The Role of Foreign Powers in Lebanon's Security Landscape

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In recent years, Lebanon has descended into crisis, marked by political instability, economic collapse, and regional conflicts. While domestic actors bear much responsibility for the country's instability, international powers have played a decisive role in shaping Lebanon's security landscape. Lebanon has long been a battleground for foreign ambitions, with its governance and sectarian balance shaped by external involvement. From Western states such as the United States and France to regional players such as Iran and the Gulf states, foreign intervention has long influenced Lebanon's fragile equilibrium. Once known as the "Switzerland of the

Middle East", the country has endured decades of turbulence. The election of Joseph Aoun as Lebanon's president in January 2025, the downfall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and Hezbollah's weakening grip in the South signal major shifts in the security landscape. As tensions escalate in the Middle East, Lebanon's future will depend on how these international actors choose to engage with – or disengage from – the country's security architecture.

The roots of foreign entanglement stretch back to the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, which established a sectarian power-sharing system that still dictates Lebanese politics today. France aligned itself with the Maronite Christian elite, reinforcing divisions that persist within the country's governance structure. Even after Lebanese independence in 1943, France continued to exert influence in governance, education, and diplomacy. However, the decline of European colonial power – accelerated by the 1956 Suez Crisis – pushed France to the periphery of Middle Eastern affairs. Despite periodic reengagement, such as President Macron's diplomatic push after the 2020 Beirut explosion, France today remains more of a passive bystander than a decisive actor. Its recent backing of Hezbollah-affiliated presidential candidate Sleiman Frangieh – contradictory to its professed reformist stance – illustrates the limits of its influence. While French nostalgia for "France the protector" persists, Paris' practical leverage is limited. As the Middle East analyst Anne Gadel put it, "Lebanon's political situation is not decided in Paris, it is decided in Riyadh, Tehran, or the United States".

Iran, on the other hand, has entrenched itself as the leading external force in Lebanon's military and security structure. The 1979 Islamic Revolution provided the ideological foundation for Tehran's ambitions, but it was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 that allowed Iran to turn Hezbollah from a fledgling militia into the country's most powerful military entity. More than a political party, Hezbollah became a state within a state, overshadowing the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in strength and embedding Iran's influence in Lebanon's institutions. The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, only reinforced this grip, as Hezbollah fought to keep Bashar al-Assad in power, while securing critical logistical corridors that further tied Lebanon to Tehran's regional strategy. But the landscape is shifting. The death of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has injected uncertainty into the organization, and the downfall of the Assad regime threatens to disrupt Hezbollah's supply lines. Additionally, the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement began with a clear change in Hezbollah's behaviour after its military capabilities and political influence were diminished. Yet Iran's grip on Lebanon remains firm, woven into the very fabric of its power structures.

The United States, long wary of Hezbollah's ascendance, has sought to counterbalance Iran's influence primarily through security assistance to the LAF. Since 2006, Washington has allocated over $3 billion in security assistance to the LAF, positioning it as a counterbalance to Hezbollah. However, this strategy has always been fraught with contradictions. While

Washington's support for the LAF is designed to strengthen state institutions, the military's uneasy coexistence with Hezbollah undermines this very objective. Meanwhile, U.S. sanctions targeting Hezbollah-affiliated individuals have done little to alter the broader political equilibrium. Lebanon remains low on Washington's list of regional priorities, overshadowed by larger strategic concerns, from the Gulf to the war in Gaza. American influence remains present, but reactive rather than visionary.

The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, once played a central role in Lebanon's economy and political patronage networks. For years, Riyadh bankrolled Lebanese leaders aligned against Hezbollah, but growing frustration with Iran's unchecked influence led to a strategic retreat. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has shifted its engagement from direct political intervention to economic leverage, investing selectively while avoiding overt involvement in Lebanon's factional power struggles. Yet without a coherent strategy to challenge Hezbollah's dominance, the Gulf's influence remains erratic, often dictated by broader shifts in Saudi Iranian relations.

Lebanon's political paralysis and economic collapse have only deepened the sense that its future is being shaped by decisions made abroad. The 2023 presidential crisis, which saw France backing Hezbollah-affiliated candidate Sleiman Frangieh in a move widely criticized as contradictory to its reformist stance, was just one of many examples of external actors failing to steer Lebanon toward stability. The erosion of state authority, exacerbated by a deteriorating economy and the ongoing shadow of regional conflicts, ensures that Lebanon remains a proxy ground for geopolitical competition rather than a sovereign actor. As the region undergoes seismic shifts – from the fall of Assad to the recalibration of Gulf-Iran relations – Lebanon's trajectory remains uncertain. While the U.S. and France push for reforms and counterbalance Hezbollah, Iran remains committed to its strategic foothold, and the Gulf states remain cautious in their reengagement.However, without a unified international strategy, Lebanon risks remaining a battleground for proxy conflicts rather than progressing toward genuine stability. Whether foreign powers can move beyond short-term tactical gains and commit to a long-term vision for Lebanon's security remains a critical question.