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## **“What’s Next for Lebanon: A View from the Ground”**

***Habib C. Malik, PhD***  
***Professor, Lebanese American University***

*Delivered at the Transatlantic Leadership Network’s Conference “Turmoil in the Middle East: The U.S. Role and Future Scenarios,” held at the United States House of Representatives on Friday, February 7, 2020.*

Raw populism, especially of the peaceful sort, cannot be expected to achieve swift transformative change in the face of entrenched state corruption and criminality. This is the pessimistic, or realist, view, and it is supported by much evidence in history.

Something finally snapped in Lebanon on the popular level back on 17 October 2019, and an unprecedented, massive, and fairly sustained popular uprising (with ebbs and flows) exploded in the streets, squares, and thoroughfares of Lebanon’s towns and cities. It comprised young and old, urban and rural, educated and barely literate alike, but the driving energy behind it has been the youth, and at times the women—and they have largely hailed from all the country’s religious sects without exception, meaning the uprising has been nonsectarian and inclusive. Even though much of it started spontaneously, the uprising relied for its sustained momentum on social media. But what has really kept it going has been the underlying genuineness of the grievances and unanimity of the legitimate demands, with abysmal conditions serving as a unifier in misery: an end to corruption by the political class; the repatriation of stolen billions; basic life necessities (electricity, infrastructure, affordable medical care, affordable education, and jobs); a halt to the hemorrhaging emigration of the country’s youth; cabinet government ministers with clean records and real expertise in their respective fields of specialization who can offer workable solutions for Lebanon’s economic and financial meltdown; new early parliamentary elections under heavy international supervision and scrutiny (in any self-respecting country, when such large and persistent popular protests occur, all legitimacy of any recent parliamentary elections is lost and people go back to the polls for new early elections—what took place on the popular level in Lebanon amounts to nothing less than an expression of collective remorse over the recent parliamentary election results, something similar to what happened in Egypt after only eleven months of the popularly elected government of the late Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammad Morsi); and a call for the swift departure of the entire existing political class perceived as hopelessly corrupt and responsible for bringing Lebanon to this deplorable state.

The authenticity of the uprising and the unity of its rightful demands are attested to by the lack of prior coordination or any identifiable leadership. Also, this has been evident through the spontaneous, indeed instinctual, unity of the demands. For years Lebanon has been a victim of a vast criminal conspiracy of systematic plundering of the country’s resources perpetrated by its corrupt and thieving political class from every stripe, and this uprising of the people, so far largely peaceful, has been the resounding collective angry response to their deliberate impoverishment. By definition, popular uprisings (and populism in general) are maximalist in nature. The signature slogan of this Lebanese popular revolt has been “All of them means all of them” have to go—no exceptions. So the street demands are extremist in their very essence, and the street does not negotiate or



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compromise; the minute these take place the uprising is lost, finished. The politicians who made disingenuous calls to negotiate with “representatives” of the uprising know this very well.

What has the uprising achieved so far? Here’s a small listing: the transcending of Lebanon’s deep sectarian fault lines; the mobilizing of the youth; the resounding rejection of the political status quo and its endemic corruption; the toppling of the Saad Hariri government; capture of the attention of the wider region and the world including much expressed sympathy from many directions; movement towards a government of independent experts, or technocrats (the Hassan Diab government is a step in that direction, but questions remain about how truly independent the new cabinet ministers are from the traditional politicians and their political parties); and perhaps most importantly the evaporation of any credibility, any popular trust, in the venal ruling class and in the system of dividing the spoils among themselves that they have created over the years and decades. Once credibility and trust are gone it is exceedingly difficult to restore them without radical change of behavior and of leaders.

In all this the Shiite paramilitary group and Iran proxy Hezbollah, alongside the other Shiite political grouping, the Amal Movement of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, started out as cautiously offering oral endorsement to the popular call for assuring basic needs and an end to corruption only to turn aloof and eventually to reject the uprising altogether and even engage in sporadic violent attacks on the protestors as well as widespread vandalism in downtown Beirut perpetrated by infiltrators to tarnish the peaceful nature of the uprising. Clearly, Hezbollah was caught off guard by the scale, duration, and resilience of the mass popular revolt. Since the start Hezbollah has revealed a series of basic weaknesses that include severe constraints on their ability to engage in open bloody suppression of the swelling protests—recurring pressures were put by them and their allies on the Lebanese army and security police to be more forceful with the protestors, but commander of the army General Joseph Aoun (no relation to the President) wisely resisted these pressures to his great credit. Apparently, Hezbollah and their masters in Tehran including the late Qassem Suleimani do not understand what a free, vibrant, dynamic, courageous, creative, and life-affirming people as the Lebanese are all about. They only know an ideologically indoctrinated and brainwashed human herd of sheep that is regimented yet needs every now and then to be violently repressed if it strays beyond the strict bounds laid down for it. If such repression works on the streets of Baghdad and Tehran, it certainly does not work on the streets of Beirut and other Lebanese towns and cities.

Hezbollah only isolated themselves further when they turned a peaceful non-sectarian protest into Shiites versus Sunnis, or painted it falsely as the “resistance” versus supposed plots, schemes, manipulations, and conspiracies from the outside. By doing this it was Hezbollah that first rejected the popular uprising, not the other way around. In any case, it is not the job of such an uprising to “reassure” anyone, and this includes Hezbollah. So in essence Hezbollah has lost the “strategic depth” that came from any previous sympathy by the Lebanese people as a whole during times of confrontation with Israel. The fabled “golden triad” Hezbollah speaks of often—the people, the army, and the resistance—has consequently teetered: actually, the army was never with the “resistance” except during specific and clear acts of external attack either by Israel or, more recently, by *Daesh* (ISIS), and the people are now overwhelmingly alienated from the “resistance” with mounting defections within Shiite ranks despite the dangers such defectors have faced. So the intimidation factor on which Hezbollah has hitherto relied, including some open displays of bullying both within their community and against the protestors, is showing signs of erosion on the popular level (Sunnis, anti-Hezbollah Christians, and rising numbers of disgruntled Shiites constitute more than 50 percent of the Lebanese population; this also amounts to a swelling rejection of Iran in Lebanon). For



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them, those who position themselves as protectors of the corrupt status quo are implicated in the corruption. In the end, if Hezbollah truly cared for Lebanon and the welfare of the Lebanese people, they would have refrained from entering the new Diab government, encouraging instead genuinely independent technocrats to step forward and come up with the needed difficult solutions to overcome the dire challenges Lebanon faces on the economic and financial fronts. This would have constituted the proper separation of political considerations from pressing economic ones, something Hassan Nasrallah has been hypocritically calling for.

A question must arise amid the preceding: Why should Lebanon be given any attention at present? Allow me to submit before you a controversial contention: Lebanon is in fact at the epicenter of the single, abiding, and most central cause in the entire Arab and indeed Islamic worlds. This uniquely pivotal and most pressing issue in the wider Middle East region, as my proposition posits, is *not* the Palestinian question, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or oil and energy, or big-power geostrategic competition, or matters of development and economic advancement, or even the region-wide Sunni-Shiite showdown—important and significant as all these issues surely are. The paramount and urgent challenge in the Arab, Turkish, and Persian domains is the persistent, glaring, and deepening *freedom deficit*. All these societies suffer from a pitiful dearth of freedom on the personal and communal levels, and they are becoming even less free year after year.

This freedom drought is further undermining an already shaky pluralism, and it is hampering development in these societies on the human level including overall wellbeing, women's status, relations among Islamic peoples, and relations between native Muslims and native non-Muslims. When freedom weakens the way becomes quickly open to further Islamist radicalization. Freedom therefore is without a doubt the most vital yet severely compromised commodity in the Middle East region today.

When such a crucial ingredient as freedom is threatened it becomes imperative to search for and protect any lingering indigenous oases of authentic individual and group freedoms native to the Middle East if these rarities do indeed exist. Such precious specimens of homegrown freedom must be guarded and nurtured at all costs in the hope that they will grow and spread and infect positively their freedom-starved surroundings. They are the only hope for a future restoration of pluralism and creative vibrant diversity throughout the region.

An oasis of this sort featuring a native, free, open, and pluralist society does undeniably exist in the Middle East—it is Lebanon. Despite the long litany of problems—some quite serious—that the little country of Lebanon faces, it remains remarkably if not miraculously by far the freest society in the Arab world, and it passes the freedom test with flying colors when compared to Mullah-dominated Iran or to Erdogan's Turkey. The reason why Lebanon is special, nay unique, when it comes to freedoms is that it is home to the only remaining ancient, free, rooted, indigenous, and non-*dhimmi* Christian community in the entire Middle East, whereas all other native Christians have at some point or other in their turbulent histories succumbed to second-class *dhimmi* subjugation under Islamic rule, lost their freedoms, and have never regained them. Moreover, Lebanon's free Christians have helped spawn a special breed of Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites: liberal, educated, sophisticated, open, and considerably free while being largely immune to jihadist ideology of whatever stripe. Whenever Muslims live side by side and interact closely over long periods of time with free Christians, they tend to change and for the better. However, when Muslims live side by side and interact for long periods of time with *dhimmi* Christians, they don't change: Lebanon is the case in point for the first proposition; Egypt is an example of the second. So



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free native Christianity like the one that obtains in Lebanon serves as the leaven for cultivating and spreading this freedom elsewhere. It is for this reason that Lebanon's greatest asset remains its human capital, something not so much in evidence in other more tranquil, economically prosperous, and technically advanced countries in the region, such as the Gulf States. Helping Lebanon to stand on its feet economically and financially following decades of corruption and theft by the country's kleptocratic ruling political class—today's popular uprising that ignited in fall 2019 signals that the Lebanese people of all sectarian affiliations have had enough of this entrenched criminal enterprise—would contribute tangibly to the single greatest cause as well as future hope for this region: Freedom.

Lebanon is today disputed territory between the free and the unfree. The values that permeate the people of Lebanon's popular uprising, and that are empirically entrenched in the lives of the people who embody them, are identical to your deepest values right here in America and the West. They are genuinely homespun in the soil and culture and traditions of little Lebanon and are not, as some tendentiously claim, mere colonial imports, transplants, and impositions from the West. Lebanon has always been oriented towards the West and the Arab world simultaneously—hardly ever towards the Persian sphere, or never to the degree one witnesses at present. The deepest Western values found rich fertile ground in Lebanon, and for this very reason the numerous educational institutions that Westerners established there have grown and flourished and endured for over 150 years and counting. So whatever you do, do not let down precious freedoms in Lebanon; instead, do everything possible to halt regional collapse at Lebanon's doorstep if this region is to have hope for a brighter future. Lebanon today is at once a hijacked and a plundered country. The two—the hijacking and the plundering—are *not* unrelated. The hijackers (Iran's minions) have also plundered, or they have protected the plunderers and remained silent about their grand robberies. And for their part, the plunderers have participated in, and facilitated, the hijacking in order to provide a safe cover for their criminality. So there *is* a connection between the two, and those who have deliberately hitched Lebanon to an alien agenda should not be absolved of responsibility. Simply put, this hijacking of Lebanon into the Iranian sphere, under the fake pretext of support for Palestine through resistance to America and Israel, is rejected by the majority of Lebanese.

This said, the way out for the Lebanese is not for them to have another civil war against Hezbollah so as to qualify for any outside attention or help. This is absurd, and certainly *not* the way to help beleaguered Lebanon; it is equivalent to punishing the innocent victim, the hostage in this case. To state it again: to expect the Lebanese to engage in a bloody clash with Hezbollah in order for them to merit assistance from the outside world is both incomprehensible and illogical; it is also cruel in the extreme for the suffering Lebanese people. Destroying Lebanon presumably in order to help it doesn't make any sense. As things stand, Hezbollah's strength is steadily eroding, and so ultimately the way to address the challenge posed by a diminished Hezbollah would be *at the source*, namely Iran—no reason to throw out the baby with the dirty bathwater in Lebanon. Barring all-out war, an eventual US-Iran comprehensive deal over the triad of issues—nuclear, ballistic, and regional expansion—stands the best chance of bringing relief to Lebanon and to the region as a whole. Until that materializes, however, Lebanon should be propped up in every available way.

Do not let the Lebanese people down, and do not make them pay even further for the destruction brought on by an insensitive, callous, indeed heartless kleptocracy whose insatiable hunger for ill-gotten riches and power betrayed the people and the country.