

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 18, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express deep concern about Lebanon's worsening economic and political crises which are destabilizing the country and present clear risks to the broader region. We urge prompt and significant U.S. action, in coordination with key international partners, to address the suffering of the Lebanese people and prevent Lebanon from economic collapse, posing further risks to the security and stability of the broader Middle East as well as U.S. national security.

Nine months after the catastrophic Beirut port explosion in August 2020, which killed over 200 people, injured over 4,000, and caused billions in economic damage, Lebanon faces rapidly worsening economic and political crises. Its currency has plummeted, losing 80% of its value, unemployment is soaring, and food prices have risen 400% compared to 2020. According to the World Bank, the crisis has led to a projected 19.2% decline in gross domestic product and resulted in a projected 45% increase in poverty. Lebanese citizens have taken to the streets across the country, protesting the rapidly deteriorating economic and social conditions. This is all worsened by Lebanon's parliamentary leaders' failure to form a new government after months of negotiations. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation, straining the capacity of hospitals and the healthcare system, compounded by shortages of medical goods. Such challenges raise the potential not only for broader civil conflict within Lebanon, but greater regional instability.

As conditions worsen, internal Lebanese actors such as Hezbollah, along with other militias and criminal networks, and external forces such as Iran and Russia, cynically aim to leverage the fragmentation of the Lebanese state and society for their own gain. Supporting Lebanon at this critical time is not only a humanitarian and economic imperative, but also a

The Honorable Antony Blinken
May 18, 2021
Page Two

security necessity to prevent such actors from further undermining Lebanon's independence and sovereignty.

We support policies that advance a strong and stable U.S. – Lebanon relationship and a just, prosperous, and independent future for the Lebanese people. Initial U.S. steps such as State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) emergency humanitarian assistance for hospitals battling COVID-19 in early 2020 were important. But as Lebanon's economy continues to implode and civil unrest spreads, more must be done. Therefore, we call on the United States to undertake the following:

1. Spearhead an international 'Friends of Lebanon' group of like-minded partners, France prime among them, to coordinate an urgent financial assistance and reform program with the IMF and World Bank to stabilize the Lebanese economy pending formation of a government capable of addressing the needs of Lebanese citizens. In doing so, deploy aggressive measures to root out corruption and reform dysfunctional government ministries, in addition to conducting the long-delayed comprehensive Central Bank audit.
2. In parallel, the U.S. along with international partners, should immediately lead a robust direct humanitarian assistance effort to address the hunger, health, and joblessness of the most vulnerable in Lebanon. This assistance must be provided directly to the Lebanese people ensuring all appropriate U.S. laws are upheld as well as upholding all vetting standards and screening of recipients and implementing organizations.
3. Provide supplementary assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), a longtime U.S. partner and a respected institution critical to stability in Lebanon. Though U.S. assistance can and should continue for equipment and training, Lebanese soldiers' salaries have been cut and their economic hardship threatens to lead to desertions, degradation of the force, and further civil conflict. Non-state armed groups like Hezbollah and other militias that threaten Israel and the broader region stand to gain in their stead.
4. Publicly call for an international, independent, investigation into the Beirut port blast of August 2020. Lebanese investigations have thus far yielded little and been mired in corruption and mismanagement. The U.S. should lead calls for an impartial UN-led investigation that leverages the capabilities of key member states.

We value Undersecretary of State David Hale's April visit to Lebanon and engagement

The Honorable Antony Blinken
May 18, 2021
Page Three

with Lebanon's political leaders and echo "America's continued support for the Lebanese people" he articulated. As policy options are considered, we strongly urge you to undertake the steps outlined above without delay.

As members of Congress who care deeply about the security and stability of the region, U.S. national security, and the right to a peaceful, prosperous and independent future for the Lebanese people, we appreciate your response and urgent attention.

Sincerely,



GREGORY W. MEEKS
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee



TED DEUTCH
Chairman
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North
Africa, and Global Counterterrorism



TOM MALINOWSKI
Vice-Chair
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The Honorable Antony Blinken
May 18, 2021
Page Four



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The Honorable Antony Blinken
May 18, 2021
Page Five




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