



# Quagmire in Lebanon

Between Domestic Mismanagement  
and External Interference

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# Quagmire in Lebanon: Between Domestic Mismanagement and External Interference

## Political Blocs in Lebanon

### March 8 Alliance:

- Development and Resistance Bloc
- Free Patriotic Movement
- Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc (includes Hezbollah)
- Nasserite Popular Movement
- Popular Bloc
- Syrian Ba'th Party
- Syrian Social Nationalist Party
- Tashnaq

### March 14 Alliance:

- Democratic Left
- Democratic Renewal Movement

- Future Movement Bloc
- Kataeb Party
- Lebanese Forces
- Tripoli Independent Bloc

### **Independent Blocs:**

- Democratic Gathering Bloc
- Metn Bloc

## **18 Religious sects in Lebanon**

### **12 recognised Christian sects:**

Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Coptic Christians, Roman Catholics and Evangelical Christians including Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists.

### **4 recognised Muslim sects:**

- Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites and Ismaili Shiite orders.

### **Other groups:**

- Druze and Jews

Lebanon in the current decade has witnessed pressing economic instability, political turmoil, large scale protests, and clashes with security officials, fires and explosion exposing the gross mismanagement and the incapacity of the present political structure. The political structure in Lebanon based on the confessional democratic model has resulted in corrupt and self-serving ruling elite that is responsible for its economic downturn and political instability. The situation has been further complicated by the interference of regional powers especially Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as extra-regional powers i.e. France and the US.

Since October 2019, the public outrage over the prevailing economic and social conditions led to the resignation of the incumbent Prime Minister, Saad Harari and appointment of technocrats, Hasan Diab and Mustapha Adib. Both leaders failed to muster enough political will to usher in the much-needed reforms. The re-appointment of Harari as the compromise Prime Minister after a year in October 2020 in light of the continuing economic downturn, COVID-19 crisis and the Beirut blast in August 2020 was aimed at restoring political stability. He promised urgent reforms but failed to address the basic fault lines affecting the political and the economic sphere. The research would seek to analyse the political transition period between October 2019 and October 2020 and identify the problem areas responsible for the state's current crisis. It would also explore the role of external actors namely France, the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia during the transition period and analyse their impact of Lebanese politics.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the factors for the current political and economic turmoil in Lebanon?
2. What are the reasons for Saad Harari's appointment as the Prime Minister in October 2020?
3. What are the options for the new government under Saad Harari

for executing the much needed economic and political reforms?

4. What are the challenges faced by the Harari government in implementing reforms?
5. What is the role of global and regional powers in Lebanon's politics?

### **Quest for Status Quo**

In the post-civil war period, the confessional political process in Lebanon coupled with feudal social structure and adoption of neo-liberal policies have resulted in highly unequal, corrupt, indebted and economically unstable state. The political crisis since the protests and Harari's resignation in October 2019 displays the contradiction between the public desire for structural change and resistance by political parties that benefit from preserving the status quo.

The quest for maintaining status quo stems from the need to preserve the confessional political structure amidst the strategic and economic crisis facing the country. The current confessional system was re-adjusted after the signing of the Taif Agreement on 22 October 1989 by sectarian militias to end the 15 year long civil war. The agreement framed on the basis of mutual coexistence entailed proportional distribution of political representation and allotment of offices among the 18 recognised religious sects (UN 2021). The position of the President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the parliament are reserved for the members of the Maronite, Sunni and Shiite communities respectively, the three largest groups. It adopted parliamentary procedures essentially transferring the real executive powers from the Maronite President to Sunni Prime Minister and his/ her council of ministers. The 128 Chamber of Deputies, the legislative body was equally divided between the Muslim sects and the Christian sects (UN 2021; Bahout 2016; Lebanon's President Office 2021).

Notably, the contemporary politics in Lebanon is divided between the March 14 Alliance and the March 18 Alliance that includes Hezbollah and Maronite predominant, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). The geopolitical competition between the two regional rivals i.e. Iran and Saudi Arabia have affected the domestic politics and added to the mutual suspicion between the Shiite predominant Hezbollah and the Sunni predominant Future Movement (Global Security 2020).

In the post-civil war period, the militia groups disarmed and transformed themselves into political blocs. Notably, Hezbollah was allowed to carry weapons because although the group emerged under the shadow of the civil war, it was recognised as a resistance group rather than militia aimed at overthrowing the Israeli occupation in south Lebanon. It therefore functions as a politico-military organisation and plays a key role in cabinet formation and drafting parliamentary legislations in the post-civil war Lebanese state (Bahout 2012: 57-58). Hezbollah's prominence allows its regional patron, Iran to maintain a sustained influence in Lebanese domestic affairs. Hezbollah and its allies in order to serve their interests on several occasions have destabilised the political process including the cabinet selection during the transitional period after Harari's resignation in October 2019.

The post Taif Accord political settlement also systemised sectarian loyalty and patronage by granting rewards in exchange of votes. There are several instances of proliferation of political parties tussling for support within the same sectarian demography. The sectarian political parties ally with parties of different sects to serve their interests (Global Security 2020). Moreover, the feudal social structure in Lebanon has enabled a personality driven political eco-system. The leader of the influential families, Zaim play a key role in influencing local and national electoral behaviour. These families pursue their political and financial interests by controlling its support base. It has facilitated an environment of self-profiting by all political parties compromising with the national goals (Calfat 2018;

Ghaddar 2016).

The adoption of neo-liberal measures and market-driven tendencies in Lebanon prioritised profit over workers, social welfare measures and environmental concerns. It proved unsuitable for a post-conflict state lacking political stability, natural resources, large manufacturing bases and reliable bureaucratic structure. The successive governments have liberalised regulations and lowered corporate taxes in order to attract foreign investment and encourage privatisation (Battah 2020). Foreign donors offered loans and grants on the condition that the government would undertake austerity measures such as raising tax, reducing wages in public sector etc. The high degree of privatisation of financially viable assets translated into poor government revenue and affected the quality of essential services contributing to the current crisis (Henley 2016; Battah 2020).

The government is heavily dependent on banks to meet its expenditures and payment of salaries. The banking sector drew large sums of money from citizens of Gulf States due to its liberal regulatory system and huge interest rates. The 2008 global financial crisis as well as the Hezbollah's entry into active politics slowed down the inflow of money from the Gulf States. The government in the Gulf States discouraged their citizens to invest in Lebanese banks that may directly or indirectly finance Hezbollah. Gradually, the size of deposits and investments in real estate dropped contributing to the deteriorating economic situation. The government has failed to resolve the deep-seated economic instability and on a day to day level, the breakdown of the state machinery is reflected in poor public services including power shortages; irregular water supply and notably, stalling work in sewage treatment and waste disposal facilities.

The banking sector has faced severe criticism and incidents of attacks of financial centres have been widely reported since the 2019 protest. The Central Bank or Banque Du Liban (BDL) in 1997 pegged the Lebanese

Lira to the U.S. dollar at 1507 to 1. The fixed exchange rate to the US dollar played a key role in stabilising Lebanese economy in 1990s and 2000s (Koffman 2020).

Riad Salameh who has been the governor of the BDL since 1993, carried out financial engineering. Accordingly, BDL borrowed money from banks at high interest rates in order to secure government's finances and maintain the fixed exchange rate of Lebanese Lira with the US dollar (Arnold 2019). BDL in order to incentivise deposits and project stability offered high interest rates up to 14 percent requiring large deposits to pay the high interest rates. The Central Bank's debt in November 2019 was at US\$ 85 billion (Arnold 2019). The monetary policy has been described as a Ponzi scheme in which the BDL relied on fresh borrowing to repay existing debt. Salameh instructed that all money transfer offices including Western Union and Money Gram to be paid in Lira rather than USD. By mid-2019, the demand for USD increased leading to a flourishing black market. The exchange rate for Lebanese Lira to USD rose up to 10,000 in the black market (Koffman 2020).

The well-connected billionaires meanwhile sensing economic collapse transferred their funds abroad further destabilising the economy. The currency was devalued by 85 percent in late 2019 and banks limited the disposal of currencies to ordinary citizens intensifying the economic crisis (Moubayed 2019).

**Table 1: Main Sectors of Economy in 2020**

Sectors	Agriculture	Industry	Services
Employment by Sector (in % of Total Employment)	13.4	22.3	64.3
Value Added (in % of GDP)	5.3	12.8	75.9
Value Added (Annual % Change)	29.1	-0.1	-5.0

*Source: Nordea Trade 2021*

The state has limited resources producing mostly fruits such as olives, apples, oranges, bananas, grapes and vegetables. Table 1 indicates that in 2020, agricultural sector contributed 5.3 percent and employed 13.4 percent of the workforce. The industrial sector is concentrated in food processing; metals; minerals; furniture etc. The state secures 90 percent of food supplies, equipment, commodities etc from imports and the economy is largely dependent on trade, banking and remittances and service sector contributes to 75.9 percent in GDP and provides employment to 64.3 percent of the total workforce (Nordea Trade 2021; Koffman 2020). Tourism sector over the years has declined partly due to the Syrian crisis as well as availability of alternative destinations such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha etc.

### **Protests, COVID-19 and the Explosion**

The crisis in government reserves prompted the introduction of new tax measures on gasoline, tobacco and online phone calls. The so called WhatsApp tax served as a trigger for country wide protests erupting on 17 October 2019 to address the myriad range of issues such as corruption; recovery of stolen funds; public accountability; implementation of fair taxation and financial procedures; formation of an independent and non-political technocratic government for problem-solving and eventually overhauling the confessional political structure (BBC News 2019).

In response to the public outrage, the incumbent Prime Minister Saad Harari resigned on 29 October 2019. The resignation of the Prime Minister only partially addressed the protestors' demands. The Lebanese public frustrated with the endemic corruption and failure of the state machinery stemming from their political and economic procedures are demanding political overhaul (Moubayed 2019). It essentially would require complete re-adjustment of the power structure to nurture a more publically accountable political culture. The sect-based parties enjoying the status

quo and political grip have however maintained their resistance to enable genuine reforms.

The transitional period between October 2019 and October 2020 displays this very contradiction between peoples' demands and the denial by political groups to initiate structural overhaul. In order to address the protestors' immediate concerns, the ruling elite offered the illusion of technocratic government comprising of academic and technical experts. In this context, Hasan Diab, an academic and former Education Minister was appointed as the new Prime Minister as a safe bet to calm the protestors. He received 69 votes in the 128-member Chamber of Deputies (Azhari 2019; Shartouni 2019).

The political parties continued to take measures to safeguard their interests leading to in-fighting in the cabinet selection process. Diab's selection designated for a member from the Sunni community was approved by the Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement. The members of Saad Harari's party however opposed Diab's appointment accusing Hezbollah of bulldozing the selection process. The political groups continued to tussle for cabinet appointments instead of implementing the much-needed tax and banking reforms (Azhari 2019; The Statesman 2020). The protestors demanded that the new Prime Minister should be named by their revolutionary movement. Therefore, in terms of public perception, similar to the resignation of Harari, the appointment of a technocrat was seen as an unfair compromise and Diab's legitimacy was repeatedly questioned (France 24 2019).

In March 2020, Diab government announced its inability to repay bond payment worth US\$ 1.2 billion (Khraiche 2020). The economy in 2020 shrank by 21 percent and inflation was at 78 percent. The Lebanon after defaulting to repay the sovereign debt found it difficult to attract external assistance hindering any attempt at long term restructuring.

The public discontent continued to grow throughout Diab's brief tenure and despite lockdown measures in response to COVID-19 pandemic, people came back to the streets in several cities since late March and early April 2020 demanding structural reforms. Diab government also failed to ensure public accountability and was unable to bring to trial of corrupt politicians, businesses and banking officials (Majzoub 2020). The talks between Diab government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial support also reached an impasse due to inaction in pursuing reforms and dispute over the scale of financial losses among the government officials, politicians and the bankers (France 24 2020). On 3 August 2020, Finance Minister Nassif Hitti resigned citing contradictory interests and lack of political will to usher in comprehensive structural reforms to tackle with mismanagement and corruption (DW 2020).

During this period of gloom, the very next day on 4 August 2020, the explosion in Beirut Port that killed more than 200 and injured around 6500 people further exposing the incompetence of the ruling elite (Human Rights Watch 2021; World Health Organisation 2021). Reportedly, around 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate was stored in Beirut Port warehouse since 2013 (BBC News 2020). It cut off Lebanon's key sea trade route disrupting the supply chain. The port stored the state's only grain silos and 80 percent of its imports. The explosion destroyed most of its grain reserves (Nordea Trade 2021).

The economic effect of the blast is estimated at US\$ 20 billion. Consulting firm Strategy& has estimated that the government must allocate around US\$ 3.1 billion for rebuilding the infrastructure including US\$ 1.8 billion for repairing houses and US\$ 865 million to support more than 30,000 small businesses destroyed due to the blast. The Diab government was however incapable of channelling the sum required for the rehabilitation. Lebanon is currently the most indebted state with gross public debt at US\$ 93.4 billion in the first half of 2020 and the debt to GDP ratio is likely to increase by 375 percent by the end of 2021 (Strategy& 2020).

The pattern of gross negligence and lack of proper oversight reinvigorated protests repeating their demand for justice and penalty for responsible government and port officials. The government in spite of repeated promises to tackle corruption have not arrested or tried any high-ranking official (Human Rights Watch 2021). Meanwhile, around 1,400 protesters, activists and journalists have been arrested, detained or interrogated by security forces between October 2019 and September 2020 (Azhari 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020). The protests and clashes in the subsequent days after the blast led to the death of one security official and injuries of around 180 people (Reuters 2020). The lack of public distrust in carrying out a thorough investigation on the blast forced the government to seek help from France to identify the reasons for the incident.

On political level, Diab had initially proposed the idea of early election to overcome the structural crisis and appoint a new parliament and new power elite. The public antagonism however continued to increase in succeeding days leading to resignation by number of cabinet members (Al Jazeera 2020). On 10 August 2020, Prime Minister Diab announcing his resignation expressed his helplessness and noted that the regime of corruption is bigger than the state and the state cannot confront or detach itself from this corrupt regime (Al Arabiya 2020). It reflects the continuing reluctance of the political elite to implement reforms in spite of the economic crisis worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the port blast.

After Diab's resignation, Mustapha Adib, a career diplomat, appeared as the consensus candidate selected by the four former Prime Ministers. He received 90 votes in the 128-member parliament (The Guardian 2020). Adib after taking office faced severe pressure in the cabinet formation process. The key portfolios have remained under the control of same factions for years. Adib in this scenario intended to shake up the cabinet selection process by appointment of non-partisan technocrats. Hezbollah and Amal Movement however insisted on maintaining control over the finance ministry. Adib after undertaking series of failed discussions

admitted his inability to form a cabinet approved by all the major political blocs and eventually resigned on 26 September 2020 (BBC News 2020). The failure in formation of cabinet indicates the continuing problem of political groups maintaining a stubborn attitude to uphold their interests even at the cost of the ongoing political crisis and the collapsing economy. The resignation further jeopardised the flow of international funding promised during the two visits by French President Emmanuel Macron on 6 August and 27 August 2020.

### **French Initiative**

French President Macron after the blast incident took control of the international response coordination. On 9 August 2020, Macron organised a teleconference with 30 leaders and committed US\$ 300 million to assist in the re-construction process. Macron insisted on developing transparent channels to directly transfer the money to Lebanese people. The measure to directly transfer the amount was made by the Lebanese citizens during Macron's first visit to Beirut in August as they were suspicious of their government's capacity to fairly allocate the money required for rehabilitation. The international donors also feared that the amount given through official channels would contribute to Hezbollah's banking networks (VOA News 2020). However, due to the close association of the political groups with their sect-based society, it is unlikely that they would not intervene in disbursement of funds.

Macron during his second visit on 27 August 2020 to Beirut offered a 15-day ultimatum to appoint a new government to unlock the foreign funds required for reconstruction. France also sent a concept paper prescribing measures to the government including an audit of the state finances and the BDL; formation of an interim government capable of enacting urgent reforms; early legislative elections within a year and power sector reforms. France promised to contribute in rebuilding Beirut port, improving the healthcare care, support in conducting financial audit and helping

to organise early parliamentary voting, along the lines of the European Union (EU) (Macaron 2020; France 24 2020). Reportedly, French firms are actively seeking contracts for different reconstruction projects including rebuilding and running operations of Beirut port.

The French initiative outlined four sectors that would require immediate attention i.e. humanitarian aid and the response to the COVID-19 crisis; post-Beirut blast reconstruction; political and economic reforms and conducting early parliamentary election. France also pressed for progress in talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and oversight on international humanitarian funds by the United Nations (UN) (Macaron 2020; France 24 2020).

France's ultimatum facilitated the swift selection of Mustapha Adib by most of the major parties. However, Adib too fell victim to systemic problems facing Lebanon. Under this context, political veteran and former Prime Minister, Saad Harari has re-emerged as the safest bet to lead the fractured country.

### **Saad Harari's Political Trajectory**

Saad Harari assumed the leadership position in the Sunni predominant Future Movement after the assassination of his father and former Prime Minister Rafik Harari on 14 February 2005. He emerged as the leader of the March 14 Alliance, a coalition of political parties that opposed the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanese territory and influence in politics. March 14 Alliance received support from Saudi Arabia and the western states.

Saad Harari shares an uneasy relationship with Hezbollah, the Shiite political and militia group, close to Iran and the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria. Harari's party members have regularly pointed towards Hezbollah's complicity in Rafik Harari's assassination (Arab News 2019; The Times of Israel 2019). He was however, aware of the domestic political realities

derived from the confessional system that allots political representation and offices based on proportional representation. Therefore, Hezbollah and Amal Movement's popularity among the Shiite community guaranteed their position in the post 1990 civil war Lebanese state. Harari relied on Hezbollah's support to assume the position of Prime Minister during his first tenure between 9 November 2009 and 13 June 2011. His tenure was cut short after Hezbollah and its allies withdrew support over investigations into Rafik Harari's death (Australian Government Refugee Review Tribunal 2011).

Harari was re-appointed as the Prime Minister after two years of political vacuum by the newly elected President Michel Aoun in late 2016. He took office on 18 December 2016. Harari's immediate challenge was tackling the economic and social ramifications of accommodating more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees residing in the country (Adamczyk 2016). The conflict in Syria also blocked the only overland trade routes hampering the supply of goods. The economic condition continued to deteriorate during his tenure.

Harari maintained his opposition to Hezbollah's military activism against Israel risking escalation and unwilling involvement of the Lebanese government and the armed forces. Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria and incidents of confrontation with Israeli forces in Syrian and Lebanese airspace complicated Harari's leadership. In this context, he sought to detach the activities of Hezbollah in Syria from the Lebanese state and on several occasions, expressed his inability to control Hezbollah's activities and called it a regional problem (The Times of Israel 2019).

The Lebanese Prime Minister in a dramatic fashion announced his resignation in Riyadh on 4 November 2017. In his resignation letter, Harari protested against Iran and Hezbollah's regional actions and expressed fear of assassination. The resignation was forced on him by the Saudi government to spark a regional crisis with Iran and create a domestic stir

within Lebanon. Saudi efforts however failed after news of its complicity in destabilising the state was widely reported within Lebanon. It also came to light that Saudi Arabia forced Harari to resign due to his inability to counter Iran's influence and delegitimize Hezbollah's presence in Lebanese politics (Linge & Italiano 2017; Barnard & Abi-Habib 2017). Harari was aware of the need for political consensus to uphold the continuation of the current political structure. The crisis was neutralised after France requested the presence of Harari and his family to meet with President Emmanuel Macron. The incident displayed Saudi Arabia's loss of favour over Harari and it is looking for new partners to counter Iran's influence in Lebanon (Al Jazeera 2017).

Harari subsequently resumed his position supported by different political groups including Hezbollah and continued to serve as Prime Minister until his resignation in response to public demonstration on 29 October 2019.

Harari after Adib's resignation in September 2020 saw an opportunity to reassure international donors and position himself as the best person to bring political stability and reform implementation. Harari benefitted from the pressure imposed by France to the ruling elite to set aside their differences and work together. Subsequently, Hariri received 65 votes from across political spectrum, including his own, Future Movement, Amal Movement, Druze Progressive Socialist Party and Syrian Socialist Nationalist party. The Free Patriotic Movement, Lebanese Forces and Hezbollah abstained from voting (Azhari 2020). Hezbollah's move was tactical because although it supported Harari's return, it did not intend to project the impression of backing the new government internationally.

Harari has promised to devote his energy to conduct reforms and channel the much-needed economic relief. The Lebanese citizens experienced in Harari's political style and aware of his connections with the corrupt banking sector is highly doubtful about his sincerity. His return is seen as a

setback for the October 2019 protest that began with the highly ambitious goal of political overhaul (Azhari 2020). The citizens had to settle with his resignation only to witness yearlong political instability, economic failures, health crisis and large-scale deaths caused by incompetence and negligence. Hariri's critics have called his return as the peak of counter revolution and see him as an integral part of the corrupt regime (Azhari 2020; BBC News 2020). He therefore exudes very little confidence to rescue the state's faltering economy and reform the political structure. Hariri until April 2021 has failed to reach political consensus for forming a new cabinet as a result of political deadlock with President Michel Aoun. Aoun since Hariri's appointment has challenged the Prime Minister designate's sole decision-making power in choosing the cabinet especially the Christian members reflecting the chronic political problem facing Lebanon (Abumaria 2020). Hasan Diab who is serving as a caretaker Prime Minister had threatened to quit on 6 March 2021 in a bid to pressurise the political parties to form a new cabinet (Al Jazeera 2021). The political impasse has however continued. Meanwhile, the Lebanese currency has collapsed with black market rate of US\$ 1 at 10,000 Lebanese Lira (Al Monitor 2021). In this context, exchange reform may lead to financial instability in the short run, but the government must seek to apply it to overcome the crisis.

On the international level, Hariri due to his political experience is seen as credible face by international donors. However, they are aware of the problems facing Lebanese polity. In this respect, donors are suspicious of traditional methods of channelling money to the government. The UN has been suggested as an effective medium to coordinate the relief efforts. However, based on experience in the region, the UN agencies cooperate with local NGOs linked with governments. Therefore, the chances of corruption through UN channel cannot be ruled out. There is an urgent requirement by the international aid organisations to set clear conditions to the government to function effectively and without interference.

Moreover, the civil society groups can also be empowered to carry out the relief efforts. The subject of corruption must be addressed by donors and financial institutions as part of wider reconstruction efforts (Human Rights Watch 2020).

## **Role of Regional and Global Players**

France's historic and cultural ties along with its economic heft offer it with a unique opportunity to jumpstart reforms. France has not yet recognised Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation (Ahren 2013). It can therefore play a key role during deliberations with all the parties. It also offers France an opportunity to expand its influence in the region. Moreover, in light of the new Joe Biden Presidency, France could use its diplomatic outreach in the Levant to intensify coordination with the US' Middle East policy.

France's initiatives however, fell victim to the political infighting and differences over cabinet formation leading to the resignation of Mustapha Adib, only after a month of joining office. The proposals are likely to face difficulty to effect reforms especially under the same political structure and the ruling elite responsible for years of mismanagement. Hezbollah due to political and military weight would attempt to hinder the French initiatives in case it does not suit their interests (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2020; Al-Sharif 2020). The French Initiative has proposed setting clear and short-term deadlines for restructuring the political system. Hezbollah however, has insisted on conducting negotiations without any time limit. France would also have to engage with the competition between the US-Saudi Arabia axis and Iran in the Lebanese battleground (Macaron 2020; Cook 2020; Sadzot 2020).

France has urged the global and regional powers to support the French backed initiative. The US however, imposed sanctions on former Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil from Amal Movement and former transportation and public works minister Yusuf Finyanus from Marada Movement, close

to Syria on 8 September 2020 (Harb 2020). In November 2020, the US extended sanctions on former Foreign Minister Gibran Bassil, the leader of the Maronite predominant Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) (Chulov 2020). These measures have destabilised the French initiative by opening the scope of confrontation among the Lebanese parties. The US efforts are aimed at pressurising France to delegitimise Hezbollah's participation in the political process and arm-twist Lebanese politicians to adopt a more flexible approach during the maritime boundary demarcation talks with Israel (Macaron 2020).

In the current period, there are divergences in French and the US policy towards Lebanon. France on one hand has emphasised on the issues of governance, investments, expanding influence and countering Turkey in Lebanon. The US on the other hand has prioritised discrediting of Hezbollah and severing its trade flow; containing Iran; demarcation of Israel's maritime boundary; limiting the influence of Bashar Al Assad regime in the country's politics; maintaining neutrality in foreign policy etc (Macaron 2020; Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2020; Al-Sharif 2020).

The Iranian government is seeking the US' re-entry in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Iran is currently applying wait and see approach. It is incapable of offering economic relief or rehabilitating the economy. Iranian companies are seeking to gain contracts in the electricity sector (Hashem 2020). It maintains a sustained influence through Hezbollah and it was feared that Iranian forces would activate their military front to challenge Israel in light of the killing of Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on 27 October 2020 (BBC News 2020). Iran with regard to Lebanon has maintained diplomatic engagement during the transition period. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Lebanon on 14 August 2020 to express his support for Lebanon's reconstruction. Zarif taking a high ground condemned the foreign powers of interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs and suggested that funding should not be tied with reforms. He opined that the government and the people should be

given the freedom to decide their future. Iran would continue to favour continuation of the political structure to safeguard the interests on its crucial ally, Hezbollah (USIP 2020). Moreover, in case of lack of progress in Iran nuclear talks, there will likely be repercussions in Lebanon.

From the Saudi perspective, it has historically supported the Hariri led March 14 Alliance due to its geopolitical competition with Iran and Syria. It backed the March 14 Alliance's efforts to push for Syria's withdrawal in mid-2000s. In light of the Arab Spring protests in different parts of the region, Saudi Arabia adopted an activist policy to change the leaderships in Syria and Libya while safeguarding the friendly regimes in Bahrain as well as Yemen. The Lebanese government however, adopted the policy of neutrality to avoid spill over of regional conflicts in the state. It continued to consider Hariri and his Sunni predominant Future Movement as a useful ally to counter Hezbollah and Iran until 2017. However, the forced resignation of Hariri in Riyadh reflects Saudi Arabia's disenchantment with Hariri. On the subject of Hariri's reappointment, it has maintained a quiet posture. However, joint photo ops by Saad Hariri and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman have been posted in early 2019 to suggest that their personal relations have remained intact (Davies 2020). Saudi Arabia is likely to follow the US strategy in thwarting Iran's influence and encourage Lebanon's border talks and eventual normalisation with Israel. Lastly, Saudi Arabia withdrew support to Lebanese government under Hariri due to its perceived failure to contain Hezbollah. This has further aggravated the internal imbalance in the absence of regional actor to contain Hezbollah.

### **India's Ties with Lebanon**

India shares excellent ties with Lebanon since establishment of diplomatic relations in 1954. There is a high degree of appreciation for Indian culture, yoga, Mahatma Gandhi's legacy and the principled stand towards supporting the Palestinian cause within Lebanon. Both states

are highly multi-cultural, multi-linguistic democratic societies and shares commonalities in terms of democratic, parliamentary system of government; written constitution; basic freedoms and human rights; market economy; availability of educated English-speaking professionals and entrepreneurs etc (Ministry of External Affairs 2019).

There are currently 8000 to 9000 Indian nationals in Lebanon working in industrial firms and agricultural sector. Most of them are living however, illegally (Ministry of External Affairs 2019). The Indian Embassy in Beirut has made concerted efforts to reach out with Indian nationals and ensuring their welfare and safety. The Indian government has repatriated over 1000 Indian workers. India-Lebanon bilateral trade is relatively modest with total trade worth US\$ 234.91 million in 2019-2020. India's exports to Lebanon include machinery, textile articles, plastics; precious stones etc (Ministry of Commerce & Industry 2021).

The last high-level visit to Lebanon occurred when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Beirut in May 1960. In the recent past, the then Minister of State for External Affairs, M J Akbar visited Beirut. Earlier in 2015, Lebanese Agriculture minister Akram Chehayeb visited India (Ministry of External Affairs 2019). Besides, ministerial level visits, there have been number of secretary level visits. Both states have signed number of MOUs in cultural and educational exchange; agricultural and allied sectors; tourism; setting up of Yoga Chair; Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection (BIPPA); Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA); Mutual and Legal Assistance and Judicial Cooperation; Extradition and transfer of sentenced persons; Labour & Manpower; skill upgradation etc.

The Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation [ITEC] programme initiated in 1964 has offered 75 civilian slots and 25 defence slots to Lebanon in 2019-2020 ((Ministry of External Affairs 2019).

Notably, an Indian battalion (INDBATT) has been deployed in UNIFIL since November 1998. The battalion currently consists of 860 defence personnel including 4 doctors and 1 nursing staff officer, who are deployed in the eastern-most sector of Lebanon's southern border with Israel at the tri-junction with Syria. Additionally, 16 Indian defence personnel including the Deputy Force Commander are based in UNIFIL Headquarters, Naqoura, together with a 21-member medical team (Ministry of External Affairs 2019).

India in 2014 provided US\$ 500,000 in 2014 and US\$ 500,000 in 2016 to Lebanon as part of its commitment to financially support the state hosting around 1.7 million Syrian refugees (Ministry of External Affairs 2019). The Indian government after 4 August port blast flew 58 metric tons of food and other relief material. India also provided medicines considering the COVID-19 crisis (The Times of India 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The confessional democratic model cultivated during the French colonial mandate and re-adjusted during the 1989 Taif Agreement offered scope of sectarian reconciliation in Lebanese's multi-religious society. It offered stability and the political trajectory within the state has been largely peaceful barring Hezbollah's military activities against Israel. The model however has nurtured corrupt political structure that has eroded the economic foundation of the state. The problem is compounded with the feudal social structure in the state that enables self-profiting at the cost of national goals. The adoption of neo-liberal measures has optimised an environment that benefits the richer sections of society while the state's capacity to conduct basic functions has been disrupted. The economic crisis is further accentuated by the actions of the banking sector that continued to channel money at high rates of interest to sustain the ruling elite without creating productive assets to repay the sum turning it as the most indebted state globally.

The public frustration over government's mismanagement has triggered widespread protests in late 2019 leading to the resignation of Saad Harari. The political parties benefitting from the prevalent structure are unwilling to relent and they offered the illusion of independent technocratic governments under Hasan Diab and Mustapha Adib. The failure by the two Prime Ministers to usher in political reforms has pushed the wide array of political groups to rely on Saad Harari's competence to attract funding to pursue the much-needed reforms. Saad Harari's return marks the restoration of the status quo. He has promised urgent reforms while failing to address the fault lines.

In terms of options for Saad Harari government, balancing his interest vis a vis the diverse interests of political groups including Hezbollah would be hard to attain. Harari is however aware of Hezbollah's relevance in maintaining political consensus and stability in the country. While the political and economic picture for Lebanon is not highly optimistic in the coming days, Harari's political goodwill among the major parties especially in the current period of economic distress may offer his government an opportunity for national consensus. The Lebanese citizens are highly suspicious of Harari's sincerity to overcome the crisis. It is seen as a setback for the peoples' movement demanding the complete overhaul of the sectarian and corrupt political system since October 2019. Therefore, there is a need for effective communication with civil society groups and grass root organisation to address the problems facing Lebanese society. Moreover, Lebanon's willingness to engage in maritime border talks with Israel may widen its engagement with the US as well as help to explore energy potential in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

France has taken the lead in coordinating the reconstruction programme after Beirut blast. It has urged the political elites to display political will to conduct genuine reforms. Harari's appointment may help the government to receive the much-needed finances. However, it is unlikely to the reconstruction measures would be carried out efficiently under the

same political elite. The French efforts face challenge from the systemic problems within Lebanon as well as the US' efforts to utilise the crisis to corner Hezbollah and its allies. Iran has disfavoured the western policy of setting conditions in exchange of relief and indicated preference for preserving the current political structure. For Saudi Arabia, since 2017, Harari is seen as too soft on Hezbollah. Currently, it favours the US policy of containing Iranian influence and is willing to support any group willing to challenge Hezbollah in Lebanon.

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