

“LEBANON IN CRISIS: NO END IN SIGHT”
WITH JACQUES NERIAH
SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST FORUM’ WEBINAR
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Jacques Neriah is a Middle East analyst at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Formerly, he served as foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and deputy head of IDF Military Intelligence for assessment.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS MADE BY JACQUES NERIAH

- Jacques Neriah began his talk by stating that due to a combination of Islamist politics and endemic corruption, the economy in Lebanon has collapsed.
- Lebanon, given its deep slide into disintegration, was now a failed state incapable of providing services for its citizens.
- With national reserves in the Central of Bank of at most \$11.5 billion (as compared to \$220 in Israel), 3 million Lebanese people were now living under the poverty line, with some 23% of them under extreme poverty. It followed that these people were incapable of living without outside help. As a result, there were shortages in drinking water and barely 6 hours per day of electricity along with rivers of uncollected garbage in the streets.
- Some help was being provided by the 15 million diaspora who send money to their relatives. However, the problems were far more complicated and getting out of the current quagmire did not look likely.
- A consequence of this dire situation was the fact that frustrated young Lebanese men, especially from areas such as Tripoli were turning to Daesh that was providing them with a monthly salary of \$150 – something that was allowing them to survive.
- He said the start of economic problems went back to 2012, when at the behest of the Iranian government, Hezbollah became actively involved in Syria as an Iranian proxy against the opponents of President Assad and most importantly Saudi Arabia. This action started a motion for Saudi Arabia for withdrawing its money from Lebanese banks, a slide that reached its peak by 2019, when the government was forced to raise taxes on WhatsApp applications. In desperation, the government had proposed new taxes on tobacco, petrol and voice calls via messaging services such as WhatsApp to drum up more revenue.
- The \$6 (£4.50) monthly charge for using WhatsApp prompted widespread anger, and although the backlash forced the government to cancel the proposed tax within hours, but a surge of discontent that had been simmering in Lebanon for years was unleashed in an

unprecedented way leading to the disintegration of the country's economy.

- The collapse of the economy, apart from the fall of the Hariri government has had its political fall outs, especially with parliamentary and presidential elections looming ahead in the coming months.
- According to Neriah, the prognosis at this time for the parliamentary elections that are to be held in May is that Hezbollah will not do as well as it had in the past. The fear is that buoyed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah will then opt to paralyze the entire political system – much like what Iranian proxies have done in places like Iraq.
- As for the presidential election scheduled for October, the problems are equally complicated especially if in the absence of a proper parliamentary election, there is no parliament to potentially exercise the option of extending the term of the President Aoun who is 89 years old at this time.
- Neriah said that of the 4 leading contenders for the presidency (Samir Geagea, Gebran Bassil (the ruling president's much discredited and sanctioned son-in-law) and Maronite leader in the north allied with Hezbollah, Joseph Aoun who has since 2017 been the Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces is the current favourite.
- Neriah concluded that in his view the country was in danger of leading itself once again into a new civil war.
- It was also possible for Hezbollah to try and completely take over the country, officially making it a satellite of the Iranian state by declaring it as the 'Islamic Republic of Lebanon' following the theocratic teachings of the Iranian 'Vali Faghih' (Ayatollah Khamenei). With 100,000 armed combatants, this was certainly a very realistic option for Hezbollah and its leader Sheikh Nasrallah. Such action could also potentially lead to the partition of Lebanon reminiscent of the way things were back in the 1920s.
- Neriah ended by underlining the fact that famine in Lebanon with only 20 days of wheat available in the country was round the corner at a time when Lebanon had no foreign currency for making the necessary purchases. As such, Lebanon was faced with a deadlock and minus meaningful support from the likes of the US or France, it was headed for elections capable of creating a vacuum to be filled by Hezbollah.

