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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

December 16, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Janet L. Yellen
Secretary of Treasury
U.S. Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretaries Blinken and Yellen,

We write to reiterate increasing concerns about the economic crisis and political stalemate facing Lebanon. The recent agreement between Lebanon and Israel to formally demarcate their maritime border holds the potential of long-term economic gains for Lebanese citizens. However, for too long, Hezbollah and others in Lebanon's political class have continuously failed to prioritize the needs of the Lebanese people over their own narrow agendas. As a consequence, Lebanon today faces an economic and political crisis of proportions almost unparalleled in the last 150 years. The need for an effective elected government, free from malign foreign influence and that prioritizes the needs of its people, cannot be understated. We urge the Biden administration to use all available leverage, including the threat of sanctions, to ensure that Lebanese lawmakers select a new president and form a government in a timely manner and implement overdue economic reforms.

This summer's parliamentary elections were a clear indication that Lebanese voters want a government free from the yoke of Hezbollah and empowered to address the massive challenges facing the country. Instead, the Lebanese government is mired in political gridlock, and all attempts to elect a replacement for President Michel Aoun, whose term expired on October 31, have failed. Following a number of parliamentary votes in which no candidate was selected, Hezbollah and its allies in the Amal and Free Patriotic Movement parties have prevented the quorum that would allow the president to be selected.

Nabih Berri, the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and a Hezbollah ally, has facilitated these tactics by repeatedly calling special sessions to select a president where a supermajority is needed for the first vote, only to see pro-Hezbollah members leave parliament before a simple majority vote could take place. Speaker Berri and other pro-Hezbollah politicians must stop playing procedural games with Lebanon's future and allow for the maintenance of a quorum and for successive simple majority votes to take place.


These actions by Hezbollah and its allies bear concerning similarities to previous attempts to derail basic state functions for their own political benefit. This includes the constant delaying actions targeting investigations into both the August 4, 2020 explosion at the Port of Beirut and the February 4, 2021 murder of Lokman Slim, as well as the refusal of the Lebanese government to implement national capital controls or IMF reforms to stem the country's economic collapse.


Instead of simply waiting for political movement and reforms, it is time for the Administration to implement a more forward leaning policy. In earlier correspondence, we expressed both our concern over the political and economic crises facing Lebanon as well as bipartisan support for the previous administration's sanctioning of Gibran Bassil, the former Lebanese foreign minister, member of parliament, and president of the Free Patriotic Movement. We also praised the designation of Jihad al-Arab, Dany Khoury, and Jamil Sayyed, two Lebanese businessmen and a member of parliament, for engaging in Lebanon's endemic corruption and undermining democracy and the rule of law.

Given this new phase of political deadlock and a lack of movement on necessary reforms, we strongly urge the Administration to use its existing authorities to sanction members of Lebanon's financial and political elite across the political and sectarian spectrum who are engaging in corruption and undermining the rule of law. The Administration should do so in lock-step with its European allies, who have built an EU sanctions framework for Lebanon and whose patience with Lebanon's endemic corruption is also limited.

As Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, we have been strong supporters of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces, and we will continue to work with the Administration to ensure that these institutions receive the support necessary to make them effective defenders of Lebanese sovereignty. Just as we believe that continuing security assistance for Lebanon sends a strong message of U.S. support for Lebanese sovereignty, trans-sectarian institutions, and the rule of law, so too will U.S. sanctions targeting Lebanese individuals who seek to undermine Lebanese sovereignty, institutions, and the rule of law.

Sincerely,


Robert Menendez
Chairman


James E. Risch
Ranking Member