

US imperialism seeks to restructure political relations in Lebanon after Israeli invasion

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Lebanon's parliament is to convene on January 9 in another bid to elect a president. The vote comes amid intense pressure from the US, France and Saudi Arabia to select a figure, behind the backs of the Lebanese people, that will run the country in their geostrategic interests.

Their delegations to Beirut this week are determined to capitalise on Israel's significant weakening of Hezbollah's military and political forces, the Israel/Hezbollah ceasefire and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria at the hands of Washington's Islamist ally, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). They are seeking to establish an explicitly pro-US/Israel government and end Iran's longstanding influence in the country via Hezbollah and its political allies.

Hezbollah, the "Party of God," was formed in the 1980s as an "Islamic Resistance" dedicated to "the armed struggle" against Israel, amid Israel's occupation of Lebanon during the 1975-90 civil war that served as a proxy war for the competing regional and imperialist powers. Backed by Syria and Iran, it drew its support within Lebanon from the impoverished Shi'ite masses to whom it provides vital welfare services. Hezbollah advocated corporatism, paternalism and religious obscurantism as a counterweight to the class struggle. With its Shi'ite and Palestinian allies, Hezbollah constitutes the largest bloc in Lebanon's confessional-based and fragmented political system.

The tiny country, long a pawn in the broader machinations of the imperialist and regional powers, has been without a president for more than two years after Michel Aoun's term ended in October 2022. This left the country without a functioning government. Headed by Najib Mikati, Lebanon's richest man, the government has been unable to impose the "economic reforms" demanded by the International Monetary Fund and international banks in return for a restructuring of the country's debts—amid bankruptcy, soaring inflation and mass poverty caused by the looting of the country's wealth by the handful of billionaires that have run Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990.

US President Joe Biden's envoy Amos Hochstein is to visit Beirut, alongside representatives from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt. This follows the recent visits of Lebanese Forces legislator Pierre Bou Assi and Lebanese Army Commander General Joseph Aoun (no relation to the previous president), Washington's preferred candidate, to Saudi Arabia.

Lebanese Forces, the former Christian-militia that during the height of the civil war in the 1980s controlled, with support from Israel, much of the predominantly Christian territories of the country, is now a political party backed by Saudi Arabia. Aoun heads Lebanon's armed forces in southern Lebanon where he is charged with disarming Hezbollah, under the terms of the Washington-imposed ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. The Progressive Socialist Party of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt recently endorsed his candidacy.

Hezbollah, now led by Na'im Qassem, is backing its ally Suleiman Frangieh, who had close relations with Syria's President Assad and Iran. However, Nabih Berri, the speaker of parliament whose party is allied with Hezbollah, has indicated that Hezbollah is willing to be more

"flexible."

Another possible candidate is said to be Jihad Azour, a senior International Monetary Fund banker.

Last month, French President Emmanuel Macron paid a three-day state visit to Riyadh, the first by a French president since 2006, where he sought Saudi help in Lebanon's reconstruction. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have made it clear they will not help Lebanon rebuild if Hezbollah remains the dominant force in the country, giving whoever becomes president and prime minister significant power over Hezbollah and the ability to limit its political influence.

The US is building a new \$1.2 billion fortified embassy on a 43-acre site near Beirut whose declared purpose is to counter the "Axis of Resistance", meaning Iran. Its scale, out of all proportion to the country's size, is indicative of US geo-political interests in Lebanon, with its strategic location and newly found sources of gas and oil under the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Following the settlement of a longstanding maritime border dispute between Israel and Lebanon, a French, Italian and Qatari consortium began drilling in 2023, while Israel has already begun extraction.

The US has funded Lebanese security forces to the tune of \$3 billion since 2006 as part of its \$10 billion aid programme to the country, according to a 2020 congressional hearing, a sum that largely matches that of Iran. In January 2023, the Biden administration announced that as well as providing military hardware, it would also pay most of Lebanese army salaries in US dollars, at a cost of \$72 million, following the collapse of the Lebanese currency. The US has troops stationed at two Lebanese military air strips not far from Beirut where large C130 style military planes have been seen landing.

Results of the US/Israeli war against Hezbollah

Israel's war against Hezbollah began alongside its genocidal war on Gaza in October 2023, ostensibly in retaliation for its support of the Palestinians. It launched almost daily airstrikes against Hezbollah's forces, bases and weaponry in Lebanon, and also in Syria, where it had played a key role, along with Iran and Russia, in propping up the now collapsed Assad regime.

Its political aim on behalf of US imperialism was to eliminate Hezbollah as a military and political force in both countries as part of Washington's broader preparations for war against Iran, a critical component of its existential struggle against Russia and China.

At the same time, the US and UK targeted Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and Iran-backed militias in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, targeting their operations and intelligence centres, rockets, missiles, drone storage facilities and "logistics and munition supply chain

facilities.” The Pentagon justified this by claiming there have been more than 250 attacks on its bases in Syria and Iraq since October 2023, indicating there are far more US military outposts across remote areas of the two countries than officially acknowledged. Supposedly established in the war against ISIS, these bases are now targeting Iran and Iranian backed groups.

In February 2024, US President Biden ordered airstrikes on Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria as well as Iran-backed Houthi fighters in Yemen, who have launched attacks on US and British ships in solidarity with the people of Gaza. These actions make clear that US/Israeli operations in the Middle East are nothing less than a war to eliminate Iran’s allies, encircle it and provoke retaliatory action against US forces that could be used as the pretext for an all-out war against Tehran.

In September last year, Israel destroyed Hezbollah’s communications systems, detonating hundreds of pagers and walkie-talkies used by its operatives and injuring thousands before launching a devastating, two-month ground invasion of Lebanon.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) murdered Hezbollah’s first- and second-tier leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah and senior commander Ali Karaki, in an aerial strike on Beirut—in clear violation of multiple international laws of war, including prohibitions on assassination and indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas. It killed Ibrahim Aqil, another top Hezbollah operative, in another strike the same month, and Nasrallah’s successor and cousin Hashem Safieddine in October. The IDF struck Hezbollah’s financial, administrative and media facilities and bombed much of its weaponry and missile stockpiles in Lebanon and Syria, including Damascus and al-Bukamal near the Iraqi border, Qusair, and the countryside of Homs and Hama.

The IDF’s October ground invasion of southern Lebanon caused widespread destruction, about which little has been said. It forced more than 1.2 million, including 400,000 children, of Lebanon’s 6 million population to flee their homes. It killed around 4,000 people, mostly civilians, and injured more than 16,000, according to the Ministry of Health. Nearly 250,000 homes were completely or partially destroyed, 20,000 public buildings damaged and hundreds of small and medium-sized businesses closed down.

According to the UN’s Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (UNESCWA), this devastation includes the destruction of 13 hospitals and 130 ambulances, and the closure of 100 primary healthcare centres, which has left vast sections of the population without access to essential care. Furthermore, the overcrowded shelters (908 of the 1,095 are at full capacity) exacerbate the risk of infectious diseases and compound care needs.

The cost of reconstruction is estimated at \$13 billion, about half in direct damages and the rest in broader economic impacts. This far exceeds that of the last war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006.

And this is not the final figure, as Israel has continued its air strikes on Lebanon in defiance of the 60-day ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal imposed by Washington in late November. Beirut claims that there have been 300 violations of the truce.

The terms of the ceasefire, conveniently timed to end with US President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration later this month, amounted to a devastating defeat for Hezbollah, and set the scene for Washington’s Islamist ally, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), to take Damascus. The agreement, which called for Hezbollah to give up its fortified positions in southern Lebanon and withdraw its forces to the north of the Litani River, included a US letter granting Israel the right “to take military action” if “Hezbollah looks to be preparing an attack”. This effectively gives Tel Aviv and Washington the green light to resume hostilities whenever they deem it expedient.

Israel’s daily *Ha’aretz* cited army sources as saying that the IDF intends to remain in southern Lebanon after the 60-day period “if the Lebanese

army is unable to fulfil its obligations included in the agreement to extend its control over the entire south.”

Crucially, the ceasefire served to free Israel from attacks on its northern border as it continues to wage its war of annihilation against the Palestinians in Gaza and occupy Syrian territory, while the US and UK continue their operations against Iranian-backed targets in Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

The bankruptcy of the bourgeois nationalist regimes of the Middle East

In 2006, following Israel’s two-month war on Hezbollah and Lebanon, Iran’s IRGC moved swiftly to help with the reconstruction. But today, with Iran’s own economy in deep trouble thanks to US sanctions and the loss of its crucial ally in Damascus, there will be no money from Tehran to help rebuild.

Similarly, the loss of Hezbollah’s funding and arms that were channelled from Iran through Syria has crippled its ability to finance its operations, including its social welfare activities, and maintain its political influence. There are reports that Dahiyeh’s residents—where more than 400 buildings were destroyed and 1,500 damaged—are frustrated by Hezbollah’s late compensation payments despite Hezbollah leader Na’im Qassem’s promise of \$77 million to the Shi’ite families affected by the war with Israel.

Those who fled their homes have started to return, only to be met in the worst affected areas by bulldozers clearing debris and families searching for missing relatives under the rubble. Electricity, water, mobile phone reception and the internet are unavailable. Many have not been able to reach their villages in the south due to Israeli military restrictions, with more than 70 still off-limits. Around 40 villages near the border with Israel have been destroyed by Israel’s scorched earth policy.

The response of the regimes of the Middle East to the assault on Lebanon, no less than to the Gaza genocide, has demonstrated yet again the bankruptcy of the bourgeois nationalist regimes. While some, like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are key allies of the US as it orchestrates a new carve-up of the Middle East, others, like Iran, are desperate to reach some sort of negotiated settlement assuring their future—including against the struggles of their own populations.

They demonstrate that combating imperialism, wars and poverty means rejecting all forms of nationalism dividing the working class of the region. There have been repeated mass protests in Lebanon—during the 2011 Arab Spring, in 2015 and 2019-20—against the discredited and dysfunctional political elite that has failed to address mounting poverty and hardship. But their demands, like those of workers who have risen up in revolt elsewhere, cannot be resolved outside of a struggle led by the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism on a world scale.



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