

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XVIII, ISSUE 19

p.1

*John Foulkes*

**BRIEFS**

p.4

*Sunguta West*

**Al-Shabaab's Top Leader Transfers Power Amid Factional Strife**

p.5

*Jacob Lees Weiss*

**Fragile Pro-Iranian Militia Ceasefire Highlights Inter-Shia Polarization**

p.7

*Andrew Devereux*

**Beirut Port Blast Punctures Trust in Hezbollah**

## DOES TURKISH WITHDRAWAL FROM MOREK BASE SIGNAL RENEWED CONFLICT IN IDLIB?

*John Foulkes*

On October 20, Turkish forces withdrew from the Morek observation post, the country's largest base located north of the city of Hama near the border with Syria's northwestern Idlib province ([Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), October 20). The post was surrounded by Russian-supported forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in August 2019, following a breakdown in a 2018 deal that established the base in an attempt to calm fighting between the Syrian government and Turkish-backed rebel forces ([al-Monitor](#), October 20).

According to a report from Middle East Eye, Turkey made an agreement with Russia to pull out of four observation posts and two military sites that had been surrounded by al-Assad forces. Eight Turkish posts and five military positions in total are currently surrounded ([Middle East Eye](#), October 19). The Turkish forces moving out of Morek and other future observation points will reinforce current positions within opposition-held Idlib province.

The withdrawal comes as speculation is rising that Russia and its allies in Damascus will soon launch an offensive to attempt a seizure of territory in southern Idlib ([Zaitun Agency](#), October 18). Negotiations between Turkish and Russian officials, which took place in Ankara in mid-September, ended without an agreement. Some sources claimed that Russian insistence for the closing of Turkish posts and drawdown of troops in Idlib led to the disagreement ([Enab Baladi](#), September 20).

On September 17, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated that Turkey was failing to live up to its end of the March 5 agreement, citing the continued presence of jihadist groups such as Haya'at Tahrir al-Sham and Huras al-Deen ([TASS](#), September 17). The comments were followed by the most intense strikes taking place since the March 5 agreement, with regime artillery and missile strikes and Russian airstrikes hitting several villages in southern Idlib between September 17-19.

The most recent agreement came after a push by Russian-backed Assad forces into Idlib in late February resulted in airstrikes that killed approximately 60 Turkish soldiers and displaced nearly one million Syrians. The Turkish response halted the advance, with a ceasefire agreed to by Ankara and Moscow on March 5. Opposi-

tion forces initially lost a sizable amount of territory near the strategic M5 highway, but vigorous Turkish-led counterattacks, involving significant unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) assets, reversed some of the losses and resulted in significant losses to the Assad forces ([Al Jazeera](#), March 2).

Ultimately, the current state of Idlib is unsustainable for all sides. Damascus remains set on reconquering all of its lost territory, while Turkey has made clear that it cannot take in any further refugees. Turkey already hosts 3.5 million Syrian refugees, and has no interest in taking any more while experiencing severe economic issues. A violent takeover of Idlib by regime forces would certainly result in a large refugee flow into Turkey.

The withdrawal from Morak is also contrary to past Turkish policies against pulling out of Idlib bases and observation posts. Ankara's refusal to budge from the surrounded bases was reportedly a sticking point in the September negotiations ([Enab Baladi](#), September 20). While the sudden change in policy might be as a result of Ankara recognizing the reality that the surrounded bases would prove indefensible if/when conflict re-erupts, it could also be as a result of geopolitical jostling in other theaters.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been relatively un-supportive of the Armenian government, with whom Moscow holds a mutual defense treaty, in its ongoing war in Nagorno Karabakh, despite significant gains by Turkish ally Azerbaijan. In statements made on October 7, Putin indicated that the mutual defense treaty does not extend to Nagorno Karabakh ([Moscow Times](#), October 7). In meetings between Russian and Turkish defense ministers on October 12, the conflict in the Caucasus was reportedly discussed alongside Syria and Libya; meetings in Moscow on October 23 between Turkish and Russian officials are also discussing a solution to those latter two conflicts ([Hurriyet](#), October 12; [Daily Sabah](#), October 23). It is possible that Turkey's pullout from Morak is linked to negotiations over these other conflicts.

Turkey vacating indefensible observation posts in territory held by al-Assad forces and moving those troops to new positions, while reinforcing opposition-held Idlib with additional materiel, strengthens its position in the province ([Arab News](#), October 3). An estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Turkish troops are currently located there, sending a message to Moscow and Damascus that Ankara has real interests in maintaining a buffer zone to keep out additional refugees and extremists.

Russia and its Syrian allies might still be tempted to seize strategic areas such as Jisr al-Shughour or Jabal al-Zawiya, in order to strengthen its grip on the strategic M4 highway and the areas south of it. ([Enab Baladi](#), October 12; [Middle East Eye](#), October 19). However, the Turkish troops who vacated Morek were reportedly sent to reinforce Jabal al-Zawiya, demonstrating the substantial risk to Russian and Syrian forces and equipment should an attempt be made ([Arab News](#), October 20).

*John Foulkes is a Program Associate for Jamestown's Global Terrorism Analysis program. He is the assistant editor of Terrorism Monitor, and managing editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.*

## VIOLENCE IN HELMAND REFLECT PROBLEMS IN DOHA NEGOTIATIONS

*John Foulkes*

As negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban continue in Doha, Qatar, violence is increasing in the country's southern province of Helmand. On October 11, the Taliban launched a multidirectional attack on the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. Over 5,000 families have had to evacuate from the area, and reportedly over 200 Taliban fighters have been killed ([TOLONews](#), October 19).

In the days following the initial assault on Lashkar Gar, the nearby districts of Babaji, Chae-e-anjir, Nad Ali, and Nawa-e-Barakzaiy also became a focus of the fighting. The strategic 601 highway, connecting Lashkar Gah to Kandahar City, was also targeted. It, along with many other roads in the area, became impassable due to the wide range of improvised explosive materials (IEDs) that were been planted. Multiple bridges were reportedly destroyed, further inhibiting travel through the province, according to a spokesperson with the office of the Helmand governor. Several security checkpoints in the area were overrun before the United States launched airstrikes against Taliban forces ([Al Jazeera](#), October 19; [Twitter.com/USFOR\\_A](#), October 12).

The Taliban accused the United States of violating the February 29 peace agreement by engaging in airstrikes that it claims were outside active conflict zones. The spokesperson for U.S. Forces-Afghanistan "categorically" rejected the claim, saying that airstrikes were only used to support Afghan partners facing Taliban attacks on the ground. In a separate statement, the U.S. posited that the Taliban actions were not "consistent with the US-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan Peace Talks" ([Twitter.com/USFOR\\_A](#), October 12; [Twitter.com/USFOR\\_A](#), October 18; [TOLONews](#), October 18).

After the tit-for-tat responses, U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad stated that the increase in violence had resulted in a meeting with the Taliban in Doha, where all sides agreed to decrease attacks and "reduce violence and casualties" ([Twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace](#), October 18). The governor of Helmand, Yasin Khan, has since stated that Taliban attempts to seize Lashkar Gah were "foiled" ([TOLONews](#), October 23).

The violence in Helmand comes as peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government have

moved arduously slow over disagreements focused on following the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence during deadlocks; issues of inclusivity for Afghanistan's minorities; disagreements over the describing the war as a "jihad" or a "conflict"; and more ([Al Jazeera](#), September 23).

The slow negotiations and the rise in violence in the country are additional body blows to the U.S.-Taliban peace deal signed on February 29. Since its signing, the Taliban has continually violated certain segments of the deal. The Afghan insurgent group has failed to completely cut ties to al-Qaeda, and are unlikely to do so due to long-standing relationships and inter-marriage between families of the groups' leaders. Some of the 5,000 Taliban fighters freed by the Afghan government as a prerequisite to begin negotiations have returned to fighting, according to Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, contrary to promises made in the February 29 agreement ([Al Jazeera](#), September 23). This is on top of growing violence, reduction of which is not an explicit requirement of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, but is continually pointed to by Afghan and American leaders as being in violation of the expectations set by peace negotiations ([State.gov](#), February 29).

A substantive and meaningful decrease in violence in Afghanistan is unlikely to occur within the near future. The Taliban's and Kabul government's positions are too far apart, and it is ultimately likely that the insurgents will continue to use violence to get what it cannot at the negotiation table.

*John Foulkes is a Program Associate for Jamestown's Global Terrorism Analysis program. He is the assistant editor of Terrorism Monitor, and managing editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.*

# Al-Shabaab's Top Leader Transfers Power Amid Factional Strife

Sunguta West

Al-Shabaab—the Somali al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa—has reportedly experienced a change in its top leadership in order to better organize its terrorist activities amid an increasing onslaught by African Union troops and the continued loss of key leaders to U.S. airstrikes.

Shaykh Ahmed Diriye, a.k.a. Abu Ubaidah, allegedly transferred power to his deputy Shaykh Abukar Ali Aden, a move that has further widened internal disagreements within the deadly terrorist group ([The Standard](#), August 31). It is not clear when the actual transfer occurred, but the change had been widely anticipated following earlier reports that the militant organization's supreme leader was ailing and unable to discharge his duties efficiently.

According to Somalia's intelligence agency, the National Intelligence Security Agency (NISA), Aden is currently supervising the activities of the group. Like Ubaidah, he is on the U.S. list of wanted terrorists ([GaroweOnline](#), August 28).

Aden became one of the new faces at the apex of al-Shabaab leadership in 2018, when the emir appointed him as a deputy leader and one of his principal advisors. He had spent several years as al-Shabaab's military chief, after previously heading the *Jabhat*, al-Shabaab's army. In 2018, his jihadist credentials increased after the U.S. State Department listed him as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist ([State Department](#), January 4, 2018).

Ubaidah's worsening health condition had been the subject of news for some time. Reports that he was ailing first emerged in 2018, when speculation spread that the organization had begun to re-organize its top leadership ahead of the emir's possible demise.

The emir had reportedly been bedridden for six months. Although it was speculated that the leader may have been injured in the battlefield, a source in Mogadishu told the *Terrorism Monitor* that Ubaidah was suffering from a serious ailment affecting both of his kidneys, confining him to bed for treatment ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 18, 2018).

Ubaidah has been the emir since 2014 when he took over from the late Shaykh Ahmed Godane, a.k.a. Mukhtar Abu Zubeir, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike. Like Aden, he was part of his predecessor's inner circle and was a brutal hardliner who ordered the assassination of dissidents and rivals. Ubaidah appeared to follow in Godane's footsteps, maintaining the group's allegiance to al-Qaeda. In 2015, some members of the group pushed for a shift of allegiance to Islamic State (IS), but he rejected the proposal and launched a crackdown against the alleged IS supporters.

With his illness becoming a liability to al-Shabaab's operations at a time when it faced more pressure from African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops and increased U.S. airstrikes, the *shura*, the al-Shabaab executive council, began discussing who would succeed Ubaidah. At the time, they could not agree who would replace him as the emir ([Tuko](#), April 23, 2018).

The *shura*—which makes the group's policy decisions on issues including ideological direction, finances, and operations—had been concerned that the prolonged absence of the leader was creating a vacuum, reducing its operational capacity as an organization. Al-Shabaab's *shura* is composed of an unspecified number of people appointed by the emir. Ubaidah's council size has ranged from eight to ten members. It has included prominent leaders such as Abdirahaman Mohammed Warsame, a.k.a. Mahad Karate, the head of al-Shabaab's financials and its intelligence wing, Amniyat, Maalim Osman, the infantry commander, and Ali Mohammed Rage, a.k.a. Ali Dheere, the group's spokesman.

Under the current emir, the terrorist group has lost key territory and strategic towns crucial to its revenue collection, recruitment, and arms shipments ([The Star](#), July 1, 2017). Al-Shabaab has traditionally funded its activities through *Zakat*—a form of alms-giving treated as obligatory in Islam. Reports also indicate that some foreigners who share the group's ideology also send funds to support its activities.

When he appointed Aden, Ubaidah could have bolstered the 14-year-old organization, but his actions appeared to worsen the disputes between Ubaidah's supporters and those of Karate, who is also on the U.S. list of wanted terrorists. With the powerful departments of intelligence and finance under his control, Karate felt he had the clout to take over the militant group's leadership. The feud peaked early this year, with reports detailing attempts by the intelligence chief to wrestle power from the emir ([The Standard](#), August 31).

For some time, Karate had allegedly refused to provide the emir access to the group's finances, crippling Ubaidah's ability to pay his fighters. In retaliation, the emir started to purge Karate's supporters, the majority of whom are from his Habagedir-ayr clan.

In retaliation, Karate began targeting Ubaidah's stronghold, striking his kinsmen from the Rahawein clan, where most of the emir's support came from. Attempts by Ubaidah to expel Karate from al-Shabaab early this year failed after his clan threatened to launch a parallel group. The clan elders accused Ubaidah of arrogance and demanded he cede power to the younger generation ([Garowe Online](#), August 29).

Apart from disagreements over leadership, the militant group is split on which international terrorist group to pledge allegiance. Some leaders within the group insist it should keep its allegiance to al-Qaeda, while others suggest it's the time to shift to IS ([The Standard](#), August 31).

With the amount of internal disputes growing and the group operating on reduced income, al-Shabaab fighters had reportedly intensified extortion and illegal taxation inside Somalia and northeastern Kenya to meet their needs ([Daily Nation](#), April 26).

The disputes are evidently affecting the militant group's activities and its income. While this could be good news for the militaries countering the insurgents, a new leadership could eventually lead to a strengthened and re-energized fighting force. Meanwhile, with his extensive military experience as an insurgent, Aden cannot be underestimated.

*Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi*

## Fragile Pro-Iranian Militia Ceasefire Highlights Inter-Shia Polarization

*Jacob Lees Weiss*

On September 24, reports surfaced that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had threatened to close the U.S. embassy in Baghdad if the Iraqi authorities did not stop the frequent pro-Iranian militia attacks on U.S. diplomatic assets ([Al-Monitor](#), September 25). The militias initially appeared emboldened following Pompeo's threat, with eight improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and rocket attacks targeting U.S. military and diplomatic positions from September 24 until October 1. [1]

However, the newly formed Iraqi Resistance Committee, containing prominent militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), announced a ceasefire of all operations targeting U.S. forces countrywide on October 10. A spokesman for KH stated that the continuation of the ceasefire is contingent on Iraqi authorities implementing a timetable for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq ([Al Jazeera](#), October 11).

### A Conditional Ceasefire

The potential for large-scale U.S. targeting of Iranian-backed militia sites following the withdrawal from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad may have forced the militias into a ceasefire, but a return to hostilities remains likely. Although Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has made it clear he wants a working relationship with the United States, the ultimate goal of these militias is to expedite the complete withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. Militias will recommence the harassment of U.S. diplomatic and military forces through regular IED and rocket attacks when Iraq inevitably fails to present a timetable for a U.S. withdrawal.

While Pompeo's warning may have only brought about a temporary halt to the attacks, it unified support behind Kadhimi's project of counter-balancing the influence of pro-Iranian militia groups. Following the warning, influential Shia cleric and head of the Sairoon coalition in parliament Muqtada al-Sadr called for the creation of a security committee to prevent further attacks ([al-Sadr](#), September 25). Hadi al-Amiri, head of the Fatah bloc, similarly condemned the attacks ([Rudaw](#), September 24). The Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), in which some of the pro-Iranian militias are embedded, implicitly de-

nounced the attacks by affirming its commitment to the Iraqi state ([Al Jazeera](#), September 24).

With Sadr and Amiri's condemnation of the attacks, Kadhimī has the backing of the two largest political blocs in the Iraqi parliament. The PMU's statement is also significant, due to its implicit disapproval of factions within its apparent control. This represents a significant coup for Kadhimī and highlights how far Iraq has come since June, when these voices remained silent or were ambivalent when KH stormed the Green Zone in Baghdad and forced the authorities to release detained militia members ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 15).

While Pompeo has galvanized support for Kadhimī, an actual U.S. withdrawal from Baghdad would have disastrous consequences. Not only would it hand a propaganda boost to groups such as KH, it would undermine the steady progress Kadhimī has made over recent months. Ali al-Sistani, the highest authority in the Iraqi Shia clergy whose 2014 *fatwa* calling for Iraqis to support the government against Islamic State led to the creation of the PMU, threw his support behind Kadhimī in September ([Sistani](#), September 13). Sistani's support for early elections and limiting militia influence in September was a major boost for Kadhimī's long-term goals of building a strong and sovereign state.

### **Inter-Shia Polarization**

The more Kadhimī succeeds in regaining control of the security environment, the more the country's inter-Shia polarization becomes apparent. The Iraqi Shia militias are largely divided between supporters of the Najaf clergy headed by Sistani and those adhering to the Iranian *Wilayat al-Fiqh* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) ideology ([Rudaw](#), June 10). Whereas the former has taken a broadly quietist approach to politics, the latter is inherently interventionist. KH and others consider the Supreme Leader of Iran to be the highest political and religious authority and thus seek to serve the interests of Tehran. With Kadhimī winning the support of important Shia voices and facilitating the defection of Sistani-aligned militias under direct Iraqi government control, the pro-Iranian camp has grown increasingly insecure. Following his support for elections, Sistani was attacked by an Iranian cleric close to the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei ([al-Quds](#), October 3). Similarly, pro-Iranian militias began to talk about betrayal ([Al-Monitor](#), September 28).

This polarization is equally evident amid the general Shia population. During the recent Arba'een Pilgrimage,

a Shia religious festival in Karbala, some pilgrims erected effigies of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike ([Press TV](#), September 29). Others aligned with October 2019's protest movement chanted both anti-Iran and anti-U.S. slogans, held up pictures of assassinated activists, and clashed with the security forces near the Imam Husayn Shrine ([Youth of Change](#), October 6). [2]

If pro-Iranian militias restart attacks targeting U.S. forces and the United States were to withdraw from its embassy in Baghdad, it could decide to finally launch retaliatory airstrikes ([Middle East Eye](#), October 8). This would likely lead to significant retaliation. With U.S. assets withdrawn to Kurdistan and other regions less accessible for militias to operate in, the Iranian-backed groups would likely turn their focus to Kadhimī. The prime minister could see himself faced with ceding to maximalist militia demands or mobilizing state-aligned PMU factions in support of a direct confrontation.

An inter-Shia conflict is not in the interests of Iran, and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has been quick to underline the importance of Shia unity ([Mehr News Agency](#), September 26). Iran has built up a powerful position in Iraq over the past decade, enabling it to influence policy by imposing costs for adopting directions that it does not approve. Iran does not want to see that influence threatened by conflict. However, Iran lost its intermediary with the militias when the United States assassinated Soleimani in January. With Iranian control over KH and similar militias increasingly doubtful, it is not clear that Iran could rein in its militias if conflict were to escalate significantly.

*Jacob Lees Weiss is an analyst specializing in the MENA region at Healix International and HX global. He holds an MA in Contemporary Arabic Studies from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Prior to working at Healix, he spent time volunteering for NGOs and studying in Algeria and Egypt.*

### **Notes**

[1] Author access to private database of Iraqi security incidents, October 2020

[2] Author interview with Karbala-based security contact, October 2020

# Beirut Port Blast Punctures Trust in Hezbollah

Andrew Devereux

The explosion in the Port of Beirut on August 4 caused domestic reverberations throughout Lebanon. With close to 200 people killed, over 6,000 wounded and damages estimated at over \$15 billion, the public outrage toward the ruling elite was immediate and damning ([Daily Sabah](#), August 12). The political classes were already subjected to heavy criticism for an ongoing economic crisis that has left 55 percent of the population living below the poverty line, while remnants of the October 2019 protests against political corruption remain active ([Middle East Monitor](#), August 20). In the aftermath of the explosion, public ire accelerated swiftly. No group has come under more scrutiny, or been blamed more directly, than Hezbollah.

While much of the outrage has been focused on the role the Iranian-backed political and militia organization has played in the gradual erosion of basic political cohesion in Lebanon, its involvement in the explosion itself has been questioned. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah issued a public statement in the days following the blast denying that the group had stored arms in the port. He denied all knowledge of the stockpile of 2,750 tons of industrial ammonium nitrate that had been stored in the port since 2013, without the necessary safety measures in place ([al-Arabiya](#), August 7). Thus far, no evidence has been found to discount these repudiations of responsibility, but international and domestic observers believe it is unlikely such a large number of explosives would be present in Beirut without Hezbollah's leaders having knowledge of its existence.

The denials of complicity have been complicated further by Hezbollah's previous history of using the explosive material, and the United States has subsequently accused the group of stockpiling caches of ammonium nitrate across Europe ([Alaraby](#), September 17). Furthermore, Hezbollah's security chief Wafiq Safa exerts substantial influence over operations at the Port of Beirut ([Arab News](#), August 9). By very publicly percolating itself into every political and operational aspect of the Lebanese governance apparatus, Hezbollah has made the claims of denial difficult to palate. With public outrage directed at the group and international observers hoping the incident will lead to Hezbollah's influence in

Lebanon diminishing, the next few months are vital for the group.

## Declining Public Trust

The blast reignited public outrage towards deep-seated corruption among the political elites, with Hezbollah at the heart of the indignation. The group has spent years cultivating itself as a 'state in a state' and has managed to place itself at the center of Lebanon's political system. When Hassan Diab was appointed as prime minister in January 2020, he was hand-picked by Hezbollah and its political allies, the Free Patriotic Movement and the Amal movement ([Al-Arabiya](#), July 14). Hezbollah's allies held key positions of power in the cabinet and the group had successfully managed to craft a government that would pursue an agenda coherent with Hezbollah's domestic and international program.

With public outrage focusing on the government in the aftermath of the explosion, largely due to mismanagement, negligence, and failure to protect its citizens, Hezbollah was quick to sacrifice Diab and his government in order to create distance between itself and the incident—the resignation of finance minister and Hezbollah ally Ghazi Wazni precipitated Diab's resignation ([Middle East Eye](#), August 10). This was indicative of Hezbollah's defensive stance in the immediacy of the explosion.

Along with essentially forfeiting Diab's government, the group also reiterated hostile rhetoric towards Israel. Initial allegations of Israeli involvement were quickly disproved. Nasrallah's narrative reverted back to the usual 'resistance to Israeli and U.S.' agenda, largely in an attempt to reinvigorate support among its Shia Muslim base. This narrative was furthered by claims by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that a secondary explosion was possible, owing to a hidden Hezbollah missile factory in southern Beirut ([Almanar](#), October 4).

Criticism from the Christian and Sunni communities has been consistent since the escalation of protest activity in October 2019, but discontent has also been growing within the Shia community, the foundation of Hezbollah domestic support. During protests following the explosion, effigies of Nasrallah were hanged—a display of public condemnation towards Hezbollah rarely seen. The level of criticism from within Hezbollah's Shia constituents will be of most concern to the group, as even secular Shias participated in the protests following the blast ([Alaraby](#), August 30).

The Shia community has not been immune to the rise in unemployment, inflation, and basic levels of poverty that have exponentially increased during the economic crisis. The welfare services Hezbollah have historically provided are ongoing, but Lebanese Shias are being increasingly impacted by the declining value of the Lebanese pound. The ongoing military campaign in Syria is also increasing the perception that Hezbollah is prioritizing foreign military conflicts, at the behest of Iran, over the basic wellbeing of its Lebanese constituents. Ensuring the continued support of its base is among Hezbollah's most pressing priorities.

### **Stick to the Status Quo**

Hezbollah has continued its policy of self-containment. Primarily, this involves ensuring that the status quo is maintained. The organization uses its political and military might to exploit the system of sectarianism, which acts as the basis for Lebanon's political system. Prior to the explosion, it had managed to position itself as the puppet master of domestic politics, wielding outsized influence over numerous institutions.

The inability of the political establishment to agree on the formation of a new government in recent weeks is largely due to Hezbollah's intransigence. The man appointed to form a new government, Mustapha Adib, resigned in late September citing sabotage attempts by Iranian-backed factions—referencing Hezbollah and other Shia political allies ([Arab News](#), September 27). Adib was exploring the possibility of appointing a reformist, consensus government with all ministers representing the major religious sects, but separate from the main political parties ([Middle East Eye](#), September 26). The initiative for a government of independent specialists was recommended by the French government with significant input from President Emmanuel Macron.

Hezbollah and the Amal Movement were named as the biggest impediments to progress and their refusal to agree to compromise led to the collapse of Adib's attempts to form a government. Hezbollah and Amal refused to cede the finance ministry. The organizations demanded to either name a finance minister or force the new prime minister to pick a finance minister from a Hezbollah-approved list. Hezbollah was never going to agree to any reforms that diminished its domestic political power—the standing sectarian government structure enables Hezbollah to manipulate its disproportionate influence. Publicly, Nasrallah has stated Hezbollah remains committed to the French initiative, and blamed its ongoing failure on intervention from the United States

and Saudi Arabia ([Middle East Monitor](#), October 1). Realistically, Hezbollah's commitment to forming a government that significantly altered the political system was minimal.

Such statements are meant to challenge accusations that Hezbollah is responsible for the current lack of a functioning government, but the ongoing political vacuum benefits the organization's 'wait-and-see' strategy. The group is continuing to safeguard its domestic interests while waiting for public outrage to dissipate. Nevertheless, its role appears diminished. Its current inertia has given international and domestic opponents an opportunity to claim the group is prioritizing its own survival over the well-being of its constituents. In addition to this, Hezbollah's influence and the lack of a functioning government is an impediment to the provision of international assistance that Lebanon needs to address its current economic crisis.

The current maritime negotiations between Israel and Lebanon also indicate Hezbollah's power has waned slightly. It is likely no coincidence that the talks over contested maritime borders have been organized when Hezbollah is lacking its usual political capital. If Hezbollah and its political allies had been in support of such talks, they could have happened at any time in the last decade. Hezbollah's opposition has largely been limited to criticizing the composition of the negotiating team, insisting the delegation is only comprised of military personnel rather than including civilians or politicians ([Alkhaeej Today](#), October 14). The involvement of rival politicians could allow other sects to gather public support and gain political power.

### **Conclusion**

Realistically, Hezbollah retains enough domestic support that its hegemony over the Lebanese political system is unlikely to be impacted in the medium-to-long term. The explosion, however, is the latest in a series of incidents that have impacted Hezbollah's previously impermeable standing. The ongoing result of its negligence of political institutions, its obsession with self-preservation, and the prioritization of a seemingly never-ending conflict in Syria have seen support waver among its Shia constituents. In the immediate term, Hezbollah's efforts will be concentrated on ensuring its political capital is not diminished further; Hezbollah abstained from voting for former Prime Minister Saad Hariri in his attempts to regain his former position, but have publicly back his candidacy - provided he agrees to let the Shia bloc retain control of the finance ministry. With serious political

reform avoided, Hezbollah has achieved its immediate aim of maintaining the status quo and will look to rebuild its tarnished domestic reputation in the coming months.

*Andrew Devereux is an Associate Analyst in Counter-Terrorism at Healix International and HX Global, focusing on terrorist incidents, actors and the wider MENA region. He holds an MA in Global Security Studies, during which he focused on the impacts of the War on Terrorism and the geopolitical rationale behind US arms distribution. Prior to his work on counter-terrorism, Andrew worked as political and security threat analyst, focusing on the Americas.*