



Hezbollah, Iran, and the Politics of Obstructionism

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On September 7, Lebanon's Parliament failed for the forty-third time to convene a session to elect a president. Since the expiration of former president Michel Suleiman's term in May 2014, the country has had a caretaker cabinet headed by Prime Minister Tammam Salam who has become the head of constitutional executive authority for the country. Its House of Representatives has twice renewed its own term and may very well be on the road to doing it again before next June. Indeed, Lebanon approaches the edge of an institutional collapse that threatens whatever is left of its sectarian peace at a time of great uncertainty in the Arab East.

As on previous occasions when Lebanon's confessional makeup allowed for an active role of external actors with competing rivalries and politics in its domestic affairs, the current crisis smacks of manipulation and interference by the Islamic Republic of Iran through its surrogate Hezbollah. In the presidential stalemate, the Party of God has prevented the convening of an election session by disallowing its deputies and its political allies from attending one, thus depriving the session of a two-thirds constitutional quorum, or 86 members out of a total of 128. It has maintained this stance although the two leading Maronite contenders for the office – former Army Commander and leader of the Change and Reform Bloc Michel Aoun and leader of the Marada Movement from northern Lebanon Suleiman Franjeh – are its allies.

Citing a purported 'commitment' to the 82-year-old Aoun, the party insists on assuring his selection even before Parliament convenes. Reciprocally, Aoun has provided the party with a non-Shiite ally in the political system and confessional makeup of the country that has so far allowed Hezbollah to claim a broader national constituency. Adding to the confusion, the other major Shiite party, the AMAL Movement of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, refuses to back the former general in his presidential bid.

On the other hand, Franjeh was nominated as a compromise candidate by the leader of the anti-Hezbollah coalition Saad al-Hariri since Aoun was rejected by a majority of the members of Parliament. Moreover, the politician from the north refuses to withdraw, claiming an equal right to the seat as a Maronite of standing and as someone acceptable to both pro-Syrians and pro-Saudis in the

country. However, and in a bizarre display of `deference' to `ally Hezbollah,' Franjeh himself refuses to attend the nominating session which could elect him president.

In this convoluted political atmosphere, the Lebanese have come to believe that the only plausible explanation for the stalemate is Hezbollah's stance on the election, backed as it is by Iran and its own military power vis-à-vis unarmed political factions. Hezbollah's threat to potentially seize power outright deters its foes and emboldens its allies to the detriment of both camps. In 2008, the party led a putsch against its opponents that almost re-ignited the country's civil war had regional powers – notably Saudi Arabia, Syria, Qatar, and Iran – not intervened with a political deal that brought former President Suleiman to power. But with the current escalation of regional tensions and sectarian polarization, the raging Syrian civil war, and Iran's attempts at imposing its regional hegemony, the 2008 conditions for regional agreement do not exist.

Two general reasons stand behind Hezbollah's obstructionism in Lebanon today. First, and as party to the rising Shiite trend asserting itself in the Sunni-dominated Arab world, Hezbollah seeks to claim a political role in Lebanon commensurate with both its military power and the fact that the Lebanese Shia constitute a confessional plurality, estimated at 40% of the population. A few years ago, Hezbollah's Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah floated the idea of `a founding convention' that would potentially re-cast political power in the country in a tripartite division between Christians, Sunnis, and Shia, instead of the current Christian-Muslim confessional democracy.

Opponents of the party believe that by delaying the presidential election, Hezbollah hopes to ram through a new constitutional arrangement that would alter the 1989 Taif Constitution asserting the 1943 bifurcated political system to make the Shia a separate pole on par with Sunnis and Maronites. But in the highly charged confessional divisions in the country and the fear of diminishing Lebanon's Christians' political power, the proposal did not gain much traction. Nonetheless, Hezbollah continues to assert its supremacy through military power and intimidation, succeeding in derailing any real attempt to hold a presidential election.

Second, the party's seemingly endless entanglement in the Syrian quagmire prevents it from allowing for a full return to constitutional authority in Lebanon. A constitutionally-elected president will, however weak or ineffectual, provide the necessary legitimacy to the Lebanese state and its institutions. As an armed faction that has succeeded in carving out its own state within the state, and that has

committed itself to fight in the Syrian war, Hezbollah wants to avoid a potential confrontation with the new president, even if he were a pliant ally.

A Lebanese president would represent a unified Lebanese state that would have to abide by international norms of behavior, including preventing one of its political forces from participating in a foreign war. Although Hezbollah has at least twice subverted the state's right to exercise its sovereignty within its own borders – by waging war with Israel in 2006 and by participating in Syria – it will still have to answer to a president who would conceivably be required to assert his position as head of a constitutional order. Between 2011 and 2014, the party disrespectfully rejected former President Suleiman's demands for it to withdraw from Syria, creating a tense political atmosphere and paralyzing politics. This time around, it is in the party's interest not to even create the conditions that would increase the pressure on it to end its illegal participation in Syria and its mortgaging of Lebanon's future to Syria's war's conclusion.

Thus, Lebanon today limps slowly forward without a president, led by a weakened government that cannot count on an ineffectual parliament, on the road to institutional decay and constitutional and confessional disarray. Once described as a functional democracy in the Middle East, it now awaits a radical change in its domestic makeup and regional conditions. Primarily, however, it needs Arab and international assistance to address the deleterious impacts of Hezbollah's reckless disregard for its social peace and Iran's determination to exercise hegemony over an Arab country.

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