

Lebanon at a Crossroads: Geopolitical Shifts, Sectarian Realignments, and the Path to Stability in the Post-Assad Era

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Key Points

- The collapse of the Assad regime and Hezbollah's weakening have reshaped Lebanon's political landscape, creating opportunities for Sunni, Christian, and Druze factions to reassert influence.
- Hezbollah faces significant challenges, including disrupted supply lines, economic strain, and military encirclement, diminishing its dominance in Lebanese politics.
- Regional and international actors, including Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and Türkiye are leveraging the power vacuum to enhance their strategic presence in Lebanon.
- Lebanon's future stability hinges on managing sectarian tensions, Syrian refugee returns, and the influence of new Syrian leadership with Salafi jihadist roots.

Introduction

The collapse of the Assad regime marked a critical juncture in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, precipitating a profound transformation in the region's strategic architecture, particularly in Lebanon. Syria has historically functioned as Lebanon's geographic, political, economic, and military hinterland, rendering any shifts in Damascus's political order inherently consequential for Beirut. The ascendancy of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to power in Syria has engendered a new strategic reality, compelling Lebanese actors, as well as regional and international stakeholders, to reassess their geopolitical alignments and recalibrate their strategic approaches.

In this paper CSAG aims to analyze and explain what implications these changes in security dynamic have had on several actors important for the strategic environment in Lebanon and the broader CENTCOM AOR. By analyzing this issue on an actor level, including ethnic groups with an influence on domestic policy and the security dynamic, it is possible to get a more comprehensive view and situational awareness that is likely to have a broader strategic impact.

The Lebanese Government and Domestic Politics

Lebanon is currently experiencing an important phase resulting from the major changes taking place in Syria, which have, and will continue to have a direct effect on local political drivers in Lebanon. More specifically, it will have a large

impact on Hezbollah, for whom Syria was a vital artery for passing weapons and supplies from Iran. Hence, these ongoing transformations come with great strategic opportunities for other sects and political forces in Lebanon that have suffered Hezbollah's dominance for more than three decades. The current vacuum resulting from Hezbollah's decline makes it possible to reshape the power dynamics and end the era of "political Shiism" in Lebanon.

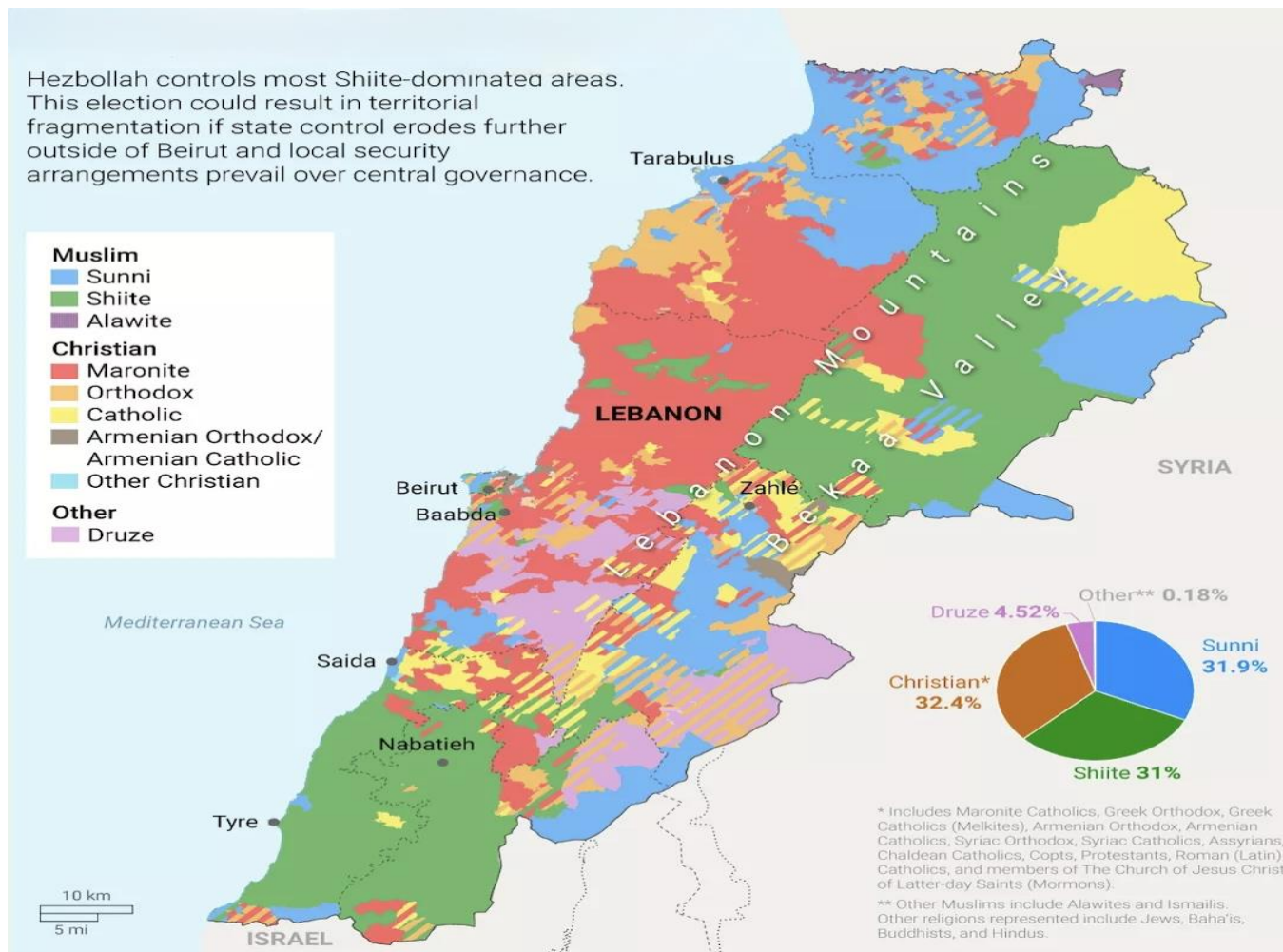


Figure 1, Lebanon Religious Demographics

Source: Creative Commons (Prodrummer619), Wilson Center, state.gov (from Statistics Lebanon)

Hezbollah

The loss of the Assad Syrian regime as Hezbollah's most prominent provider of strategic depth and secure supply routes will likely significantly disrupt Hezbollah's operations. The regime's rapid collapse has forced Hezbollah to abandon its weapons depots and infrastructure it had built in Syria and probably has had a dramatic impact on its military and economic power, which also complicate its efforts to confront Israel.¹

The fall of the Assad regime is also taking a clear toll on the Shiite community, as it coincides with Hezbollah's defeat in the most challenging war it has ever fought against Israel. The defeat has forced the group to submit to a ceasefire

that includes the withdrawal of its forces from south of the Litani River, dismantling of its military infrastructure, acceptance of U.S. and international military, and security supervision to monitor the implementation of the agreement. Moreover, the victory of HTS in Syria poses new threats to the group along the border between the two countries, placing it between two adversaries, a Syrian one in the east and north, and an Israeli one in the south. Given its sense of military encirclement from within and without, Hezbollah may resort to escalating its rhetoric, reshaping its local alliances, and even carrying out military moves to reassert its influence, but these steps entail significant risks that the group is unlikely to be willing to bear.

Internally, Hezbollah will face increasing pressure from the rise of the Syrian Sunnis and its positive impact on Sunni forces in Lebanon.² This shift will challenge Hezbollah's political hegemony and undermine its legitimacy among broader segments of Lebanese society. Moreover, the economic repercussions of the fall of the Assad regime will be severe; with the diminishing support flowing from Iran via Syria, Hezbollah will be forced to deal with a scarcity of resources at a time when the Lebanese economy is witnessing an unprecedented collapse. This also at a time when the group will increasingly need to face heavy financial burdens resulting from the destruction of homes and infrastructure in the Shiite villages in the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Bekaa, and the south during the Israeli war. This will also increase the burden on the social support provided to Shias, the basis of Hezbollah's popular support, and shift the discourse of loyalty from Iran to the Lebanese state.

The fall of the Assad regime further dealt a devastating blow to the economic partnership between the Assad family and Hezbollah, related to the manufacture and smuggling of Captagon to neighboring countries in the region, as well as the delivery of materials to Syria through Lebanese ports to circumvent the economic sanctions imposed on Damascus.³ Hezbollah also benefited economically from the proceeds of smuggling between the two countries and the flow of cheap Syrian materials to its strongholds. In addition, the collapse of the regime will deprive Hezbollah of the proceeds of the Shiite pilgrimages in Lebanon and Iraq to the Shiite shrines in Damascus and its countryside, which the group supervised directly or indirectly.

Sunnah

The Sunnis of Lebanon are the most prominent beneficiaries of recent events in the region, having seen their Shiite rivals significantly weakened by all the things previously mentioned. Since the Baath revolution in Syria in 1963, which empowered minority groups in Damascus, Sunnis in Lebanon have faced both geographic and political isolation. This situation worsened after the Shiites gained power in Iraq following Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, and the alliance between Hezbollah (Shiites) and the Free Patriotic Movement (Maronites) in Lebanon. These developments, coupled with reduced Arab and regional political engagement in Lebanon, have further marginalized the Sunni community.

Recent developments indicate a shift in regional and international attention toward the Sunni community in Lebanon, presenting a strategic opportunity to reconfigure the political landscape and reassert the Sunni sect's role within the national framework. This transformation extends beyond mere geopolitical considerations, encompassing the enhancement of Sunni representation in national decision-making processes. This shift occurs against the backdrop of Lebanon's ongoing and profound realignment of sectarian and political power structures.

The primary challenge confronting the Sunni community lies not only in its capacity to leverage this emerging momentum but also in its ability to address and resolve internal fragmentation, which undermines collective cohesion. Illustratively, the 27 Sunni members of parliament are dispersed across six distinct parliamentary blocs.⁴

Among these, some maintain an independent stance with robust affiliations to Saudi Arabia, while others are aligned with Hezbollah, the Amal Movement, the Lebanese Forces, or the Progressive Socialist Party. Consequently, the Sunni community lacks cohesive political leadership capable of harnessing the evolving dynamics and translating them into a sustainable and coherent strategic framework.⁵

As a result, Sunni political elites are grappling with a state of disarray and indecision. For instance, during the election of Joseph Aoun as President of the Lebanese Republic, Sunni representatives failed to articulate a clear stance on the presidency until external pressures compelled their alignment with Aoun's candidacy. This lack of unified and proactive decision-making risks delaying critical initiatives required to capitalize on the current strategic momentum, potentially ceding advantage to other sectarian groups within Lebanon's complex political ecosystem.⁶

Christian powers

The significant geopolitical transformations in Syria and Lebanon have also ushered in a critical juncture for Lebanese Christians. Historically, the political role of Christians in Lebanon has been contingent upon external patronage and the maintenance of a delicate balance of power between Christian and Muslim communities. However, with the erosion of the Hezbollah-Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) alliance, which had previously secured a central role for a segment of the Maronite community through the influence of political Shiism, Christians now confront a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities.⁷ This necessitates both internal realignment and external recalibration to navigate the shifting dynamics.

During the preceding phase, beginning in 2009, the FPM successfully consolidated control over key governmental institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Energy, effectively directing their policies.⁸ This influence was further cemented by the FPM's strategic alliance with Hezbollah, which facilitated Michel Aoun's ascension to the Lebanese presidency in 2016.⁹ However, in the current context, marked by the waning dominance of Hezbollah and the election of Joseph Aoun as president, Lebanon is poised to witness a decline in the political influence of the Maronite faction aligned with Shiite interests. Conversely, this creates space for the resurgence of rival Christian factions, particularly the Lebanese Forces (LF) and the Kataeb Party.¹⁰ The LF, under the leadership of Samir Geagea, present significant opportunities for the Christian community, given Geagea's extensive network of regional and international alliances, notably with Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Furthermore, the anticipated central role of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), whether in maintaining internal stability or deploying along the southern border in the aftermath of Hezbollah's diminished influence at the hands of Israel, offers Christians a strategic avenue to reinforce their position within the Lebanese state. This is particularly significant given that a substantial proportion of the LAF's leadership and personnel are drawn from the Christian community, in accordance with Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing framework.

Nevertheless, Lebanese Christians face considerable challenges. The policies of HTS in Syria have heightened apprehensions among Christians regarding their potential impact on Lebanon's Sunni population. Lebanon's economic collapse and political neglect could provide fertile ground for extremism, potentially destabilizing the country's fragile sectarian balance, something Lebanese Christians deeply fear given their history. Additionally, Christians are grappling with internal issues such as emigration, which undermines their demographic presence, and political fragmentation between the FPM and the LF.¹¹ These divisions risk diluting their collective influence and capacity to address both national and regional challenges effectively.

Druze

Walid Jumblatt, the prominent leader of the Druze ethnoreligious minority in Lebanon, has demonstrated a nuanced understanding of his community's political and demographic significance, which has enabled the Druze to maintain their pivotal role as interlocutors between the country's major sectarian factions. Following his recent diplomatic engagement in Damascus and discussions with Ahmad al-Sharaa, the interim leader of the new Syrian administration, Jumblatt has strategically maneuvered to secure the Druze community's position in the evolving regional dynamics and reaffirmed their status as a crucial swing vote in Lebanon's delicate confessional balance.¹²

However, the Druze's limited demographic footprint, constituting approximately 5.2% of Lebanon's population, presents a significant constraint to their political aspirations. This demographic reality necessitates a strategic alliance with one of the two predominant sectarian blocs, either Sunni or Shiite, to maximize their influence within the Lebanese political system. Currently, there is a discernible inclination towards aligning with the Sunni faction, bolstered by broader Arab and regional support.

Implications for the policies and interests of active state actors in Lebanon.

1. **Gulf States.** Saudi Arabia is the largest Gulf player in Lebanon, for several reasons. The most important are Riyadh's own capabilities, regional and international influence, in addition to the aspirations of Saudi Arabia being the most influential Arab country in the Lebanese political scene. Data indicate an intersection between Saudi Arabia and the new authorities in Syria, and its Turkish allies, in limiting Hezbollah's political influence. Riyadh was able to re-establish its influence in Lebanon following the vacuum created by the fall of the Syrian regime, Hezbollah's defeat at the hands of Israel, and the collapse of the Iranian role in the Levant. The Saudi return was showcased by the visit of Prince Yazid bin Farhan, advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Beirut on the eve of the Lebanese parliament's election of President, and the movements and meetings he held that paved the way for Aoun's election as President of Lebanon.¹³ Given the absence of a political reference among Lebanese Sunnis over the past years, Saudi Arabia has worked to maintain a minimum framework for Sunni representatives in Lebanon.¹⁴ This framework is likely to be a starting point for Riyadh to strengthen its political presence on the Lebanese scene in the coming period.

For its part, Qatar plays an important role in Lebanon and seeks to maintain good relations with all Lebanese parties, including Hezbollah. Despite its significant financial resources, Doha cannot be an independent player in Lebanon, which requires it to coordinate its activities with its most important partners, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, respectively. Moreover, the new reality represents an opportunity for Qatar to strengthen its geo-economic position in the Eastern Mediterranean, as Qatar is part of the alliance that includes the French company Total Energies and the Italian company Eni to explore gas findings in Lebanese waters.¹⁵ With Hezbollah's political influence waning and Joseph Aoun elected president, with whom Doha built good relations during his tenure as commander of the Lebanese army, Qatar will likely have an opportunity to strengthen its political and economic presence in Lebanon.¹⁶

2. **Türkiye.** The Turkish strategy towards Lebanon during the past years did not include direct support or sponsorship of any political party, but that did not prevent them from building a network of relations with several Lebanese politicians.¹⁷ The new strategic environment provides an opportunity for Türkiye to strengthen its political presence in Lebanon. Days after the fall of the Assad regime, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan received the then Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who in turn confirmed the Lebanese

people's reliance on Ankara's political role in Lebanon.¹⁸ For several years, Türkiye has worked to build a wide network of non-governmental organizations in Lebanon that are active in the field of relief and social work, which has strengthened its popular presence there.¹⁹ Accordingly, northern Lebanon is likely to be the starting point for Turkish political and security action in Lebanon. Moreover, the new geopolitical environment provides an opportunity for Ankara to enhance its economic influence in the region. The port of Tripoli (the second largest Lebanese port) represents a strategic opportunity for Ankara to enhance its economic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region.²⁰

3. Iran. Iran is the regional player with the biggest losses among international actors with interests in Lebanon, as the Iranian era of greater influence in Lebanese politics is potentially coming to an at least provisional end. Tehran lost Hezbollah as a strategic proxy threat in the region after its last defeat by Israel, and it also lost Syria as the center of the "axis of resistance" and the center of Iran's operations in the Arab Levant. As a result, Iran and Hezbollah's grip on Lebanese politics has loosened, with the party forced to back down from its insistence on nominating Suleiman Franjeh for the presidency and accept the election of Aoun as President of Lebanon. Iran is no longer able to freely deliver money and equipment to Hezbollah through Syrian territory, and in light of the economic sanctions imposed on it, Tehran will be forced to transfer money in illicit ways that are easier to track and interdict.²¹ With the fall of Hezbollah's political dominance, Shiite groups began to emerge with an alternative political ideology to the "Guardianship of the Jurist," competing with Iran in the religious mobilization and political narrative of Arab Shiites in Lebanon and the region.²²

4. United States. The new political reality in Lebanon allows the U.S. to enhance its influence in Lebanon by allowing its allies to rise to power in Beirut again. The Lebanese presidential election is the first event to demonstrate this reality, as the U.S. successfully pushed for the election of Joseph Aoun as president.²³ Washington will continue to strengthen its partnership with the Lebanese army, which will expand its security and political presence in the coming phase, and will be one of the main players in the phase of restructuring the authority in Lebanon. The U.S. army will also benefit from its chairmanship of the committee monitoring the implementation of the armistice agreement between Lebanon and Israel to strengthen its military/security presence in Lebanon, thus establishing a direct military presence in all the countries of the Arab Levant (Lebanon-Jordan-Syria).

5. The European Union and its central powers. The European Union is anticipated to bolster its strategic engagement in Lebanon by sustaining pressure on Lebanese authorities to implement comprehensive economic and administrative reforms. This approach constitutes a critical soft power mechanism aimed at shaping the restructuring of Lebanon's political landscape, particularly as Hezbollah and Amal, historically the most resistant to reform initiatives, experience a decline in their political influence. The EU's strategy underscores its commitment to leveraging diplomatic and economic tools to foster stability and governance reforms in a region of geopolitical significance.

France, as a key actor in the region, is anticipated to reorient its diplomatic approach by prioritizing trust-building initiatives with Lebanon's Christian political factions, following Hezbollah's prolonged hegemony over the political landscape, to reinforce its geopolitical leverage, counterbalance rival external powers, and consolidate its stabilizing role in the Levant. This recalibration aims to reassert France's historic influence, diversify its alliances within Lebanon's fragmented polity, and enhance multilateral coordination with United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the LAF to ensure long-term conflict de-escalation and regional stability. Germany, whose prior attempts to expand its security footprint in Lebanon were obstructed by Hezbollah prior to the truce agreement with Israel, is likely to renew its efforts to assume a more robust security role in the region.²⁴ With Hezbollah's political and military influence waning, Berlin's strategy will

focus on strengthening its engagement through support for non-governmental organizations and enhancing the operational capacity of German forces within the UNIFIL. This renewed emphasis on security and institutional support aligns with Germany's broader strategic objective of promoting stability and multilateralism in the Eastern Mediterranean.

6. Russia. Russia did not have a strategic presence in Lebanon before the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, and it is likely that it will not have such a role after it. It is true that Moscow had some political relations with various Lebanese parties, but none of them reached the level of strategic relations that give Russia significant influence in Lebanon. With the recent changes in Syria, Moscow's role in the Middle East in general seems to be heading towards decline rather than expansion.

Determinants of Syrian-Lebanese relations in the future

After the fall of the Assad regime, Syria and Lebanon face several important issues that must be dealt with by the new authorities in both countries.

1. Security/ stability. An atmosphere of tension has prevailed on the Lebanese-Syrian border as a result of clashes between the Lebanese army and Syrian militants.²⁵ The latest round of hostilities has been concentrated in the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr and the northeastern Lebanese city of Hermel. Demographics emerge as the most critical factor in this equation, given the presence of a mixed configuration of Shiite and Sunni villages in these areas. Hezbollah entered Syria through Al-Qusayr in 2013; however, the current focus is not on the city itself but rather on the area west of the Orontes River. This region includes villages with a Shiite majority, inhabited by Lebanese communities who have owned land on the Syrian side of the border for decades. During the Syrian conflict, this area served as a strategic gateway into Syria and has now become the site of armed confrontations between HTS and Shiite clans from the Jaafar and Zaiter families.

2. Syrian refugees in Lebanon. According to the United Nations, more than 300,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon returned to Syria in less than ten days since the fall of the Assad regime, but some of them may not settle in Syria and may return to Lebanon.²⁶ These figures indicate that the issue of the return of Syrians to their country will not be a major problem, especially since the return of Syrian refugees is in the interest of both parties. However, a problem may arise if it is proven that Lebanon is harboring members of the former Syrian regime. So far, the Lebanese authorities deny the presence of former regime members on its territory, but the strong relations between Hezbollah and the regime suggest the possibility that some of its officials sought refuge in Beirut and are taking shelter in party safe havens.²⁷

3. Military relations between Damascus and Hezbollah. In the recent "Deterrence of Aggression" operation, Hezbollah withdrew from the Syrian city of Qusayr without clashing with HTS, leaving behind large quantities of weapons, tunnels, and military factories.²⁸ Hezbollah's sites constitute a strategic reserve and a source of intelligence information, which the new Syrian administration can exploit later if a dispute arises between the two parties. Hezbollah may seek to destabilize the new government, carry out sabotage and assassination operations, and provide military support to HTS opponents, especially among the Druze and Alawites. In addition, the possibility of a resumption of the war between Hezbollah and Israel remains, while anticipating the role of the new Syrian administration in determining its positions, whether by besieging the party or supporting it.

4. Lebanon's fears of new leadership in Damascus. One of the concerns in Lebanon is that the new leadership in Damascus has Salafi jihadist roots, and its influence may extend into Lebanon, potentially sparking sectarian conflict.²⁹ The Salafist movement in Lebanon has felt a resurgence of vitality due to developments in Syria, and its ties with its Syrian counterpart are likely to strengthen over time. This dynamic could exacerbate sectarian tensions in Lebanon, where localized conflicts may undermine civil peace and stability. The district of Zahle, two towns, Taanayel, with a Shiite population, and Saadnayel, with a Sunni majority, exemplify these tensions. Celebrations in Saadnayel over the fall of the Assad regime were marked by gloating and provocations directed at the Shiite residents of Taanayel. Additionally, posters of Ahmed al-Sharaa on car windows and jihadist chants occasionally fill the streets. These practices could escalate into armed clashes across various regions of Lebanon, further destabilizing the country.

Analysis

1. Hezbollah is currently in a state of strategic encirclement, with the LAF positioned on one flank of the border and HTS along with its affiliated factions on the opposing flank. Despite this, Hezbollah maintains considerable influence within the Bekaa Valley and across all Shiite-majority villages situated along the border region. The group's operational activities in this contested border zone are contingent upon two principal factors: its integration within the evolving political architecture of the Lebanese state, and the persistent security and sectarian tensions that permeate the border area. These tensions may create an environment conducive to the resumption of Hezbollah's activities.
2. Perceiving itself as militarily encircled both domestically and externally, Hezbollah may adopt a strategy of rhetorical escalation, recalibrate its local alliances, and potentially undertake limited military actions to reassert its influence. However, such measures are fraught with substantial strategic risks, which the organization is unlikely to deem acceptable given the potential repercussions for their already weakened posture. Consequently, Hezbollah is expected to exercise strategic restraint, as the costs of overextension could outweigh the benefits of reasserting its dominance.
3. While the Sunni and Christian communities in Lebanon face significant internal and external challenges, the current geopolitical environment presents a unique opportunity for strategic reorientation. The ability of these communities to unify, adapt, and proactively engage with regional and international actors will be critical to their long-term political resurgence and Lebanon's broader stability.
4. Jumblatt's recent diplomatic overtures, particularly his engagement with the emerging Syrian leadership, appear to be a calculated maneuver aimed at consolidating the Druze community's role as pivotal intermediaries within Lebanon's intricate political landscape and the broader regional order. This approach is consistent with Druze's historical strategy of adaptive realignment, a pragmatic framework designed to preserve their socio-political interests and ensure their continued relevance amid fluctuating regional power dynamics. By positioning themselves as indispensable power brokers, the Druze leadership seeks to navigate the complexities of Lebanon's sectarian politics while leveraging external alliances to reinforce their strategic autonomy and influence.
5. The shifting geopolitical dynamics in Lebanon present opportunities for Gulf states, Türkiye, and Western powers to expand their influence, while Iran faces significant setbacks. The EU and its central powers are leveraging soft power and security initiatives to reshape Lebanon's political landscape, while Russia's role remains marginal. The

interplay of these actors will shape Lebanon's future trajectory, with Hezbollah's decline creating space for new alignments and power structures.

6. Three key determinants shape the contemporary relationship between Syria and Lebanon: first, the ideological reorientation of Syria's new leadership; second, the collapse of the so-called "axis of resistance" in the region and the ensuing security vacuum; and third, the heightened risk of sectarian conflict in Lebanon. The ideological framework of the dominant actors in Syria today is constructed primarily in opposition to the "other," with the Sunni Islamist ideology of HTS emerging as a direct counterpoint to the Shiite political ideology that previously held sway in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The defeat of the axis of resistance has precipitated a significant security vacuum in Syria. This void has been increasingly occupied by local jihadist factions, whose ideological and operational influence could resonate with Salafi networks embedded within Lebanon. Such a development carries the potential to exacerbate sectarian fissures in Lebanon, thereby threatening the country's already precarious sociopolitical stability and undermining efforts to maintain civil cohesion.

7. An atmosphere of heightened tension and vigilance has emerged along the Lebanese-Syrian border, driven by recent clashes between the LAF and Syrian militant groups. These confrontations underscore the persistent sectarian tensions that have characterized the region since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2012, highlighting the enduring impact of communal divisions on the trajectory of the crisis.

8. The broader structural challenges facing Lebanon—systemic corruption, entrenched factionalism, and the resultant erosion of economic stability, governance, and democratic institutions—remain critical impediments to the country's development. While Hezbollah has historically functioned as a key pillar upholding this flawed system, its decline or potential removal would not inherently resolve these deep-seated issues. These systemic deficiencies persist independently of Hezbollah's influence, underscoring the complexity of Lebanon's political and institutional landscape.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Lebanon is experiencing a critical moment in its history; after the fall of the Assad regime and the recent Israeli war, the Lebanese sects will have to redistribute power again. In this context, major challenges appear before the Lebanese forces, most notably the weakness of the main parties within those sects, such that there is no single party that can be counted on to lead the next stage in Lebanon, which will increase the influence of regional and international powers on the Lebanese authorities. Accordingly, and because the repercussions of the Syrian earthquake on Lebanon will be security-related, at least in the beginning, it is likely that Lebanon will witness a greater rise in the role of the army and security services.

1. The U.S. could prioritize supporting Lebanon's state institutions, particularly the LAF and security agencies, to enhance their capacity to maintain stability and counter non-state actors like Hezbollah. This includes providing targeted military aid, training, and intelligence sharing to bolster Lebanon's ability to secure its borders and enforce law and order.

2. Address Lebanon's systemic corruption and economic collapse by conditioning financial assistance on the implementation of transparent governance reforms. Encourage international financial institutions to work with Lebanon on restructuring its economy, combating corruption, and ensuring accountability in public spending.

3. Countering Hezbollah's influence without escalation is essential. While weakening Hezbollah is in line with U.S. interests, efforts should avoid exacerbating sectarian tensions or further destabilizing Lebanon. Political and civil society groups that advocate for a pluralistic and democratic Lebanon should be supported, and moderate voices should be provided platforms to counter Hezbollah's narrative. Hezbollah's disarmament should be negotiated through Tehran to avoid future civil wars in the region.
4. Collaborate with regional allies and international organizations to create a unified approach toward Lebanon. Encourage Gulf states, the EU, and the United Nations to support Lebanon's stability through humanitarian aid, economic assistance, and diplomatic engagement.
5. Develop contingency plans for potential Syrian involvement in Lebanon, particularly if a future Syrian government seeks to counter Hezbollah. While a democratic Syria could play a constructive role, the U.S. must ensure that any Syrian engagement does not undermine Lebanese sovereignty or exacerbate sectarian divisions.
6. Move beyond short-term crisis management and develop a long-term strategy for Lebanon that aligns with U.S. interests in regional stability, democracy promotion, and counterterrorism. This strategy should be adaptable to changing dynamics on the ground and responsive to the aspirations of the Lebanese people.
7. Provide humanitarian aid to alleviate the suffering of the Lebanese population, particularly in light of the economic collapse and refugee crisis. Work with international organizations to ensure aid reaches those in need without being diverted by corrupt actors or militant groups.
8. Advocate for and assist in the organization of free, fair, and transparent elections in Lebanon. Ensure that electoral reforms are implemented to reduce the influence of sectarian parties and promote representation that reflects the will of the Lebanese people.

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² Nicholas A. Heras and Faysal Itan, "Lebanon After the Assads," *New Lines Institute*, December 18, 2024, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/lebanon-after-the-assads/> (accessed February 28, 2025).

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⁵ Ghada Halawi, "Where is the centrality of the Sunni MPs' decision in the presidential file?," *Nida Alwatan*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.nidaalwatan.com/article/169371-> (accessed February 10, 2025).

⁶ *Reuters*, "What is the make-up of Lebanon's new parliament?," May 17, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-make-up-lebanons-new-parliament-2022-05-17/> (accessed February 13, 2025).

⁷ Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), FPM is a prominent Lebanese political party founded by Michel Aoun in 1994. It has become one of the largest Christian parties in Lebanon's National Assembly. As of 2021, FPM leader Gebran Bassil has called for revisiting the alliance with Hezbollah, indicating potential shifts in the political landscape. Despite these challenges, the Free Patriotic Movement remains a significant force in Lebanese politics, particularly within the Christian community.

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- ⁹ *Aljazeera*, “Michel Aoun elected president of Lebanon https,” May 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/31/michel-aoun-elected-president-of-lebanon> (accessed February 10, 2025).
- ¹⁰ Kataeb Party, known as the Phalangist Party, is a right-wing Christian political party in Lebanon founded by Pierre Gemayel in 1936. The party re-emerged in the early 2000s and is currently part of the Lebanese opposition, the Kataeb Party holds 4 out of 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament and continues to be an active political force in Lebanon.
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- ¹³ Tamara Qiblawi, “Watershed moment for the Middle East after Lebanon elects new president with a Saudi push,” *CNN*, January 11, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/11/middleeast/lebanon-aoun-president-saudi-push-intl/index.html> (accessed February 22, 2025).
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- ¹⁶ *Reuters*, “Qatar fund to grant Lebanese army \$15 million for fuel,” September 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-fund-grant-lebanese-army-15-million-fuel-2024-09-17/> (accessed February 23, 2025).
- ¹⁷ *Arab News*, “Lebanon’s Hariri pays unannounced visit to Erdogan,” January 08, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1789376/middle-east> (accessed February 24, 2025).
- ¹⁸ *Euro News*, “Turkish President Erdoğan hosts Lebanese PM Mikati in Ankara to discuss regional issues, instability,” December 19 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/12/19/turkish-president-erdogan-hosts-lebanese-pm-mikati-in-ankara-to-discuss-regional-issues-in> (accessed February 24, 2025).
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