



Recommendations for U.S. Engagement and Leadership in Lebanon

THE ISSUE

Government corruption and economic collapse, violent repression, and devastation of parts of Beirut from a historic explosion have left Lebanon in a spiraling humanitarian crisis with overwhelming poverty. 18 months ago in October 2019, mass protests erupted due to tax hikes and failures of the government. For years, public anger has grown with soaring inflation, unemployment, utility shortages, drastic food insecurity, and severe mismanagement of and inaction towards the country's economic crisis by the ruling class. The lira's value sank 85%, prices of basic necessities and food have risen astronomically, and Lebanon defaulted on its debt for the first time in its history.

[In the fall of 2019](#), hundreds of thousands of Lebanese peacefully took to the streets across the country for several weeks. Protesters demanded government accountability and economic reform; they received only brutality from Lebanese security forces in return. In January 2020, a new cabinet was appointed, but a lack of real change led to continued protests. Instead of addressing the problems that pushed people to take to the streets, authorities continue to respond to journalists, activists, and protestors with arbitrary detention, intimidation, and illegal force - using live ammunition, water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Through March 2020, authorities [arbitrarily arrested 967 protesters](#), extracting "confessions" via torture. The practice of torture has not been isolated in response to protests, with Amnesty further documenting a pattern of abuses towards hundreds of [Syrian refugees detained on baseless terrorism charges](#) since 2014, subjected to fair trial violations and torture by authorities. Lebanese authorities have injured thousands in the protests, with [409 protesters injured over two nights in January 2020 alone](#). The Lebanese Armed Forces - heavily reliant on \$2 billion in U.S. military aid since 2010 - is a regular perpetrator of these human rights abuses. The Leahy Laws bar the U.S. government from providing military aid to foreign security forces proven to violate human rights.

Despite [UN Res. 1559](#) barring non-state armed militias in Lebanon, Hezbollah has come to dominate Lebanese governance. Formed in the 1980s, Hezbollah's eventual parliament coalition toppled a unity government in 2011 and gained majority control by 2018. Rivaling the actual Lebanese army, Hezbollah's power in Lebanon has enabled it to act, like much of the political elite, with impunity. The UN's Special Tribunal for Lebanon in 2020 found a member of Hezbollah guilty of the 2005 bombing that killed then-Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and 21 others, yet no leadership faced accountability. And on February 4, 2021, activist and Hezbollah critic [Lokman Slim was killed](#) in southern Lebanon. So far, there has been [no meaningful investigation](#), let alone accountability, from Lebanese authorities.

Societal inequality and government abuses worsened with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in 2020, and refugees, imprisoned civilians, and oppressed *kafala* migrant workers were left with heightened exposure to COVID-19 and limited recourse. The country's two million Syrian and Palestinian refugees are at constant risk due to systemic discrimination, being crowded in run-down refugee camps, and the highest poverty rates in Lebanon. On March 15, 2020, with COVID-19 spreading, an emergency lockdown was declared, at first containing the virus; but only in August did cases and deaths begin to skyrocket nationwide. On August 4th, a massive accidental explosion - one of the largest ever recorded - in Beirut's port [killed at least 190 people, injured 6,500, and left 300,000 more displaced](#). COVID-19 cases soared with an already-ailing hospital system overwhelmed and scarcity of shelter for the hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Worsening matters, [three major hospitals were destroyed in the blast](#), with over half of Beirut's 55 medical centers left unusable from the damage, per the WHO. Domestic investigation into the Beirut blast has failed to meet basic international standards, marked by the authorities' obstruction, flagrant political interference, undue granting of immunity to high-level officials, due process and fair trial violations, evasion, and delay.

Officials traded blame while leaked documents showed successive governments were made aware of the danger several times since 2013, yet did nothing. The bankrupt government's negligence extended to cleanup and recovery efforts it was largely absent from, with the public relying on local volunteers and international aid and assistance. As leaders rejected calls for independent investigation, waves of protesters gathered in Beirut in early August to demand justice for the blast's victims; authorities responded with excessive force, [injuring over 230 people](#). Prime Minister Hassan Diab's cabinet resigned days later, and as of June 1st, 2021 no new government has yet been formed after 10 months due to political disagreements between PM-designate Saad Hariri and President Michel Aoun, holding up critical foreign aid as the economy collapses. In the first half of 2021, the pattern of protests and brutal security force crackdown persisted, with authorities using live bullets, injuring [over 300 protestors and killing one in Tripoli in January 26-29 alone](#). Authorities have also falsified terrorism charges against protestors, trying civilians in military courts to instill fear; and as documented by [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty](#), security forces in Tripoli have forcibly disappeared and tortured dozens of activists.

There is no sign of resolution to the political paralysis and protests, with attempts to form a government meeting perpetual stalemate, and the dire needs of the people ignored. Through June 1st, 2021, [Lebanon reached 540,630 COVID-19 cases](#) - in a country of roughly 6.8 million people - and 7,735 deaths with just 4% of the population fully vaccinated, though new cases have fallen significantly. Slow vaccination has been a struggle for lower income nations broadly, largely due to patent laws hindering wider vaccine distribution, in favor of wealthy countries.

On May 18th, Chairman Gregory Meeks of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Ted Deutch, chair of the Middle East and North Africa subcommittee, [voiced many of these same concerns in a letter to the State Department](#) and called for the Biden Administration to take critical actions Amnesty USA has been advocating for, which are detailed below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. government must pressure the Lebanese government to end torture and unlawful detention, end the brutal crackdown on protests, respect the human rights of individuals, and resolve the dire humanitarian crisis, including by:

- Increasing the multilateral allocation and delivering of emergency humanitarian assistance in the form of food, water, medicine, and electricity supply directly to the Lebanese people and civil society as they cope with economic collapse, COVID-19, and the fallout from the Beirut port blast.
- Providing significantly increased medical aid including COVID vaccines, medications, equipment and resources, and funding for medical NGOs and UN-run clinics due to the collapse of Lebanon's public health system.
- Centering all ongoing and future U.S. military and security training provided to the Lebanese Armed Forces on respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, conditioning future increases in the \$200 million in annual military aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces on successful reforms to end said violations.
- Leveraging the United States' outsized diplomatic influence in Lebanon to pressure Lebanese authorities to end the rampant arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, torture, and fair trial violations of protestors, journalists, activists, and human rights defenders; and institute deeply-needed judicial and security institution reforms.
- Formally reviewing via the State Department the potential use of U.S. security assistance - such as military training and FMF - by Lebanese security forces in carrying out human rights violations.
- Passing legislation calling for an end to the Lebanese government crackdown on protesters, free speech, and the press and judiciary; along with independent Lebanese investigation into the myriad violations by security forces.
- Designating Lebanon a TPS country to accommodate greater asylum due to the humanitarian crises gripping the country. And further increasing U.S. resettlement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and exerting diplomatic pressure on Lebanese authorities to end the continuing deportation of thousands of refugees to Syria.
- Calling on the UN Human Rights Council in its June 2021 session to launch an investigation into the catastrophic August 4th explosion in Beirut, as supported by the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair and many of the victims' families, to find whether state conduct contributed to the deaths and how to ensure remedy to the victims.
- Further stances can be found in [Amnesty's brief to the UN's 37th Universal Periodic Review in January](#). (pg. 15)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Amnesty International, 8 March 2021, "Lebanon: Authorities step up repression through use of terrorism charges against protesters" ([available here](#))
- Amnesty International, 19 January 2021, "Lebanon must end impunity for human rights abuses following UN Human Rights Council review" ([available here](#))
- Amnesty International, 29 April 2021, "Testimony of Philippe Nassif to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission" ([available here](#))

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