

Lebanese crisis: is Hezbollah politicising social aid?

A field-based commentary from Beirut showcasing how Lebanese parties such as Hezbollah are using food aid as a political tool in the midst of an unprecedented crisis.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Wilson Fache – BIC Middle East Consultant

Last Spring, Hezbollah began distributing magnetic cards that allow its supporters to receive a cash allowance and large discounts on basic goods. The so-called “al-Sajjad” card, which is credited with a maximum of 300,000 Lebanese pounds, gives access to party-affiliated supermarkets which are otherwise off limits to the public.

In a country where more than half the population now lives below the poverty line, and where food prices have risen by 400 per cent in one year, the Iran-backed party is trying to position itself as a substitute for the government in a strategy that critics say is a textbook definition of clientelism.

Party officials say the “al-Sajjad” card is accessible to anyone in need, regardless of sectarian and political affiliations.¹ However, since the card is distributed through its own social services and because the markets are located in Shia-dominated neighbourhoods and regions, it seems unlikely that the program could outreach beyond the party’s base.

Amongst its supporters, this initiative is most welcome to partially alleviate the dire consequences of the multi-layered crisis.

1 M.R., June 2021. “Le Hezbollah élargit sa panoplie d’aides sociales, mais comment et combien peut-il tenir?”. Le Commerce du Levant.

“With the Sajjad card, I get a 70 percent discount on basic goods. We would struggle without it,” Ali Hussein Mughnieh told the BIC inside his home in the southern suburb of Beirut.

“I can’t afford much now because I get paid in Lebanese pounds. So, with a monthly salary of one million pounds [around 50 USD on the current illicit market exchange rate], most of my money would go on food if not for the Sajjad card,” this 22-year-old car mechanic explained.

The crisis, which was aggravated by the pandemic and the August 4th Beirut port explosion, has gone from bad to worse with no end in sight. The currency has plummeted, and it now sells above 20,000 Lebanese pounds to the US dollar on the illicit market while the official rate is fixed at 1,500 pounds for \$1.

This unprecedented state of affairs has led all political parties to start distributing aid in order to prove themselves once again indispensable to their political and religious base. In theory, the crisis could have reduced the flow of resources that sustain clientelism, but it seemingly had the opposite impact, reinforcing the corrupt system as more and more people depend on it.²³

“We used to spend 600,000 to 700,000 per month before the crisis. Now, we are trying to spend less because we don’t have a lot of money and the prices in regular markets have increased, sometimes tenfold,” Ali Mughnieh said.

His fridge and pantry were stocked with goods he bought with his magnetic card in a store affiliated with “The Party of God”, including sugar, rice, lentils, tahini, and ketchup. Most of the products in his apartment have been imported from Iran and Syria, two long-time allies of the Shia party.

Despite this support, the Mughnieh family still had to change its eating habits.

“We are still struggling,” said Abeer, 44, Ali’s mother. *“Even with the Sajjad card, a big bag of rice is too expensive. And what about meat and vegetables? We are not eating meat anymore. For example, when I cooked green beans, I used to make it with one kilo of meat. Now, I use only 100 or 200 grams for seven people,”* she told the BIC with a sad smile.

NGOs have noticed skyrocketing demand for food assistance while some families have coped by skipping meals and eating a carb-heavy diet to save money.⁴

2 International Crisis Group, June 2020. « Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit ».

3 M.R., June 2021. “Le Hezbollah élargit sa panoplie d’aides sociales, mais comment et combien peut-il tenir?”. Le Commerce du Levant.

4 Kareem Chehayeb and Abby Sewell, August 2021. “A year after the Beirut blast, subsidy cuts compound Lebanon’s desperation”. The New Humanitarian.

“Before the crisis, I would make potatoes with eggs maybe once a month. Now, I make it at least once a week. But even eggs are expensive nowadays,” Ms Mughnieh added. “I even make my meals for two days. They have to accept to eat leftovers.”

According to the World Bank, Lebanon’s economic and financial crisis is likely to rank in the top 10 - possibly top 3 - most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century.

“In the face of colossal challenges,” the organisation wrote in a report published on June 1st, “continuous policy inaction and the absence of a fully functioning executive authority threaten already dire socio-economic conditions and a fragile social peace with no clear turning point in the horizon.”⁵

Hezbollah’s extensive security apparatus, political organisation, and social services networks have long fostered its reputation as “a state within a state”.⁶ Now, some fear that Lebanon’s unprecedented political and economic crisis will give the group a way to further consolidate its hold on the country.

“The Sajjad card is a tool for Hezbollah to avoid how its electoral base turned against it during this crisis,” Lebanese activist Nour Nouredin, a vocal critic of Hezbollah, told the BIC. “Considering the current situation, this initiative could convince the ‘Shia street’ that Hezbollah is inevitably needed, that it is a saviour and a substitute to the State.”

He added: “Hezbollah is implicitly affirming that it has all the means to be an alternative to the government. Indeed, I would argue that the Lebanese state is now a state within the Hezbollah state, and not the other way around.”

However, it seems the party that bills itself as a resistance movement failed to deliver on its ambitious promise, freezing the distribution of new cards soon after the launch of the scheme.

“Their project faltered after one month. This is the proof that the group does not have the means to supplant the State,” a Lebanese analyst who asked not to be named told the BIC.

A source close to Hezbollah told the BIC that “there is a lot of pressure on the markets because of the large number of people [who were given a card], so there are not many products left. They gave cards to people who didn’t really need it and they were soon overwhelmed.”

5 Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM), June 2021. “Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3)”. The World Bank.

6 Kali Robinson, September 2020. “Backgrounder: What Is Hezbollah?”. Council on Foreign Relations.

Yet, whether social aid has been politicised to serve a party's agenda is of little interest to the Mughnieh family, who simply feels grateful to whoever will help them put food on the table.

The massive economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosions, and political instability have all combined to create conditions worse than they were during the 1975-1990 civil war, Abeer Mughnieh argued.

"I was telling my husband yesterday that our children's generation have more difficulties than ours," she recalled. "When I was younger, everything was available even though it was the war. I remember as a child that I had to queue for bread with my father. But it wasn't as bad as it is today, it wasn't as expensive."

**Mohammed Yassine contributed to this piece.*

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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