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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

August 3, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

As we approach yet another anniversary of the explosion that decimated the port of Beirut, I write to express my deep skepticism of the U.S. approach to Lebanon. American patience for Lebanon's political stalemate is not infinite, and the current policy of life support while we wait on Lebanon's political class to make reforms has failed to deliver results. We must take a more assertive role in shaping Lebanon's trajectory, or risk losing Lebanon entirely as an Iranian client state. The United States must better support credible political candidates and a robust civil society, increase sanctions against corrupt Lebanese officials across the sectarian spectrum, impose costs for Hezbollah's use of civilian areas to store weapons that threaten Israel, expand support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), seek to eliminate Iranian revenue streams that keep Hezbollah afloat, and prioritize accountability as a pillar of American policy.

Lebanon's recovery depends on a functional government. Last month, I was disappointed to see the Lebanese parliament fail to select a president for the twelfth time since October 2022. Without a president, reforms are functionally impossible. The United States must take a more active role underscoring which political candidates merit continued U.S. support, and be clear in our opposition to candidates that will only continue Lebanon's dysfunctional tradition of inaction. A candidate's will to prioritize and execute reforms necessary to unlock International Monetary Fund and other international funding is a critical litmus test for American support.

In contrast, Nabih Berri, the current speaker of parliament, has emerged as a clear extension of Hezbollah and has singlehandedly used parliamentary procedures to delay the selection of a new president in favor of Hezbollah-endorsed candidates. I welcome recent statements from Europe calling for sanctions against Berri and those who block the timely selection of a president. Furthermore, to echo previous correspondence, I underscore the importance of exercising existing authorities to sanction members of Lebanon's financial and political elite across the political and sectarian spectrum who engage in corruption and undermine the rule of law.

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In addition to Hezbollah's role in the political stalemate, it continues to stockpile weapons that threaten Israel, our troops, and diplomats without consequence. The Israeli government continues to publicly highlight Hezbollah's arsenal interspersed among Lebanon's civilian populations and buildings putting them in danger. In 2018, Congress mandated sanctions for those responsible for the use of human shields, and the Biden Administration is long-overdue to exercise this law to the fullest extent.

Critical investments in the LAF since 2006 have modernized the force, created an effective counterterrorism partner, and cemented its role as a trusted institution in Lebanon. With continued oversight and end use monitoring, we should provide more support for this investment. Securing the LAF's role as Lebanon's sole legitimate security guarantor will increase deterrence against Hezbollah and advance American interests.

On the resource front, Hezbollah remains reliant on the Iranian regime as a source of income. The size of Iranian coffers directly impacts the regime's support for its terror proxies abroad. Iran's oil economy is at its strongest point since 2018, its fleet of "ghost vessels" that it uses to evade sanctions has grown from 60 to almost 340 vessels during your administration, and Chinese purchases of Iranian oil have ballooned to nearly \$47 billion since 2021. A lack of sanctions and sanctions enforcement, particularly Chinese purchases of Iranian oil, has real implications for American objectives in Lebanon. Ambiguity in the administration's Iran policy fuels Hezbollah in the midst of Lebanon's decline. We can and should do more to cut off this vital financial lifeline to Hezbollah and its allies.

Finally, accountability has been too slow and mired by intimidation. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon, established in the wake of Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, finally rendered an unsatisfying verdict in 2020 against members of Hezbollah. Furthermore, we have seen no accountability for the tragic port blast, the needless death of an Irish UN peacekeeper, or the death of Lokman Slim, an outspoken Hezbollah opponent. Lebanon cannot afford to wait 15 years for accountability, and the United States must prioritize it as a pillar of U.S.-Lebanon policy.

This week marks three years since the devastating port explosion, and the list of issues that plague Lebanon has only grown. The explosion took the lives of over 200 people and is a painful reminder of the continued dysfunction that paralyzes Lebanon. It is time for the administration to utilize the full array of diplomatic tools to advance American interests in Lebanon or risk seeing the country further cement its role as an Iranian-client state.

Sincerely,



JAMES E. RISCH
Ranking Member

