



LEVANT & EASTERN MED September 2019

Eastern Med: Emerging Battleground for US-Iran Showdown

As a direct repercussion of the mid-September drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais refineries, the same day the US Navy destroyer USS Ramage "entered Beirut port on September 14 as a symbol of the enduring partnership between the US and Lebanon to ensure security and stability in the eastern Mediterranean" ["US Warship Docks in Beirut Port as Sign of 'Enduring Partnership' with Lebanon", *Asharq Al Ahsat*, September 15, 2019]. This marks the first time in over three decades an American vessel docked in Lebanon and is meant as a deterrent military manoeuvre directed against Iran that the US denounces for the attack on the oil giant Aramco. US Ambassador to Lebanon Elizabeth Richard underlined that the security and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean are of "utmost importance to the United States", especially regarding the oil derivatives, while assuring that "the issue of maritime security will soon acquire more importance" [Najia Houssari, "Navy destroyer's Beirut visit a 'security reminder': US envoy", *Arab News*, September 15, 2019]. Richard's statement goes in line with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's announcement in July in which he said that it is his priority "to maintain state authority over Lebanese territorial waters, in order to counter terrorist activities, illegal immigration, human trafficking and the smuggling of goods and illicit material" [Anna Ahronheim, "Lebanese PM Hariri: Lebanon to Increase Naval Capabilities", *The Jerusalem Post*, July 17, 2019].

This comes coupled with a set of diplomatic measures from Washington targeted at countering Iran and its regional allies and non-state armed proxies. On 22 September US Treasury Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing Marshall Billingslea met on a two-day visit Hariri, Parliament Speaker Nabih Birri, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh and representatives of the Banks Association to concert action against the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. Prior to that, Lebanon-based Jammal Trust Bank SAL and its subsidiaries were sanctioned in August for allegedly facilitating the financial activities of Hezbollah. Subsequently, on 19 September, the bank was forced to liquidate. Since 2017 the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated 50 Hezbollah-affiliated individuals and entities.

These developments put Lebanon and maritime energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean at the heart of the ongoing conflict between Iran and the US, even before the Persian Gulf, hinting at a shift in the battleground of this showdown. Meanwhile, the already heated Eastern Mediterranean waters which are the scene for the enduring geopolitical confrontation between the regional power Turkey, the great powers, the EU and adjacent states over the exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves, are becoming the arena for another major conflict with implications beyond the region.

For the US strategic objective of containing Iran through “*maximum pressure*” this indicates the continuation and intensification of a twofold strategy in the Levant: first, the total draining of Iran’s and its allies’ financial flows; second, enhancing military deterrence through on the one hand higher US military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and on the other hand increasing military expenditures to Lebanon. The Donald Trump administration doubled its military aid to Lebanon, providing the Lebanese army with more than \$100 million in upgrades.

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