



The Misplaced Hope of Lebanon's Presidential Election

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Developments in Lebanon during November 2016 made it increasingly evident that the election as president of Michel Aoun, former general and leader of the Reform and Change parliamentary bloc, was a momentary respite from the country's political crisis. His ascendance fills a vacuum in the presidential palace which lasted for almost 30 months and during which the Lebanese state and its constitutional and executive institutions languished and decayed. But the return of the proverbial "man on horseback" to the apex of political power does not seem to have loosened Hezbollah's hold on political life in the country.

Indeed, the more Lebanon seeks to shield itself from the party's involvement in the Syrian quagmire—a hope the new president expressed in his post-election speech—the more it finds itself beholden to its neighbor's internal developments. Prominent among these is the battle for Aleppo, which has become a microcosm of Syria's version of the "Arab Spring" and a manifestation of the Syrian regime's ability to resurrect its fortunes inside the country and across its border with Lebanon. As the formation of the new Lebanese government by Prime Minister Saad Hariri bogs down by what many analysts consider petty demands and counter-demands, Aoun's presidency appears to be no more than an inconsequential achievement thus far.

Hariri's Difficulties

One cannot overemphasize the fact that it was former prime minister and leader of the parliamentary Future Movement bloc Saad Hariri who made Aoun's presidency possible, albeit after his failure to see other candidates through. His about-face came following a realization that not granting Hezbollah its wish to elect Aoun as president was merely prolonging the presidential crisis and further weakening state institutions. Having no sure way of standing up to the armed and powerful Party of God, Hariri retracted his support for Maronite politician Suleiman Franjieh, whom he had proposed as a presidential alternative a few months ago. But despite giving in to Hezbollah, he succeeded in negotiating his own return to the premiership in order to both check Aoun's old commitment to the party and rein in the country's institutional collapse.

However, Hariri has not yet been able to form a much-vaunted government of national unity that was supposed to quickly follow Aoun's election. Vetoes and demands abound. To wit, Hezbollah vetoes nominations for ministers from the Lebanese Forces Party (LFP) for what are considered "important" ministries—Foreign Affairs, Interior, Defense, and Finance—although LFP leader

Samir Geagea was instrumental in Aoun's success. Speaker of Parliament and leader of the AMAL Movement Nabih Berri demands control of the Finance ministry, and Hezbollah supports him—a condition others believe is the Shiite duopoly's way of controlling government largesse and public projects and programs. Berri also insists on three ministries for his ally and former presidential contender Franjieh as consolation prizes. Some Druze voices and political figures are also demanding three ministries for the sect, although the principal leader of the community, Walid Jumblatt, has refrained from articulating specific requirements, emphasizing instead the need for creating a viable government and for re-energizing state institutions.

Meanwhile, Aoun—who has aspired to be president since 2005—is up against demands to mollify his constituencies, although he and Hariri are now the faces of a reestablished constitutional order in Lebanon and must ensure its success. In fact, the delay in government formation reflects badly on Aoun's personal standing since his opportunistic support of Hezbollah over the past decade has emboldened the latter and given it a much-needed legitimacy among the country's Christian community. The Christians, paradoxically, were always the ardent defenders of republican principles, state supremacy, and non-entanglement in regional affairs.

Hariri now finds himself in dire straits. His personal and political standing is slowly dwindling after his historic acceptance of Aoun. He is fighting mini-revolts within his own community and among members of his Future Movement who are apprehensive that his compromises portend acquiescence to Hezbollah's dictates, and by extension to Syria's hegemony over Lebanon. Hariri's financial support base has been under pressure because of poor economic returns from his business in Saudi Arabia following restructuring there. In fact, many believe that Hezbollah—which declined to support him as prime minister—is engineering the delay in the cabinet's formation to deprive him of a political prize for supporting Aoun's candidacy. The party has long seen him as an embodiment of everything it abhors: Saudi Arabia's role in Lebanon; the Lebanese Sunnis' opposition to Iran's expansion; the Special Tribunal for Lebanon's investigation of Rafiq Hariri's assassination in 2005; and resentment of Hezbollah's deep involvement in Syria. At any rate, even if Hariri gets to form a government, his will be a short-lived tenure as prime minister since his mandate will expire when parliamentary elections are held in May 2017.

The Impact of Hezbollah's Involvement in Syria

Since the beginning of Hezbollah's deep involvement in Syria in 2012, Lebanon has found itself increasingly exposed to the myriad competing dynamics there. The protests of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, primarily an internal matter that expressed demands for political reform from authoritarian rule, surprised all Lebanese, who themselves were subject to repression at the hands of Syria's military and intelligence services between the late 1970s and 2005. But the strategic decision by Hezbollah, as Iran's primary proxy party, to throw its military weight behind the Syrian regime threw Lebanese domestic politics into disarray. Indeed, accompanying

Hezbollah's military involvement was both the curtailment of the traditional Lebanese political "art of the possible" and the blocking of decision making in Beirut.

Former President Michel Suleiman found it very hard to govern or play his role as arbiter after 2011. At his behest, a series of national dialogue meetings among Lebanon's many political forces led to an agreement, the Baabda Declaration—a reference to the presidential palace where the meetings were held—that called upon all political factions, specifically Hezbollah, to withdraw from Syria. But neither the declaration nor public and media calls succeeded in convincing Hezbollah, which by 2014, the last year of Suleiman's presidency, had widened its participation to all fronts of the Syrian battlefield following rebel advances against regime strongholds. By that time and into 2015, many areas of Lebanon became targets for terrorist attacks by jihadists purportedly challenging the party's role in Syria.

Syria today continues to be the dreaded cause for the collapse of political compromise in Lebanon. Hezbollah is present on arguably all fronts in Syria as a strategic strike force for the Syrian regime, alongside tens of thousands of Shiite militiamen from Iraq and South Asia and untold numbers of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members acting as advisors and soldiers. While estimates vary, it is reported that 1,500 of Hezbollah's fighters have been killed so far and over 10,000 have been wounded. Hezbollah has also claimed the mantle of opposing any Saudi Arabian or Qatari role in Lebanon, thus trying to affirm Iran's untrammelled strategic stretch to the eastern Mediterranean.

In mid-November, Hezbollah held a military parade in Qusair, an area of Syria adjacent to the Lebanese border, where it showed off columns of armored vehicles, heavy weapons, and soldiers. Many believed that the party may have been announcing its transformation from a militia with a supporting role to a full-fledged army in actual control of territory, on a par with the Syrian army and Russian forces. But whatever messages the party tried to convey, one thing was clear: its military now operates outside the control of any legitimate Lebanese authority, and in the future it will be completely unaccountable to President Aoun and Prime Minister Hariri. Moreover, the party's parading of armored columns featuring personnel carriers and American-made anti-tank missiles used by the Lebanese army not only added insult to injury but may have precluded further American military assistance to Lebanon.

It has also become clear that the party's domestic role and external function as an Iranian strategic asset leave no room for the development of an independent and sovereign Lebanese polity. As the Syrian regime exposes an increasing degree of cockiness following full-fledged Russian and Iranian support, and as the battle for Aleppo rages toward a feared defeat of the weakened opposition, it is not farfetched to claim that Damascus, once again, is extending a full *Pax Syriana* over Lebanon through Hezbollah. It was perhaps telling that the Syrian regime allowed over 2,000 Druze youth to travel to Lebanon to participate in the formation of the Druze version of Hezbollah's "resistance," *Saraya al-Tawhid*, under the direction of one of its

supporters in the country, former minister Wiam Wahhab. It also was striking that the youth militia members crossed the Lebanese-Syrian border unimpeded by any Lebanese authorities.

Conclusion

Once again, and despite surmounting its constitutional crisis and electing a president, Lebanon teeters near the edge of complete subjugation to the Syrian-Iranian axis through Hezbollah. That the country has not yet succumbed to political, and indeed military, anarchy is a testament to the patience and wisdom of seasoned politicians cognizant that military conflict will only destroy what has painstakingly been accomplished since the end of the country's civil war in 1990. Michel Aoun may be president and may choose Saad Hariri as prime minister, but as long as Hezbollah continues to hold Lebanon hostage to its role in Syria and to its strategic obedience to Iran, Aoun and Hariri will only be able to dabble speciously with government portfolios as the fate of the country hangs in the balance.

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