

LEBANON-in-CONFLICT

Alerts, Background, and Reviews from and about Lebanon

[A joint UMAM D&R and HAYYA BINA Project]

Issue 005 | October 2020

October 2019 – October 2020

LEBANON: A (TEMPORARY) REVENGE OF THE “STABILITY DOCTRINE?”



Even with scrupulous attention, the viewer is entitled to wonder whether this picture was taken in 2016 or in 2020...

Lebanon was without a President for nearly two and a half years after President Michel Suleiman's term expired in May 2014. On October 31, 2016, however, Lebanese political actors—under the auspices of their respective regional patrons—managed to elect General Michel Aoun as the country's 13th president. Previously the commander of the Lebanese Army, Aoun was also the leader of the largely Christian Free Patriotic Movement and the prominent Christian ally of Hezbollah.

Aoun's "election" by the parliament was nothing but a polite euphemism barely hiding what the Lebanese jargon came to designate as the "Presidential Deal." According to this Deal, Aoun would occupy the supreme office while Nabih Berri, head of the AMAL Movement/militia and Hezbollah's counterpart, would remain in place as Speaker of the Parliament (he had held this office since 1992), while Saad Hariri, son of Rafiq Hariri, would be the Prime Minister.

The above photo shows from right to left, Nabih Berri, Michel Aoun, and Saad Hariri. It was captured after the parliamentary consultations which brought Hariri back to office on October 22, 2020!

Indeed, it is rather difficult to explain the situation in which Lebanon finds itself at the time of writing. The whiplash of the year's events has culminated in new conundrum... How can one make sense of the fact that, ostensibly out of the blue, Saad

Hariri—under whose premiership the “October 17 Revolution” broke out in 2019, prompting his swift resignation—is one year later reinstated as Lebanon's Prime Minister, tasked with forming a “mission government” of “nonpartisan experts” to rescue the country according to the terms of the so-called French Initiative?

RETURN OF HARIRI

Any attempt to examine the chain of events that have unfolded over the past month alone leaves one stuck with solving an intricate riddle. Lebanese President Michel Aoun stated on October 7 that parliamentary consultations would take place on October 15. On the same day as the president's announcement, Saad Hariri appeared on a popular television talk show and said that he considers himself a “natural candidate” to fill the

role of prime minister—expressing a sharp deviation from his previously stated position against returning to the post.⁽¹⁾ On the day that consultations were set to commence, President Aoun postponed them until October 22, calling French President Emmanuel Macron to present his justification for yet another delay in the designation of a new Prime Minister and, consequently, the formation of a new government. Paradoxically, the delay resulted not only from Aoun's efforts to shore up support for Hariri's return among the Lebanese Forces—the president's Christian rival—but also from the intransigence of his own Free Patriotic Movement.⁽²⁾

Once the consultations finally did begin, the surreal—and at times downright baffling—nature of Lebanese parliamentary politicking was exposed clearly for all to see. A very careful upstream distribution of votes ultimately designated Hariri for the post, taking advantage of the fact that no other candidate, not even a token candidate, could compete. This distribution was full of paradoxical alliances, which invites one to question what “politics” means in Lebanon. For example, Hariri's return was endorsed by two Sunni MPs belonging to the anti-Hariri bloc that Hezbollah pieced together in the wake of the parliamentary elections of May 2018. Likewise, the three (Christian) MPs of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party—historically a sworn enemy of Hariri's Future Movement and a staunch ally of the Bashar Assad regime—also voted for Hariri. Obviously something has triggered this déjà vu-evoking

⁽¹⁾ As recently as July 8, Hariri denied interest in returning as the Lebanese premier, a denial he had been making since the earliest days of his resignation. “Hariri denies interest in returning as PM,” *The Daily Star*, July 8, 2020.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Hariri+denies+interest+in+returning+as+PM&dq=Hariri+denies+interest+in+returning+as+PM&aq=chrome..69i57j33i160.1261j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

⁽²⁾ “Report: Aoun Calls Macron to ‘Justify’ Delay in Consultations,” *Naharnet Newsdesk*, October 16, 2020. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/275829-report-aoun-calls-macron-to-justify-delay-in-consultations>

denouement, but what exactly took place? The Lebanese people have been deprived of a satisfactory or convincing answer.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Some have attributed this month's events to the "climate of moderation" that appears to have descended upon the

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region. Current developments are fostering a sudden relaxation and willingness among parties that were, until very recently, espousing unwavering adherence to specific conditions. One factor frequently cited as a potential cause of this recent flexibility is the increasing American pressure on Iran and its proxies—more specifically, the highly symbolic sanctioning of

councilors to two of Hezbollah's main allies.⁽³⁾ A second factor seems to be related to a larger, iceberg-like deal, the tip of which being Lebanon's readiness to enter into maritime border negotiations with Israel under the auspices of the UN and US.⁽⁴⁾ From this macro-level perspective, an overall "mellowing" of the stances adopted by Lebanese politicians becomes discernible, paving the way for the return of Hariri. Irrespective of the particular factor(s) from which the current situation derived—and, perhaps more importantly, irrespective of the ever-growing popular distrust of the political class and the political process—the fact of the matter is that an invisible hand seems to have concluded that the best way to

⁽³⁾ Yusuf Finyanus, of the Christian Marada party, was the Minister of Transportation and Public Works from 2016-2020, and is a close counselor to his party's leader, Suleiman Frangieh, who is a Hezbollah ally. Ali Hassan Khalil has been a minister twice, most recently as the Minister of Finance from 2014-2020, and is a senior aid to AMAL Movement head Nabih Berri.

⁽⁴⁾ "Lebanon-Israel demarcation talks to start soon," *Anadolu Agency*, October 1, 2020.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/lebanon-israel-demarcation-talks-to-start-soon/1992532>

address the Lebanese impasse is to revert to the old recipes!

This return to Lebanon's political *modus operandi* has been enabled through the support of President Macron and his "French Initiative."⁽⁵⁾ The Initiative—to which Hariri continually refers and vows to implement—has changed since Mustapha Adeb stepped down, abdicating his task of forming a government to replace that which was assembled under Hassan Diab, who himself resigned in the aftermath of the August 4 Beirut Port explosion.⁽⁶⁾ In the past two months, the Initiative has granted Shia duo AMAL and Hezbollah's demand to retain control over the Finance Ministry⁽⁷⁾, in violation of the principle of ministerial rotation among political parties.⁽⁸⁾ In its acquiescence, France has effectively undermined its push for genuine political reform and a new mode of governance. The French Initiative thus appears to have become something akin to the Baabda Declaration⁽⁹⁾: a non-binding statement of intent whose implementation is entirely contingent upon the goodwill of its signatories. Once intended as a roadmap, the practical efficacy of the French Initiative has dissipated. It should therefore come as no surprise if, in the future, the Initiative—like the Baabda Declaration—is referred to as being "born dead."⁽¹⁰⁾

By dropping the government of Hassan Diab in the wake of the explosion at Beirut's port, Hezbollah acknowledged that it could no longer sustain the confrontational posture it had assumed since Diab's designation as prime minister in December 2019. This does not mean

⁽⁵⁾ "France creates roadmap for crisis-ridden Lebanon," EURACTIV, August 27, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/france-creates-reform-roadmap-for-crisis-ridden-lebanon/>

⁽⁶⁾ Mustapha Adeb announced his resignation on September 26, 2020.

⁽⁷⁾ Sources close to the Shia duo said that the two would never relinquish control over the Finance Ministry: "Report: 'Never in a Hundred Years' Would Shiite Duo Relinquish Finance Portfolio," *Naharnet* Newsdesk, September 22, 2020. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/275155>

⁽⁸⁾ The principle of ministerial rotation in Lebanon means that no ministry can be permanently earmarked to one confessional group.

⁽⁹⁾ The Baabda Declaration contains 17 bullet points, including the need to "strengthen State institutions," encourage the "implementation of a socioeconomic development plan throughout Lebanon," ensure "restraint in political and media discourse" and other general points of support for Lebanon that offer little in the way of concrete steps forward. The most important point was however that Lebanon would "disassociate itself" from regional conflicts. United Nations, General Assembly Security Council, *Baabda declaration issued by the National Dialogue Committee on 11 June 2012, A/66/849* (21 June 2012), undocs.org/en/A/66/849

⁽¹⁰⁾ The Baabda Declaration was agreed upon by all political factions and sent to the UN, however, a year later it was "born dead" and nothing more than "ink on paper," according to Hezbollah MP Mohammed Raad. "Raad Says Baabda Declaration Was 'Born Dead,'" *Naharnet* Newsdesk, August 14, 2013, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/94191>

that Hezbollah is in a weaker position within the arena of domestic politics, however. To the contrary, Hezbollah seems to have successfully advanced a gradual operation whereby the party forces its will in regard various matters. At the outset, Hezbollah accepted the designation of Adeeb in an

effort to contain the wave of anger that followed the August 4 explosion. Yet soon thereafter, the party began impeding his work, pressing him to raise a white flag of surrender and, in the end, to return to his embassy post in Berlin. Hezbollah's final move was to bring Hariri back into

the fold. We must not forget that one of Hassan Nasrallah's main grievances with Hariri during the initial weeks of last year's revolution was the latter's willingness to abandon his post when he felt that the boat was about to sink. Bringing Hariri back to power is in itself a success for Hezbollah. By succeeding this maneuver, Hezbollah, along with AMAL, can now not only boast that it has secured their role as incontestable representatives of the mainstream Lebanese Shia, but prove, again, their capacity to appeal to and appease the mainstream Sunni constituency.

In other words, for better or worse, Hezbollah has reclaimed its role as Lebanon's "stabilizing" force. In this sense, it can also be said that the concessions Hezbollah has made—from the late Amer Fakhoury's release and repatriation to the US⁽¹¹⁾, to the acceptance of border negotiations with Israel—have proven

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⁽¹¹⁾ Fakhoury was a member of the Israel-supported South Lebanon Army (SLA) and served as an official at the infamous Khiam prison, a facility where he reportedly oversaw the torture and death of Lebanese detainees. After the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, and subsequent disbanding of the SLA, Fakhoury fled Lebanon, not returning until September 2019. He was arrested upon his return, in spite of assurances of his safety, and held until March 2020 where he was set free upon a ruling of the military court. This ruling did not fail to raise a lot of questions—especially within the “pro-resistance” milieu to the point that Hezbollah's Secretary General himself had to address the issue in a speech on March 20, 2020, pretending that his organization was unaware of the legal proceedings that led to the release of Fakhoury. Needless to say, Nasrallah's argumentation was met with incredulity and sarcasm.

to be fruitful investments, as they artfully dovetailed with the agendas of foreign actors. France is happy to see its Initiative progressing with the formation of a new Lebanese government, regardless of the distortions to which it has been subjected. What is more, the Trump administration can brag that even a country controlled by Hezbollah and Iran cannot resist yielding to its power, compelled to participate in the ongoing regional trend of engagement with Israel. More generally, the international community at large is relieved to see Lebanon back under a certain degree of “control.”

The concessions made by Hezbollah, ranging from the release of the late Amer Fakhoury, to the acceptance of border negotiations with Israel, have proved to be fruitful *investments* as these concessions artfully matched the agendas of foreign actors!

Interestingly, October 2020 delivers the country back to a state of “control” that emerged four years ago under comparable circumstances. When Aoun became president on October 31, 2016, the US was days away from its

own presidential election, while Russia, Iran, and Turkey were meeting behind closed doors to end the siege of Aleppo. Today, the US is once again on the eve of a presidential election, though it is now Lebanon, rather than Syria, that is the subject of discreet meetings convened by powerful actors. Although Iran has lost some of its prominence due to internal pressures, Russia and Turkey continue to feature prominently in the region, especially as the latter competes with France in the eastern Mediterranean, including in and over Lebanon. Meanwhile, the US has been imposing a torrent of targeted sanctions

while concurrently facilitating peace/normalization deals to reassert its own influence in the region. As such, it isn't an exaggeration to say that while the balance of power has undergone dramatic shifts since 2016, the overall framework remains relatively unchanged.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

One year after the “October 17 Revolution,” Lebanon finds itself in an extraordinary situation: It is utterly impossible to return to the old economic and financial status quo; yet the same conventional power-holders have returned once again, either to pilot a transition that will unavoidably take the country through the abyss (best case scenario), or to oversee Lebanon's worsening decay (worst case scenario).

It is clear that the “Stability Doctrine” is of critical importance in the current moment. Conditions no longer carry the potential for substantial change in Lebanon, and are instead paving the way for a roaring comeback of the status quo. Thus the “Stability Doctrine” has effectively triumphed over all those who lobbied for the painful option of change over the high price of “stability.” After all, those in support of the October 17 movement—despite their naivety or political immaturity—made it abundantly clear that anything was better than the status quo.

Is this return of the “Stability Doctrine” a definitive victory for its promoters? At present, the answer is no, as there are vital questions that will only be answered

with the passage of time. Not all former stakeholders have resumed their previous roles in the context of this reincarnated state. How much power do they wield as possible spoilers? Furthermore, a large segment of the Lebanese population harbors an irreversible distrust of the political establishment. How will this sentiment evolve and manifest moving forward? This deep distrust is currently being made evident via widespread

emigration from the country. How can Lebanon be stabilized while its population is fleeing and its socio-demographic makeup is in the midst of immense transition?

In October 2020, the “Stability Doctrine” has effectively triumphed over all those who lobbied for the painful option of change over the high price of “stability.”

And finally, any kind of stabilization—if it is to take hold and be viable—will require financial backing. To what extent will the international community be willing to withdraw its prerequisites of structural political reform to provide such funding? Just because there are no vetoes does not mean there will be any checks on governance. In fact, there is a considerable difference between the quiet acquiescence of Lebanon's traditional funders and their readiness to expend petro dollars to prop up another ill-ruling government. And so, the question remains: In which direction will the “Stability Doctrine” steer us next?