

Lebanon: Renewed Instability Following August Blast

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On August 10, Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his cabinet resigned in the wake of a massive [explosion](#) at the port of Beirut that killed [at least 178 people](#) and injured thousands. The blast displaced an estimated [300,000](#) people, and Lebanese President Michel Aoun estimated the damage at the port to be roughly [\\$15 billion](#). The explosion triggered widespread outrage among citizens, and has generated renewed protests—at times violent—against Lebanon’s political leaders. Diab’s resignation leaves Lebanon’s government in caretaker status with reduced authorities. Observers speculate that the country could become [mired](#) in months of government formation at a time of economic and humanitarian crisis, leaving it vulnerable to paralysis and greater social unrest. Policymakers may review U.S. assistance to Lebanon in the wake of growing humanitarian and economic needs, and in the context of potential shifts in the country’s political leadership.

Renewed Protest Movement

The August 4 blast renewed the momentum of the protest movement that began in October 2019 and led to the resignation that month of Saad Hariri, the previous prime minister. Following the explosion, thousands of protesters returned to the streets, [expressing](#) rage with the country’s political leadership, which [reportedly knew](#) of the risks posed by ammonium nitrate stored at the port but took no action. Over [700 civilians](#) were wounded in clashes with security forces, according to the Lebanese Red Cross, and some [reports](#) have accused security forces of using [excessive force](#). Protesters [called for international aid to be channeled directly to local organizations](#), bypassing Lebanese state institutions that Lebanese [describe](#) as corrupt. On August 13, Lebanon’s parliament voted to declare a [state of emergency](#), granting the Lebanese Armed Forces and other security services enhanced powers to restore and maintain order. Some have expressed concern that the release of a [verdict](#) by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon on August 18 for the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri could escalate protests.

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Government Formation: Next Steps

Government formation in Lebanon is shaped by the [Taif Accords](#), which ended Lebanon's 15-year civil war, and is designed to forge consensus among Lebanon's three largest sectarian communities. Lebanon's president (must be a Christian) must nominate a prime minister (must be a Sunni Muslim), following binding consultations with the speaker of parliament (must be a Shi'a Muslim) and after gaining support for the nomination from a majority of members of parliament. Following nomination, the prime minister-designate must consult with parliamentary blocs to form a government, taking into account sectarian quotas. Some [reports](#) suggest that the United States may back Lebanon's former representative to the United Nations, Nawaf Salam, to head a new government. Hezbollah—a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) that operates in Lebanon as a militia force, a political party, and a provider of social services—played a significant role in selecting outgoing prime minister Diab, and reportedly [supports](#) Hariri's return to the premiership.

Issues for Congress

U.S. economic assistance to Lebanon has sought to bolster vulnerable populations and reduce their dependence on public services provided by groups such as Hezbollah. The United States does not provide its economic aid and humanitarian assistance to Lebanon's government, but rather to local implementing partners and international organizations. U.S. security assistance has bolstered the Lebanese Armed Forces and other elements of the Lebanese security apparatus for counterterrorism and border security purposes.

As of August 12, the United States, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Department of Defense (DOD), had provided [\\$18 million](#) in emergency humanitarian assistance to Lebanon since the blast, including food aid and medical supplies. On August 7, a USAID-led Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) [deployed to Beirut](#) to lead and coordinate the U.S. humanitarian response.

Food assistance. In May 2020, then-Prime Minister Diab [warned](#) of an imminent food crisis. Lebanon imports approximately 80% of its food, and the destruction of the port of Beirut—responsible for at least [70%](#) of the country's import and export activities—also reportedly destroyed significant quantities of [food stocks](#). Recent USAID emergency programming [includes](#) emergency food assistance administered by its Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (which includes the former Office of Food for Peace) and implemented by the U.N. World Food Program (WFP).

Medical assistance. Six major hospitals and 20 clinics sustained [partial or heavy structural damage](#) as a result of the blast. The United States does not provide aid to Lebanon's Health Ministry, which U.S. officials have described as [“run by Hezbollah.”](#) (Hezbollah held the Health Ministry in both the outgoing Diab government and in the Hariri government that preceded it). However, USAID has [funded](#) some U.S.-affiliated medical institutions in Lebanon; following the blast, U.S. officials announced that these institutions would receive an additional [\\$4 million](#) in U.S. funding.

Security assistance. The empowerment of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as a result of the parliament's state of emergency declaration may increase the likelihood of confrontations between the U.S.-supported LAF and civilian protesters. U.S. law requires that security forces comply with human rights standards to be eligible for U.S. security assistance; how the protests are met could shape future U.S. security assistance considerations.

Outlook

Some reports have suggested that the Administration may be [preparing](#) new anticorruption sanctions on Lebanese officials as part of an effort to shape Lebanon's new government and reduce Hezbollah's influence (these discussions [predate](#) the August blast and subsequent government resignation). Such sanctions would be imposed [potentially under](#) either the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) (implemented by [E.O. 13818](#)) or [section 7031\(c\) of the State/Foreign Operations annual appropriations act](#). Members of Congress have expressed [concern](#) about the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon's government, and Congress places certification requirements on U.S. assistance funds for Lebanon annually in an effort to prevent their misuse or the transfer of U.S. equipment to Hezbollah. Hezbollah, which currently holds 13 seats in parliament, has been granted one to three seats in each Lebanese cabinet since 2005. Protesters have argued that politicians across the political spectrum have engaged in [corruption](#), including some with whom the United States has friendly ties.

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