

Why You Should Care About the Lebanese Protests...

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What is going on in Lebanon?

January 25, 2020, marked the 100th day of the Lebanese protests. What started as [demonstrations against a new tax measure](#) became the breeding grounds for the demands of the Lebanese people. Prior to this civil catastrophe, Lebanon was known as one of the leading nations within the Middle East in both its humanitarian efforts and consistent open discourse with developed nations. The initial protest against a proposed tax measure has transformed into a [nation's unification against the corrupt government](#). These protests, occurring in a multitude of cities throughout the country, have established landmark occurrences whereby it has allowed for the unification of all Lebanese citizens, regardless of their religious and political backgrounds. Amid such protests there have been multiple forms of civil disobedience, including sit ins, strikes, and the formation of human chains blocking off main roads.



How did this all start?

On October 17, 2019, the Lebanese government proposed a [new tax measure on a widely used messaging app, WhatsApp](#). This free app acts as the main form of communication for messaging and video calling in Lebanon thus the new tax allows the collection of a mass of profits by the Lebanese government. Immediately, substantial backlash by the Lebanese population occurred and [protests began ensuing outside government headquarters](#) in the capital, Beirut. The widespread backlash against the WhatsApp tax forced the government to repeal the measure within hours; however, a surge of citizens had already taken to the streets in retaliation of the lingering corruption within the nation. The current protests are rooted in not only the government's exploitation and the dwindling economic state of the country, but encompass factors such as the inconsistent availability of electricity and water and the lack of proper trash disposal within the state.

The then standing Prime Minister Saad Hariri was specifically targeted for his abuse of power in utilizing \$16 million in Lebanese taxes for [paying off a South African bikini model](#) following an alleged "romantic relationship" they had after meeting at a resort in Seychelles.

Protestors further spoke out against Hezbollah, a Shiite military and political group that is known to control the actions of both the Lebanese Prime Minister and the cabinet. Hezbollah is a party backed by Iran and shares a large part of government control in Lebanon. To the United States and the United Kingdom however, Hezbollah is classified as a terrorist organization.

The culmination of inappropriate government spending, indirect Iranian control, economic volatility, and inadequate resources amassed in creating the foundation of the movement of the Lebanese people in the months to follow. A movement that allowed for hope in the birth of a new Lebanon: a clean, anti-corrupt, and prosperous Lebanon.

What are the key demands of protestors?

According to analysis by the International Affairs department at the American University of Beirut, [key demands of Lebanese protestors](#) include:

- Ending government corruption
- Ending sectarian political systems
- Fair tax and financial procedures
- Recovering stolen funds by government officials and holding them accountable

Have the protests been violent?

While the protestors themselves have maintained peaceful methods of civil disobedience, there has been a growth in both the use of “extreme force” and arrests from the authorities’ end. Though initially also peaceful, the army has recently increased its force in [tear gassing, shooting](#)



[rubber bullets, and utilizing water cannons against protestors.](#) The arrest count for protestors has reached over 500 individuals, including 3 minors, as of December of 2019. There have been multiple cases of protestors burning tires, smashing cars, and defacing property within the cities however, it is rumored that such actions were a result of [individuals planted by the Hezbollah party](#), with the specific intention of catalyzing violence and tainting the peaceful actions of the true protestors, allowing for an increase in severe retaliation by the army.

What does this mean for human rights?

Within the past months, there have been a multitude of claims regarding the torturing of arrested protestors. The government’s actions have further been [called into question by the United Nations](#) and the international community regarding their handling of protestors, especially in circumstances where many civilians have yet to understand their rights.

The United Nations have acknowledged the violence occurring against protestors and prisoners in Lebanon and have launched an investigation into the use of [“unnecessary and disproportionate use of force”](#) against demonstrators. Per the United Nations, Lebanese security forces further have breached the International Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights NGO,

Amnesty International, further expressed concern over the [“excessive use of force”](#) towards peaceful protestors.

Prime Minister Hassan dismissed the global criticism regarding his security forces’ violence, stating [“sometimes bad things happen.”](#) The United Nations maintains that victims and their families have “a right to justice, truth and reparations” and thus calls upon other nations to [“respond to the legitimate aspirations of the people”](#) in helping reestablish stability within Lebanon.

What has the Lebanese government response been?

Within the hours of the initial protests, the Lebanese [government announced its repeal of the proposed tax measure](#) on WhatsApp. The repeal however, did little in hindering the citizens’ actions as the tax measure had already mobilized the irreversible anger the population possessed regarding the corruption and state of the Lebanese nation. After 12 days of protests, Prime Minister Hariri was pressured into resigning, leaving the nation in temporary military-rule. Within the following month, a new Prime Minister had been appointed: Professor Hassan Diab from the American University of Beirut. Such an appointment however, has again faced public backlash as protestors attest that even the new government is both Hezbollah backed and controlled. To the Lebanese people, the appointment of Prime Minister Diab and his new cabinet is yet another veil to the continued corruption. Demonstrators are thus continuing their agenda in demanding changes in the government and protests continue today with minimal response from the government.

What has the global response been?

Within days of the initial protests, Lebanese expats throughout the globe followed their country’s actions and began demonstrations in their own major cities. Protests made up of both expats and supporters of the movement occurred in places such as Paris, London, Sydney and Houston. Naturally, areas with larger Lebanese communities resulted in larger protests, most notably in Paris, France. With a mass global response came an [increased international pressure on the Lebanese government](#) in taking proactive measures in both responding to and protecting their citizens.



Nevertheless, as [Hezbollah is recognized as a terrorist group](#) by several countries, it remains difficult for Lebanon to attain international aid so long as their government possesses Hezbollah’s backing.

What has United States' response been?

With the Hezbollah-controlled and Iran-backed government, the [United States has warned the Lebanese government](#) not to push the Hezbollah agenda, ensuring that no resources and services are used to support them.

Due to the exposure of violence used against peaceful demonstrators in Lebanon, several Republican leaders in [US Senate have proposed the cutting of aid](#) to the Lebanese army; however, there has been no action regarding such a proposition as the threat of [increased Russian expansion](#) in Lebanon may occur as a consequence. Ultimately, the United States' support of the Lebanese protestors further exposes the American agenda of attempting to stabilize the Middle East while pushing back on Russian influence. It is the threat of Russian influence in the Middle East remains a leading concern on the United States front as they dictate their actions in Middle Eastern policies and intervention.

How does this affect the United States?

What started off with mirrored protests in major American cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York transformed into a larger problem for the United States. The politics dictating the events unfolding in the Lebanese protests play a pivotal role in their association with the United States. For context, it is understood that Hezbollah, the minority political group controlling the Lebanese government, is [opposed by both the majority of the Lebanese population](#) and the United States and yet they dictate much of the nation's decisions. Hezbollah's funding by the Iranian government exposes the how the corruption is essentially rooted in unsolicited foreign intervention.



Currently, the United States' relationship with Iran is one of tension following the back and forth air strikes, nuclear threats, and the [death Iranian General Suleiman](#). This has exposed the shared tension that both the United States and the Lebanese people are experiencing with Iran and its actions. To protestors, the [association and funding of Hezbollah by the Iranian government means corruption will continue](#) within the nation. Such association leads to a state struggling in freeing itself from the chains of foreign intrusion and influence.

Iran's indirect [interference in Lebanon enhances tensions in the United States](#) enhanced due to Iran's allied relationship with Russia, which indirectly influences the Iran's actions in the Middle East. Allowing Hezbollah's takeover as an Iran-backed Lebanese government translates into a Russian-backed Lebanese government, [increasing the Russian influence](#) in the Middle East as a whole, an agenda that the United States is actively pushing back against in their attempts of maintaining control as hegemonic influence in the Middle East. It cannot therefore be ignored, that the instability and protests ensuing in Lebanon is a microcosmic parallel to the current [United States versus Russia tensions](#).

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