah’s rivals

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, [“Relatives of port blast victims accuse finance minister of obstructing progress on probe into the explosion”](#), *L’Orient Today*, 27 April 2022.

<sup>55</sup> [“Finance ministry: Jaber assures he ‘will not block’ cabinet”](#), *L’Orient Today*, 9 February 2025. While Hizbollah’s opponents generally accept Jaber’s professional qualifications for the position, they fear that the Shiite duo could manipulate his actions for political purposes. [“Yassin Jaber, an ‘Amalite’ unlike the others?”](#), *L’Orient Today*, 8 February 2025.

<sup>56</sup> [“Hezbollah and allies resign from Lebanon cabinet”](#), *Tehran Times*, 13 November 2006.

<sup>57</sup> [“Hezbollah sit-in has Beirut at a standstill”](#), *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 2006. A newspaper critical of Hizbollah also recalled the “black shirts incident” of February 2011, when Hizbollah members dressed in black marched through Beirut’s streets to put pressure on the government. [“Hezbollah and its policy of imposition”](#), *Nida al-Watan*, 28 January 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Arsan, *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments* (London, 2018), pp. 83–85.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group Conflict Alert, [“Violence Threatens Fraying Rule of Law in Lebanon”](#), 18 October 2021. [“Warnings to centrist and opposition MPs: Assassinations are pursuing you”](#), *Nida al-Watan*, 4 December 2024 [Arabic].

<sup>60</sup> [“Protests against the banning of the Iranian plane: Hezbollah confronts the notion of its demise”](#), *al-Modon*, 14 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>61</sup> [“Warning of attacks by groups outside the control of the Shiite duo”](#), *al-Jadid*, 15 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>62</sup> According to article (J) of the preamble to the Lebanese constitution, “There is no legitimacy to any authority in contradiction of the pact of national coexistence”. After Salam was designated as



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contend that the group cannot afford to trigger more conflict now, lest it jeopardise reconstruction aid that many beleaguered Shiites urgently need. Moreover, they believe that the party has lost much of its former ideological appeal, following a disastrous war. A sovereignist party official said:

In the past, Hizbollah would threaten to go into the streets and use violence. But that option no longer exists. ... I don't think that their rallying cries would work with many Shiites now. So many desperately want to get on with reconstruction.<sup>63</sup>

Following this logic, they view the present moment as an unprecedented opening, and one which may not arise again, to push hard for Hizbollah's disarmament. In addition, sovereignist groups believe that the war's effects could organically loosen Hizbollah's grip on the political system over time. They assume that neither Hizbollah nor Iran can meet the enormous costs of Lebanon's post-war reconstruction.<sup>64</sup> A senior Lebanese Forces official argued that potential donors – especially Gulf Arab states that oppose Hizbollah's influence – would decline to fund significant rebuilding projects unless the group cedes power.<sup>65</sup> At the war's height, some Hizbollah adversaries expressed hope that Lebanon's worsening situation would eventually lead Amal (and even Hizbollah) voters to withdraw their support at the ballot box for fear of further wars.<sup>66</sup>

For now, however, Hizbollah remains a formidable political force. It made concessions as part of the deal to end the executive vacuum, but these were not necessarily a sign of capitulation. The party's ostensible flexibility on Aoun's election could well have been intended to stave off accusations that its political decisions prevent Lebanon from receiving reconstruction aid, given the hardships facing Hiz-

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prime minister, the spokesman of Hizbollah's parliamentary group, Mohamed Raad, insinuated that a cabinet without Hizbollah and Amal would amount to excluding Shiites, as these two parties control all the Shiite seats in parliament, rendering such a government constitutionally illegitimate. "[Lebanon's Nawaf Salam to be designated PM, angering Hezbollah](#)", op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 12 January 2025.

<sup>64</sup> Although Hizbollah's leader has vowed to fund reconstruction, displaced Shiites have reportedly complained about the party's insufficient emergency support. "[Lebanese whose homes were destroyed in the war want to rebuild: Many face a long wait](#)", op. cit. The party appears to be focusing on short-term solutions, such as providing rent subsidies and funding to rehabilitate salvageable housing. Crisis Group interviews, residents of Beirut's southern suburbs, Beirut, January 2025.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon, 15 October 2024. Gulf Arab states contributed generously to Lebanon's reconstruction after the 2006 war, but they have drastically reduced financial support for the country since the mid-2010s, reportedly due to Hizbollah's influence. See, for example, "[Saudi Arabia halts \\$3 billion package to Lebanese army, security aid](#)", Reuters, 19 February 2016. The claim that Hizbollah is the main reason that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries refuse to support Lebanon financially has long been a staple in the discourse of its opponents. Hussain Abdul-Hussein, "[How Hezbollah's hold destroyed Lebanon's relationship with Saudi Arabia](#)", *Arab Weekly*, 11 March 2021.

<sup>66</sup> "The Shiites are paying the biggest price for the war. We need to convince them not to support the country's continued destruction", said an independent Lebanese parliamentarian who has long opposed Hizbollah and Iran's influence over Lebanon. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 29 October 2024.

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zbollah's constituents.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, while anecdotal evidence suggests discontent among Lebanese Shiites about the war's immense toll, and several new opposition groups have called for viable political alternatives to the Shiite duo, here, too, it is not clear that the pressure on Hezbollah is as great as its opponents wish.<sup>68</sup> On 23 February, huge crowds gathered in Beirut for the official burial of Nasrallah and his intended successor, Hashim Safieddine.<sup>69</sup> It remains to be seen if the war and the aftermath will generate significant change in elections, the next of which are more than a year away.

Even if Hezbollah's political appeal has dulled, there are risks in confronting the group that must be taken into account. First, the wartime suffering of Shiites, compounded by political setbacks, may fuel a siege mentality within that community.<sup>70</sup> Over the decades, the Shiite duo claims to have secured more prominence for the historically disadvantaged Shiite masses in Lebanon's political order than they have ever had before.<sup>71</sup> A Hezbollah-aligned academic predicted that any attempt to coerce Hezbollah into submission would inflame deeply rooted communal sensitivities:

Rolling back Hezbollah politically means erasing all the political gains the Shiite community made since the 1970s. In Lebanon, any attempt of this sort will lead to violence.<sup>72</sup>

Hezbollah has taken steps to exploit such sentiments, creating the impression that the entire Shiite community's political aspirations – and not just Hezbollah's fortunes – are at stake in the struggle over the party's future.<sup>73</sup> Direct foreign interfer-

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<sup>67</sup> Qassem has publicly reiterated Hezbollah's willingness to work with other political parties. He has openly courted support from the Lebanese government and foreign nations for post-war reconstruction efforts. "[Qassem declares 'great victory', vows cooperation with army in implementing ceasefire](#)", *Naharnet*, 29 November 2024; "[Sheikh Qassem: the resistance proved steadfast and won](#)", *Al-Manar*, 5 December 2024 [Arabic].

<sup>68</sup> "[In Lebanon, songs of victory sung across fields of rubble](#)", *L'Orient Today*, 28 November 2024; and "[The new Shiite opposition: will they succeed where others failed?](#)", Beirut News Centre, 25 December 2024 [Arabic]. A sovereignist parliamentarian claimed that, for now, many Hezbollah supporters would fear reprisal if they were to vote against the party. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 29 October 2024. A prominent Shiite journalist who opposes Hezbollah argued that reversing the political hegemony the party has built among Shiites over four decades will require a long-term effort. "To break their control, we need to build a state that reliably provides what they are offering their followers: security, social services and a sense of belonging". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 January 2025.

<sup>69</sup> "[Hezbollah buries long-time leader, projects strength amid setbacks](#)", *Washington Post*, 23 February 2025.

<sup>70</sup> For instance, a Hezbollah-aligned newspaper alleged that Salam's designation as prime minister reflected an "intersection" between Hezbollah's Lebanese opponents and a U.S.-Saudi-French alliance. "[Clarity did the trick](#)", *al-Akhbar*, 14 January 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>71</sup> "[The Role of Hezbollah among Its Shia Constituents](#)", Atlantic Council, 28 February 2018; Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (New York, 2012), pp. 183-186.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 24 October 2024.

<sup>73</sup> During a semi-public forum attended by Hezbollah-leaning intellectuals (and Crisis Group) on 3 January under the headline "Our Vision for Confronting Domestic and External Changes", the deputy president of the Shiite Higher Council, Ali Khatib, said "some people in Lebanon seem to think they can go back to a time when the Shiites of Lebanon were treated as if they were not even part of this nation". Crisis Group observations, 3 January 2025.

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ence in Lebanese politics could also bolster existing narratives about collusion among Israel, Western countries and Hizbollah's domestic opponents.<sup>74</sup>

Secondly, an effort to hem in Hizbollah could create tensions within the Shiite community. Hizbollah partisans might seek to silence dissenting voices, especially if their opponents gain traction in tempting Shiites to withdraw political support. Driving a wedge between Hizbollah and Amal, as some of Hizbollah's opponents have proposed, risks tapping into the two parties' history as rivals during the civil war, which could throw more fuel on the fire.<sup>75</sup> The unexpected death of Nasrallah, who was widely accepted as a leader of all Lebanon's Shiites, could make intra-Shiite clashes much more difficult to contain than before. An independent parliamentarian noted that Nasrallah was "able to control the community" whereas Amal head Berri is "old" and "not the leader that he was ten or fifteen years ago".<sup>76</sup>

Finally, should political confrontation threaten to develop into outright conflict, the state could well find itself overmatched. At the war's height, some opposition figures predicted that Israel would degrade Hizbollah's armed wing to the point where it would cease to function, leaving its remaining cadres unable to resist being disbanded.<sup>77</sup> Yet the group kept up cohesive command-and-control until the war's last day, despite the damage it suffered, and it can probably still outgun any coalition of domestic opponents.<sup>78</sup> Before the war, most estimates say, Hizbollah had 25,000 full-time fighters and the same number in reserve.<sup>79</sup> It had perhaps tens of thousands of short-range rockets.<sup>80</sup> Israel claims to have killed more than 3,000 fighters in the course of the war. It says some 80 per cent of the rockets are gone.<sup>81</sup> If these numbers are right, Hizbollah is badly bruised but not beaten.

By contrast, on paper, the Lebanese army employs around 80,000 personnel, but even before the financial crisis, it was unclear how many were combat-ready sol-

<sup>74</sup> For example, a Hizbollah-aligned newspaper levelled such accusations following U.S. envoy Ortagus's statement that Hizbollah should not be part of Salam's government. "[Ortagus returns to ensure occupation's continuation](#)", *al-Akhbar*, 12 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>75</sup> "[Tensions endure between Amal and Hezbollah](#)", *The Arab Weekly*, 8 May 2016. A centrist parliamentarian observed that, at the height of the displacement crisis in 2024, divisions had emerged between the two parties in their emergency responses. "I am not saying that there will be a split in the Shiite community, but there is clearly competition between Hizbollah and Amal", he said. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 30 October 2024.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 14 October 2024. Despite his long history in the party, Qassem is widely seen as lacking Nasrallah's charisma. "[Naim Kassem: The former teacher now leading Hezbollah](#)", *The Independent*, 8 October 2024.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lebanon, October-November 2024.

<sup>78</sup> During the war, Gemayel said it would "make things three or more times less safe for us [in Lebanon]" should Hizbollah keep its light weapons. Gemayel reasoned that Hizbollah would probably be able to defeat its rivals in a civil war, even if it could no longer threaten Israel. Crisis Group interview, Bikfaya, Lebanon, 8 October 2024.

<sup>79</sup> "[What we know about Hezbollah's military capability](#)", *The New York Times*, 1 October 2024; "[What resources does Hezbollah have to counter the Israeli offensive in Lebanon?](#)", *Le Monde*, 5 October 2024.

<sup>80</sup> "[What is left of Hezbollah's arsenal?](#)", *This is Beirut*, 25 January 2025.

<sup>81</sup> "[Hezbollah said to estimate up to 4,000 fighters killed in war it initiated](#)", *Times of Israel*, 28 November 2024; "[Hezbollah's likely demise and Lebanon's uncertain future](#)", Arab Center Washington DC, 4 December 2024.

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diers, and questions about the army's overall strength and readiness persisted.<sup>82</sup> The budget crunch since 2019 has further reduced the proportion of combat-ready troops, because many soldiers have taken other part-time jobs to feed their families. Thus, even amid Israel's escalations, when sentiment against the group was at its strongest, most of Hizbollah's opponents hesitated to call for the army to tackle the group head on. Following the war, some project confidence that the army can act more assertively toward Hizbollah than before.<sup>83</sup> Yet such a confrontation, if it were to spiral out of control, could lead to the army's disintegration, for example if Shiite soldiers were to desert or to defect to fight alongside Hizbollah.<sup>84</sup>

## V. A Separate Challenge: Tensions over Displacement

The war's escalation in September 2024 forced hundreds of thousands of Lebanese to flee from predominantly Shiite areas in the country's south and seek shelter elsewhere, often in non-Shiite districts. Although residents often showed solidarity with the displaced, tensions also emerged. In some places, the security forces evicted squatters from buildings, and locals complained of congestion and pressure on services like waste removal.<sup>85</sup> Elsewhere, people from non-Shiite areas signalled their reluctance, and sometimes outright refusal, to host the displaced.<sup>86</sup> By targeting

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, [Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises](#), op. cit. See also "[Can Lebanon's army secure the south? A ceasefire deal could depend on it](#)", *Washington Post*, 20 November 2024. On estimates of the army's size, see "Lebanon – Armed forces personnel, total", Trading Economics; and "Lebanon's army is less useless than its reputation suggests", *The Economist*, 17 October 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese politicians opposed to Hizbollah, Beirut, October-November 2024. An opposition politician said, "It might not take an open confrontation. Hizbollah responds to pressure, so consistent pushing may convince them to gradually yield. They know that if they don't disarm voluntarily, Israel will use force". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 13 December 2024. A strategy consultant who has worked with the army for two decades said: "The army is ready to implement the order to disarm Hizbollah the moment it comes. This is no longer the army we knew in 2008-2014, because all the training and support has had a real effect. They are very confident". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 20 February 2025.

<sup>84</sup> An Arab diplomat in Beirut said, "Setting the army against Hizbollah risks destroying the only pillar of the Lebanese state still standing". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 17 October 2024. A retired Lebanese security official estimated that Shiites make up around 30 per cent of the army's ranks. Crisis Group interview, Fanar, Lebanon, 17 October 2024. Shiite officers also have considerable influence within the army command. "[Loyalties and Group Formation in the Lebanese Officer Corps](#)", Carnegie Europe, 3 February 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamra resident, Beirut, 10 October 2024. See also "[Anger during security forces' attempt to evacuate building occupied by displaced in Beirut](#)", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21 October 2024 [Arabic]; "[16,000 displaced people 'among their families'](#)", *al-Akhbar*, 13 November 2024 [Arabic]; and "[Imperiled waste collection: Another reverberation of displacement](#)", *L'Orient Today*, 16 October 2024.

<sup>86</sup> For instance, even before Israel's escalations, the mayor of Christian-majority town Falouha was reportedly requiring residents to submit documents identifying potential tenants for municipal approval before renting out rooms. "[Lebanon as a 'refugee' awaiting war: Exorbitant rents, security concerns and sectarian fears](#)", Daraj Media, 14 August 2024. A senior Lebanese Forces official confirmed that the party had distributed a large number of its flags – at the request of local communi-

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Hizbollah members living in non-Shiite communities or visiting displaced relatives, Israel instilled fear among residents that they could become collateral damage.<sup>87</sup> At the height of the displacement crisis, neighbourhood patrols emerged in some non-Shiite areas in response to perceived threats from the displaced.<sup>88</sup>

The ceasefire has considerably reduced these risks, at least for now. In late November 2024, many displaced greeted the truce's announcement by going home to repair their houses. In short order, Hizbollah pledged partial compensation and rental support for those who found that their houses were uninhabitable.<sup>89</sup> Many in these straits decided to seek accommodations close to their place of origin, either to be better able to fix their houses or to leave areas where they did not feel entirely welcome.<sup>90</sup> By year's end, the vast majority of displaced people had returned to their home regions, and fewer than 5,000 remained in public shelters.<sup>91</sup>

If the ceasefire were to collapse, however, the situation could take a dramatic turn for the worse. Tensions related to the displacement crisis are liable to return with a vengeance. At least some Lebanese would likely blame the renewed fighting on Hizbollah, and they might become increasingly hostile toward displaced Shiites whom they identify with the group.<sup>92</sup> Managing ill-will of this sort could challenge the integrity of the army, which might face dissent within its ranks – especially from its Shiite members – if ordered to confront or evacuate displaced people. Conversely, failure to keep displaced people at a distance would likely precipitate calls in non-Shiite communities to rely on vigilantes.<sup>93</sup> In turn, Hizbollah and Amal, which helped the security forces contain frictions involving displacement at the height of

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ties – as a “message that the displaced need to respect stability” in these areas. Crisis Group interview, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon, 15 October 2024.

<sup>87</sup> For example, see [“Welcome to displaced, not to party members”](#), *Nida al-Watan*, 13 November 2024 [Arabic]; and [“In Ras al-Nabaa, anger after the Israeli strike”](#), *L'Orient Today*, 17 November 2024. See also [“22 killed in Israeli strikes on Beirut, Lebanon says”](#), BBC, 11 October 2024; and [“Israeli strike kills 21 in northern Lebanon as Hezbollah steps up attacks”](#), Al Jazeera, 14 October 2024.

<sup>88</sup> Following Israel's escalations, Kataeb parliament member Nadim Gemayel revived a previous neighbourhood patrol in Achrafieh, a Christian-majority area of East Beirut. [“Tensions rise in Beirut after influx of displaced people”](#), BBC, 30 October 2024. Residents of Deir Billa, a village in Lebanon's north, initiated informal surveillance during the war to monitor comings and goings after Israel attacked a building hosting displaced people. [“Israeli strikes in Lebanon stir fears of sectarian strife”](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 November 2024. An opposition party official described these initiatives as spontaneous and lacking in coordination: “If the displaced try to force entry into my village, I will defend my community in my personal capacity”. Crisis Group interview, Batroun, Lebanon, 6 October 2024.

<sup>89</sup> [“Hezbollah to pay total of \\$77 million and rent to families affected by war”](#), Reuters, 5 December 2024.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, displaced Shiite intellectual, Beirut, 4 December 2024.

<sup>91</sup> [“Lebanon: Flash Update #52”](#), UNOCHA, 26 December 2024.

<sup>92</sup> This risk would increase dramatically if Israel followed through on its threat to wage a resumed war on Lebanon as a whole, rather than focusing on Hizbollah-aligned areas. [“Israel warns Lebanon to ensure Hezbollah adheres to truce or face attacks itself”](#), *Times of Israel*, 3 December 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Militias formed all over Lebanon during the civil war, as groups of civilians took up arms to “defend” their towns and villages. Even today, many Lebanese instinctively fear the return of such vigilantism, given the war's horrifying consequences.

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the crisis, might side with the displaced against armed residents of the areas hosting them, creating an escalatory dynamic.<sup>94</sup>

## VI. Preventing Further Destabilisation

Lebanon's new president and government need to turn the page on Hizbollah's war with Israel and grapple with the enormous challenges facing the country. To do so, they will need to work with outside partners to keep the peace on Lebanon's southern border; set a tone of compromise rather than confrontation in domestic politics; and attract support for both meeting immediate humanitarian needs and building state institutions that can help secure the country's future.

The first priority for all stakeholders should be to maintain the November ceasefire. A resumed war would be devastating to all Lebanese. Piling destruction upon destruction, losing more lives, and driving more people from their homes would deal the country a cruel blow. It would almost surely once again raise tensions between displaced persons and others. Whether it would weaken or strengthen Hizbollah domestically is an open question, the answer to which could well depend on how well the group performs in combat. But overall, there is no doubt that the truce's collapse would be a disaster that must be avoided.

Here the efforts of France and the U.S. as mainstays of the monitoring committee – and particularly the U.S. as chair – will be key. Thus far, on the whole, the Trump administration does not appear to be reversing Washington's post-truce course in Lebanon, which is good news. On the monitoring committee's watch, the ceasefire has held until now, with the U.S. apparently encouraging both sides to avoid inflaming the situation.<sup>95</sup> If it wants the truce to hold, the U.S. may need to draw even sterner lines for the parties, amid Israel's continued military operations and delayed troop withdrawal, along with Hizbollah's alleged non-compliance with the truce by remaining active south of the Litani.<sup>96</sup> Israel's declared intention to retain five strategic positions inside Lebanese territory could prompt the group to return to attacks on the occupying forces – one way in which Israel and Hizbollah could easily slide back into low-intensity conflict, with both preparing for the next round of full-scale war.

Secondly, Lebanon's new leadership – and the sovereignists who would like to see Hizbollah stripped of its arms at a moment of political vulnerability – should be careful not to overplay their hand. To be sure, Hizbollah showed uncharacteristic flexibility with regard to Aoun's election and the Salam government's formation, suggesting that the party enjoys less room for political manoeuvre than before. But

<sup>94</sup> In October, a political source close to Mikati identified Hizbollah and Amal's continued cooperation with security forces as crucial to containing displacement-related tensions. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 23 October 2024. A Hizbollah-aligned newspaper reported that Hizbollah cadres had actively prevented crime such as theft in Beirut's southern suburbs, after Israel's bombardment had forced many residents to flee the area. "[Hizbollah units active in Dahiyeh](#)", *al-Akhbar*, 23 October 2024 [Arabic].

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior U.N. officials and Western military attaché, Beirut, January 2025.

<sup>96</sup> "[Israel intensifies attacks in southern Lebanon ahead of withdrawal deadline](#)", Anadolu Agency, 17 February 2025.



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no one should read this behaviour as a sign that the group will roll over on an issue as important to it as disarmament.

That the state should have a monopoly on the use of force, and the truce's provisions enforced, seems unquestionable. But getting to those goals is likely to take time. Proponents should not try to get there by picking a fight that could send Hizbollah into the streets, open rifts with or among Shiites, and cause the Shiite duo and their allies to try shutting down the government at a delicate moment for the country. Nor is constant foreign engagement likely to yield the desired result. Instead, it could allow Hizbollah to pose as the victim of an international conspiracy to leave Lebanon undefended for Israel's benefit and empower supposed Lebanese "collaborators" at the Shiite community's expense.

An alternative would be trying to reach the same destination in increments. Addressing the issue of Hizbollah's weapons and the party's position within the Lebanese system is more likely to come via consensus than via coercion. Just like Hizbollah itself cannot be wished out of existence, a diminution of its hard power cannot be imposed by decree, at least not without great risk. It will take a succession of gradual, initially reversible steps for each side to demonstrate that it is sincerely trying to achieve progress toward a stronger, more unified Lebanon, rather than merely gain time or score political points. For example, Hizbollah could turn over heavy-grade weapons to the army to be deployed, rather than destroyed. Hizbollah and the army could also name liaison officers to cement their military coordination. It would certainly help for Hizbollah to re-evaluate its stances, in particular its longstanding practice of saddling all Lebanon with the consequences of its ideological and military choices, over the explicit objections of many Lebanese.<sup>97</sup>

Thirdly, foreign countries can promote stability in Lebanon by helping it meet its most pressing needs. They should provide humanitarian aid and funds for reconstruction. Hastening the safe return of the displaced to their homes will significantly reduce the risk of social tensions related to their plight. Donors should ensure that displaced women receive targeted support under humanitarian aid projects, which will likely require partnering with grassroots women's organisations in affected areas.<sup>98</sup>

Foreign support for the Lebanese army will also be critical. The army is the main pillar of the ceasefire terms. To meet its new and pre-existing obligations, the army will need to bolster its ranks by significantly more than the additional 1,500 soldiers it started recruiting in early November 2024.<sup>99</sup> The cash-strapped Lebanese state

<sup>97</sup> There are signs that post-conflict stocktaking is already under way, both inside Hizbollah and among other members of the "axis of resistance", the Iran-led regional alliance against Israel and the U.S. Kassem Kassir, "[A complete reckoning between Beirut, Baghdad and Tehran](#)", *Asas Media*, 13 January 2025 [Arabic]. The new U.S. administration's Iran policy is likely to determine whether these discussions lead to greater openness to compromise or to an even more confrontational approach.

<sup>98</sup> A U.N. official indicated that Lebanese grassroots organisations are often best positioned to lead interventions focused on women, because "they understand the local context and exactly where needs lie". Crisis Group telephone interview, 6 December 2024. These groups often operate on shoestring budgets, however.

<sup>99</sup> "[Cabinet approves \\$1.3 million for recruitment of 1,500 soldiers](#)", *L'Orient Today*, 6 November 2024.

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managed to spare \$1.3 million for this purpose, yet these funds covered costs for new enlistments only until the end of 2024. Donors can support the army by providing stipends to supplement officers' devalued salaries, as Qatar and the U.S. have previously done for limited periods, as well as basic supplies like fuel.<sup>100</sup> The army will also need assistance to guarantee benefits such as its medical care scheme, which offer incentives for troops to stay in the army.<sup>101</sup>

Washington, the Lebanese army's key foreign donor, should maintain its longstanding investment at this crucial juncture. In January, the Trump administration sparked concerns in Lebanon with its freeze on most foreign aid, and it is not yet clear where its policy may be headed.<sup>102</sup> The U.S. should ensure that allocations to the army survive any future funding cuts, given its irreplaceable role in upholding the ceasefire and containing Lebanese domestic tensions. The administration should also resist any calls to condition aid on the army confronting Hizbollah.<sup>103</sup> Such an approach would almost certainly imperil the ceasefire and compromise the army's institutional reputation, thus undermining the most effective tool available for stabilising Lebanon.

## VII. Conclusion

After fourteen months of catastrophic war, many Lebanese feel a guarded optimism about the future. The war that Hizbollah started opened the door to a devastating Israeli campaign that levelled entire villages and deepened misery in a country already mired in an unprecedented economic crisis. Yet, in the conflict's aftermath, Lebanese leaders have at last installed a new president and prime minister, both of whom have pledged to usher in long overdue reforms to tackle corruption and eco-

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<sup>100</sup> Donors have been coordinating support for the army through the Military Technical Committee for Lebanon, which Italy heads. "[Italian-led military technical committee begins operations with aid delivery to Lebanese army](#)", Lebanese National News Agency, 12 June 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Diplomats report that the army was inundated with applications in its latest recruitment drive. Despite the modest wages on offer, many applicants wanted to secure health care coverage for themselves and their families. "But the military health care system needs all of the niche things to convince soldiers to stay, such as cancer drugs and sophisticated equipment, which can be very expensive", a Western military attaché explained. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 2 January 2025.

<sup>102</sup> "[Suspension of U.S. military aid: what about the Lebanese army?](#)", *L'Orient Today*, 28 January 2025.

<sup>103</sup> In December 2024, a Lebanese strategy consultant who has worked directly with the army said, "I think we have been successful in setting expectations under the Biden administration that a condition cannot be for the [army] to fight Hizbollah. And, for now it seems, we have successfully impressed that expectation on the incoming Trump administration as well". Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 December 2024. In February, the consultant described those circumstances as "in flux", due both to evolving "external expectations" and a shift in Lebanese politics toward strengthening the state, adding that "real-world disruption" was "minimal". Crisis Group telephone interviews, 18 and 20 February 2025. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has declared that the Trump administration supports "a strong Lebanese state capable of confronting Hizbollah and disarming it". "[Netanyahu, Rubio: Lebanese state must do 'whatever is necessary' to implement ceasefire agreement](#)", National News Agency (Lebanon), 16 February 2025.

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conomic mismanagement. Potential foreign backers have made clear that they stand ready to help Lebanon – if Lebanon first proves willing to help itself.<sup>104</sup>

Several obstacles could stand in the way of Lebanon's progress on reforms, and perhaps none looms as menacingly as the question of Hizbollah's disarmament. For decades, the debate has sown rancour in the country. While the war was still raging, a retired Lebanese security official praised Israel's confrontation with Hizbollah and Iran as "the tenth crusade", implying that it was part of a war with Islam.<sup>105</sup> Meanwhile, Hizbollah supporters invoked the martyrdom of Hussein, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson revered by Shiites as the third imam, to justify maintaining their struggle against Israel, no matter the cost.<sup>106</sup> Even as the ceasefire remains in place, these dangerous sectarian undercurrents lurk, never far below the surface. The Lebanese people are entitled to demand a government that exercises real sovereignty, free from armed groups that undermine state authority and provoke ruinous wars. But Lebanon's politicians should approach these discussions with great caution and sensitivity, lest they take their country not into a bright new chapter but into a dark rerun of its bloody past.

**Beirut/Brussels, 27 February 2025**

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<sup>104</sup> See, for example, "[Saudi Arabia is optimistic about Lebanon under reforms, Saudi FM says in Beirut](#)", Reuters, 23 January 2025.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fanar, Lebanon, 17 October 2024.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah-aligned academic, Beirut, 16 October 2024. Hussein died fighting a tyrannical ruler. His martyrdom became a foundational event of Shiite Islam.

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