

Alerts, News and Background from Lebanon [A Hayya Bina project]

Edited by Inga Schei and Lokman Slim

Ending Lebanon's Presidential Vacancy A Rusty President for an Allegorical Republic...

Despite the rocambollesque nature of its four rounds of elections, Lebanon finally has a new president. He is none other than General Michel Aoun, who was born in Haret Hreik, (aka "Dahiyyeh"), in 1935.⁽¹⁾

During the 29 interminable months wherein the country's politicians failed to elect a new president, most if not all Lebanese political leaders said at least occasionally that the logjam was due to unspecified regional complications or outright vetoes. But when Aoun's election to the highest post in the "republic" began to seem increasingly certain, everyone who supported him—in line with a well-known Lebanese opportunistic



The view from Tehran...

scheme—tripped over themselves to proclaim that the development was an entirely Lebanese achievement accomplished allegedly because of their shared “sense of responsibility.”⁽²⁾

Moving beyond such obviously rhetorical nonsense, the group of Aoun's supporters ranged from the extreme (now defunct) March 14 Future Movement and Lebanese Forces to the extreme (and also defunct) March 8 pro-Assad Lebanese branch of the Baath party or the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. Clearly, the character of this membership provides sufficient reason to question any sudden demonstration of collective Lebanese cleverness, especially one that

⁽¹⁾ For an account of this election, see: “Michel Aoun wins Lebanon presidency, ending 2-1/2-year vacuum,” *The Daily Star*, November 1, 2016. <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Oct-31/378932-lawmakers-arrive-to-lebanese-president-election-session.aspx>

⁽²⁾ Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces Party (and former militia) has claimed the loudest that Aoun's election is based on an inter-Lebanese arrangement and that as a president, Aoun is a product “made in Lebanon.” Geagea's enthusiasm is understandable given his assertion that the January 18, 2016 “historical reconciliation” between the two former warring groups (the LF and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement) played a pivotal role in this election.

supposedly prompted these stalwarts to grasp not only that an ad infinitum presidential vacancy was not particularly good for the country, but also to agree that the best person to fill that long vacant office was none other than General Aoun.

While a detailed account of the regional/ international bargaining that finally produced the presidential agreement has yet to be made public, bits and pieces of it have already materialized.⁽³⁾ Even at this early point, we can state with confidence that regional/ international wrangling over the election of the Lebanese president was patterned largely on the bilateral covenant that instituted the 2014 formation of Tammam Salam's "National Interest" government. While that government was conceived to preserve Lebanon's stability by offsetting the looming presidential vacancy (which became a reality on May 25, 2014 when President Michel Suleiman left office), the election of a new president is meant to boost that stability even further while considering the new realities and balances of power that exist in Lebanon and the region.

More specifically, it is an approach to circumventing the current threats to Lebanon's stability, such as its grievous economic situation, the growing weight of the Syrian asylum issue and the systemic failure of State institutions. Of course, other risks to "Lebanese stability" are related to recent regional events characterized unmistakably by Russian-Iranian ascendancy—a situation that may tempt some players to use Lebanon once again as a central regional area from which messages of violence can be launched. In addition to those risks, Lebanon's endemic and acquired problems (to include public debt in the neighborhood of \$75 billion, a 30%+ unemployment rate and Hezbollah's direct involvement in Syria and elsewhere in the region) are both far-reaching and exceedingly difficult to solve. Ultimately, therefore, neither the election of a president—an office already stripped by the Taif Agreement of most of its executive powers—nor the formation of a "national unity" government can help solve them in the near term.

Assuming the actions taken to facilitate the

⁽³⁾ The day of the election, October 31, 2016, pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* reported a statement made by Speaker Nabih Berri, who characterized Aoun's election as having been the "outcome of an Iranian-American understanding."

⁽⁴⁾ One fact cannot be dismissed. Where the Future Movement (FM) is concerned, the shift made by Saad Hariri failed to convince all members of the FM parliamentary bloc, particularly its head, former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. Not only does this dissidence say a great deal about the Saad Hariri's leadership, but it also underscores the depth of the unease being experienced today by Lebanon's Sunni community.

election of a president did not result exclusively from a genuine sense of domestic duty and that filling this longstanding vacancy is no panacea, then it follows that the enthusiasm being shown for General Aoun by some actors (mainly Saad Hariri's Future Movement and Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces) and the uninspired opposition to his election (expressed by Speaker Berri, also-ran presidential candidate Suleiman Frangiyeh or the Kataeb (Phalange) party) are a direct reflection of the general exhaustion from which the country and its various stakeholders are suffering.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, this reality trumps any prognostication yet offered about how long it may take to form a new government or whether a new electoral law will be passed anytime soon.

The statements and articles produced by March 14 leaders and representatives typically claim that Hezbollah has been preventing the election of a new Lebanese president in an effort to push the country toward a leadership vacuum. Such an outcome would necessarily lead to a new "national convention," the outcome of which would be a revised power-sharing accord through which the Shia community would get a larger piece of the pie. The problem with that assertion is that it relies on petty Lebanese haggling to calculate Hezbollah's Lebanese policies and ambitions.

But what if Hezbollah and its Iranian patron want much more than just increased influence in and through the country's constitutional affairs? What if Hezbollah seeks to continue increasing, well into the future and to whatever extent it desires, its grip over Lebanon, the country's institutions and its political composition?

Considering Hezbollah's behavior from, for instance, 2005 until today, its comportment shifted from the unadulterated use of violence, to negotiation, and even to making concessions (albeit largely ceremonial) based on the goals it wanted to achieve.

Demonstrably, these permutations should prompt far more concern than any other of its characteristics, especially since the shifts Hezbollah has made either proved or appeared to prove (when it was not really the case) that it and the "axis" to which it claims with much bellicosity to belong are steadily achieving successes.

⁽⁵⁾ The steady infiltration (no other word can describe that action quite as well) of Iranian influence into the various Lebanese milieus deserves particular consideration. We prefer to talk about milieus rather than communities, as this “charm campaign” not only addresses professional sectors (such as cross-confessional entrepreneurial endeavors), but also clerical and secular Christian groups that advocate “minority rights!”

⁽⁶⁾ See ShiaWatch Alert #42, “Unfriending” Lebanon – Saudi Arabia Breaks Its Own Lebanese Taboos, at: [http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/Unfriending%20Lebanon%20\[ShiaWatch%20Alert%2042\].pdf](http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/Unfriending%20Lebanon%20[ShiaWatch%20Alert%2042].pdf)

⁽⁷⁾ Interestingly, since the symbolic and casualty-free bombing of the BLOM Bank on June 12, 2016, the application made by the central bank and Lebanese banks for relief from the U.S. Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA) was taken off the table. For more about this incident, see: “Explosion rocks bank HQ in Lebanese capital” at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/06/lebanon-unrest-blast.html>

That has been especially true in recent years, during which time the government was responsible for running Lebanon. Although that government descended from an internationally brokered arrangement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to keep Lebanon aside from the regional blaze, it is clear that the associated dividend has not been the same for each of those regional powerhouses during that period. On the contrary, while Saudi Arabia has continually withdrawn from and decreased its influence over Lebanon, Iranian influence over the country—and not only within the Shia milieu—has strengthened remarkably.⁽⁵⁾

We might even assert that the new regional deal that facilitated the election of General Aoun represents a further denigration of Saudi Arabia’s policy toward Lebanon. After all, since that deal secured (if not compelled) Saudi de facto blessing for Aoun’s election, the limits of Saudi Arabian policy toward “unfriending Lebanon” and its inability to exploit those declining relations, particularly within the larger framework of its struggle with Iran, are very apparent.⁽⁶⁾

Thus, we see yet another Hezbollah success: not only was its candidate for the presidency elected, its actions also ushered in a far weaker Saudi Arabian return to the Lebanese scene. Here again, in terms of the revised regional balance of power, Saudi Arabia is certainly not the biggest winner!

In addition to the foregoing, Iranian-Hezbollah policy regarding domestic Lebanese affairs can only be understood by considering the larger regional picture. From the Iranian-Hezbollah perspective, controlling Lebanon is not a metaphor for anything else.

In fact, Hezbollah exerts that control in very specific terms. For instance, beyond having made Lebanon its headquarters, Hezbollah uses Lebanon’s borders to reach other battlefields, leverages Lebanon’s once sovereign diplomacy at regional and international forums, consumes Lebanon’s resources and exploits Lebanon’s banking sector (despite existing sanctions).⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, Hezbollah has successfully replicated the Iranian inspired, hybrid state/non-state military/security model.

Compared to Hezbollah, no other Lebanese actor can claim to have made the same liberal use of Lebanon. Of course, the dividends produced via extensive and persistent State corruption are still being allocated proportionally among the country's old and new warlords, but compared to all others, no other domestic actor has been as adept as Hezbollah at maintaining the country's stability.

Unfortunately, Iranian-Hezbollah hegemony over Lebanon is not terribly distressing news for the so-called international community. After all, that community is fixated on a continued calm along the Lebanese/Israeli border. It is concerned that Lebanon's Syrian refugee community (and others) remain in Lebanon despite the Mediterranean sirens. It is concerned about Lebanon continuing to pull its weight in the "fight against terrorism." It is also concerned that Lebanon maintain at least some semblance of "democracy" and social and sectarian equilibrium to prevent its emergence as yet another country from which "international headaches" emanate.

In spite of those concerns, however, filling the presidency vacancy—even with Hezbollah's candidate—is simply not a big deal among the international community. On the contrary, for at least as long as the elderly General Aoun remains alive, his presidency guarantees the existence of the stability-centered status quo regardless of the inevitable inter-Lebanese skirmishes. After all, from the perspective of an informed realpolitik, an ill-functioning system is far better than one that does not function at all.

Nevertheless, even if filling the presidential vacancy validates this grand plan and corresponds with the constants imposed by the present regional balance of power, it would be unfortunate if we failed to appreciate the high costs associated with locking Lebanon into that status quo. At the very least, the country is being forced to transform from a republic on hold into an allegorical one!