



Can France Bring Stability to Crisis-Plagued Lebanon?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: France’s longstanding diplomatic involvement in [Lebanon](#) was intended to promote Lebanese stability, sovereignty, and democracy, but it has failed to achieve any of those goals. As long as Paris continues to consider Hezbollah integral to Lebanon’s democratic life and denies that it is a terrorist organization controlling Lebanon with a private army, its ability to stabilize Lebanon will remain slim to nil.

French president Emmanuel Macron visited Lebanon on September 1, 2020 ostensibly to mark the centennial of the country’s independence, but also as a follow-up to his spontaneous visit shortly after the disastrous explosion at Beirut’s port on August 4. Macron promised urgent economic and medical assistance, held the Lebanese government accountable for Lebanon’s woes, and called for a new pact between the government and its people. During his second visit, he presented an obligatory roadmap of reforms.

Macron’s visits have raised expectations that change will finally come to lift Lebanon out of its dire political and economic troubles—all of which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the catastrophic explosion at the port. There are frequent mass protests against government corruption and a popular desire for change. However, none of France’s longstanding efforts to bring relief to Lebanon’s chronic ills have been effective.

France has a long history of diplomatic, political, economic, cultural, and even military involvement in Lebanon, and has long professed a desire to solve the instability resulting from Lebanon’s deep communal rifts. Paris generally presents its intensive diplomatic involvement in Lebanon as stemming mainly from the emotional and historical attachment the French have to Lebanon and its people. France has also underlined its interest in Lebanon as part of its broader geopolitical

perceptions of the Middle East, as it believes that instability in the region affects French security.

France has often declared that its objectives in Lebanon are to establish and maintain its stability, support its sovereignty, and prevent outside interference in its internal functioning. In order to achieve these goals and help Lebanon overcome its endemic malaise, Paris has taken a variety of steps: encouraging and promoting internal Lebanese dialogue through international and intra-Lebanese conferences, sending French leaders to the country on frequent visits, mobilizing international economic assistance, and attempting to strengthen the Lebanese army so it can become a national military force with sufficient strength to counter Hezbollah's army. France has also maintained close ties with the Arab League and with leaders of Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt as it tries to find solutions to Lebanese political crises.

At the same time, France, a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), has increasingly mobilized on the diplomatic international front as it tries to stabilize Lebanon. France played a key role together with the US in the formulation of UNSC Resolution 1559 in September 2004, which concerned the assassination in February 2005 of Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese PM and a close friend of French president Jacques Chirac. France was the main force driving international pressure on that issue, which ultimately brought about the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanese territory.

A significant milestone in France's diplomatic involvement occurred during the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, which erupted following Hezbollah's rocket attacks on Israeli towns and abduction of two Israeli soldiers. Israel responded by launching massive ground and air attacks against Hezbollah military targets as well as against Lebanon's infrastructure. France condemned Hezbollah's attack but also decried the Israeli reaction as disproportionate and demanded a ceasefire.

France, together with the US, was influential in formulating UNSC Resolution 1701, which called for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, a total ban on Hezbollah military involvement in the buffer zone of southern Lebanon, entry of the Lebanese army into southern Lebanon, and the establishment of UNIFIL's (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) expanded force to prevent the smuggling of weapons by Hezbollah into Lebanon's southern zone. The UNIFIL II mandate did not include the task of disarming Hezbollah as it was stipulated that that process should be carried out with internal Lebanese political consent. That gap reflected France's rather unrealistic hypothesis that the only solution to the problem of disarming Hezbollah was to turn it from a military organization into a political movement.

Hezbollah has violated Resolution 1701 many times. Israel complains regularly about Hezbollah's rearmament, smuggled shipments of advanced weapons from Iran, the presence of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon, the stockpiling of arms in the midst of Lebanon's civilian population, and the use of civilian houses along the "blue line" border as Hezbollah outposts. Hezbollah's constant violations of Resolution 1701 have produced no more than occasional expressions of mild condemnation from France, and they are always followed by a call for Israel to restrain itself.

President Macron is friendlier toward Israel than were his predecessors. In July 2017, during a visit to Paris by PM Benjamin Netanyahu, Macron went so far as to declare in a joint press conference that he shared Israel's concerns about the arming of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

However, at the same time, Macron continued France's tradition of appeasing Hezbollah. For instance, following the discovery in December 2018 and January 2019 of six terrorist attack tunnels built by Hezbollah that reached deep into Israel's northern territory, Israel filed a complaint with the UN Security Council. France condemned the digging of the tunnels and recognized it as a violation of Resolution 1701, but maintained its traditional posture as an "impartial mediator" and yet again called for Israeli restraint.

France's hope of preventing another war that would further undermine Lebanon's stability led to a troubling initiative at the UNSC in September 2019, following Hezbollah's firing of anti-tank missiles at IDF vehicles that were on patrol inside Israel and Israel's subsequent shelling of Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's attack occurred after Israeli air strikes in Syria on August 24, 2019 that thwarted a massive Iranian drone attack on Israel. After these skirmishes, France proposed a UNSC statement condemning any violation of the "blue line" and calling for both sides to maintain restraint. The US blocked the French proposal, arguing that it failed to specifically condemn Hezbollah and also objecting to the fact that this language equated Israel's legitimate right to self-defense with the offensive actions of a terrorist group. Several days later, in September 2019, Macron, during a telephone conversation with Netanyahu, asked for Israeli restraint in its reaction to Hezbollah's attacks so as not to further undermine Lebanon's stability.

Macron seems to be aware of Israel's oft-declared position that it would hold Lebanon accountable for any attack. However, France's policy of appeasement, as manifested in its diplomatic involvement at the UNSC, has the unfortunate result of encouraging rather than discouraging Hezbollah to pursue terrorist activities against Israel. This undermines any chance of achieving stability for Lebanon, and it works to the advantage of Hezbollah's Iranian patron.

Another central problem with France's policy toward Hezbollah is its continued opposition to the designation of Hezbollah's political wing as a terrorist organization. France has so far prevented EU member states' attempts to make this designation and impose sanctions accordingly, as the EU had previously done with Hezbollah's military wing.

France justifies its opposition by saying Hezbollah is a political party that participates in Lebanon's democratic political life. By using this argument, Paris has unfortunately contributed to the false image of Hezbollah as a legitimate political entity. Moreover, France continues to promote the unrealistic illusion that Hezbollah will at some point be disarmed, either by Lebanon's army or by its political institutions. This mission is impossible to accomplish, as both are completely controlled by Hezbollah.

Also relevant is the verdict finally reached on August 18, 2020, after 15 years of investigation, by the Hague Special Tribunal for Lebanon on the Hariri assassination. The verdict said culpability could only be assigned to one member of Hezbollah and gave no answer to the question of who had masterminded the killing. The French Foreign Ministry congratulated Hague on the verdict, presenting it as an important step in the fight against perpetrators of terrorist acts. Unfortunately, France ignored the fact that the verdict raised significant questions regarding the acquittal of the other three Hezbollah activists.

Regardless, Hezbollah has stated that the Hague ruling is irrelevant and that it will not hand over the one Hezbollah member who was found guilty. Hezbollah also rejected outright Macron's proposal to set up an international commission of inquiry regarding the Beirut port explosion. Hezbollah nevertheless agreed to Macron's proposed reforms, as they do not address the issue of its military presence in Lebanon. Hezbollah obviously has no intention whatsoever of renouncing its military force.

As long as France persists in treating the political wing of Hezbollah as a legitimate actor in Lebanese political life, even when Hezbollah knowingly sacrifices Lebanon's stability by storing weapons among Lebanese civilians and pursuing its attacks against Israel, its efforts are unlikely to contribute very much to the stabilization of Lebanon.

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