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LEBANON IN REGIONAL TENSIONS: AOUN & AL-HARIRI COMPROMISE

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General Michel Aoun has been elected as the 13th President of Lebanon after two and a half year following the expiration of the term of office of Lebanese President Michel Suleiman in May 2014 due to the disagreements among the political parties and the failure in ensuring compromise between the regional actors. Aoun assigned the leader of the Future Movement Saad Al-Hariri to form the government as a natural consequence of domestic and regional compromise which allowed him to take office as the President. This policy brief aims to analyze, together with regional dynamics and developments, the compromise which gives the impression that the political crisis in Lebanon has been resolved by fulfilling the highest executive posts. In this regard, it argues that it seems impossible to anticipate that a functioning political system will be built in Lebanon in the near future given the fact that the compromise of President Aoun – Prime Minister Hariri requires cooperation of various Lebanese actors with different political aspirations and alliances at both regional and international level.

Following the expiration of the term of office of Lebanese President Michel Suleiman in May 2014, 45 sessions held in the parliament for the election of a president ended up in failure both due to the disagreements among the political parties and the failure in ensuring compromise between the regional actors. However, on 31 October 2016, in the second round of the 46th session held in Lebanese parliament for electing a president, General Michel Aoun received the votes of 83 members out of 128 seats in the parliament and became the 13th President of Lebanon, thus filling the president's seat which had been vacant for two and a half years. What President Michel Aoun first did was to assign the leader of the Future Movement Saad Al-Hariri to form the government. Essentially, this assignment was the natural consequence of domestic and regional compromise which allowed him to take office as the President. Al-Hariri, on his part, was able to form the national



President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri¹

unity government within a record time of one and a half month in Lebanese history after he was assigned to this duty.

This short time shows that there was also an agreement on the balances of the government between the alliances of 8th March and 14th March during the compromise reached in the presidential election in Lebanon which is heavily influenced by regional developments. However, having considered the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, it is highly discussable whether this compromise may provide a functioning political system in Lebanon even though the highest posts in the executive power have already been filled in such a short time.

Changing Alliances of Michel Aoun

Having been born into a working class family in Beirut in 1935, Aoun was promoted as the Chief of General Staff of Lebanese army which he joined in 1955. He became one of the key figures of the last phase of Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990 when President Emin Gemayel, whose term of office ended in 1988, appointed him as the prime minister of the interim military government. In Lebanon, where sectarian representation is recognized by the Constitution and all public positions are shared among sectarian communities within the framework of this system, the office of the prime minister was allocated to the Sunni as required by the political system. Therefore, this promotion was not welcome by Lebanese Sunni Muslims and Syria which supported these groups at the time. Besides, Aoun both triggered a struggle among Christians against the Lebanese Forces mostly formed by the Phalanges under the leadership of Samir Geagea and started an “independence war”

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against Syria which was one of the most significant regional actors of the civil war. These further exacerbated the ongoing civil war in the country and strengthened the opposition against him. Meanwhile, Aoun did not consent with the Taif Agreement accepted by members of Lebanese parliament in Taif and supported by the important actors of the time and he invaded the Presidential Palace when the agreement was being signed. Upon these developments, both Sunni groups and Samir Geagea, the other powerful Christian leader in the country, and Syrian Armed Forces backing these groups forced Aoun to take refuge in the Embassy of France in October 1990 and to leave Lebanon in August 1991.²

Aoun did not terminate his political activities in France and lobbied against Syria, which established a full domination over Lebanon in the post-Taif period. Within this framework, Aoun supported Western moves led by the US and France to end Syrian dominance, including the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 passed in 2004.³

Following the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Refik Al-Hariri and the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon, Michel Aoun returned to Lebanon and formed the Free Patriotic Movement and became the leader of the most powerful Christian group in the elections held in May-June 2005. Unlike his political stance during the civil war, he changed his side and started to forge closer ties with Syrian-backed Hezbollah and also became an important Christian actor of the March 8 Alliance. Some argue that Aoun chose to side with March 8 Alliance because March 14 Alliance includes his adversaries from the civil war.⁴ Although these kind of hostilities from the civil war years cannot be ignored, the real reason behind this move were the reflection of regional developments of the time and

his calculations of domestic politics and the upcoming elections. In the end, this alliance shift contributed both to the strengthening of Aoun's domestic political power and to the increasing influence of Iranian-Syrian axis on the country.

Presidency after 26 Years

The term of office of Lebanese President Michel Suleiman ended in May 2014. Since that time, it was not easily possible in the short term to reach a consensus on the candidate for Lebanese presidency between Lebanese actors who have alliances with Saudi Arabia and Iran due to the regional polarization which is deepened by the Syrian civil war.

Even though it was not officially announced in the beginning, Michel Aoun ran for the presidential elections in the March 8 Alliance led by Hezbollah as of May 2014. Opposition to the March 8 Alliance, the March 14 Alliance supported various candidates within the process. While it initially supported Samir Geagea, Saad Al-Hariri who made a political maneuver and nominated Suleiman Frangieh who was the member of Syrian-Iranian axis and was personally close to Bashar Al-Assad towards the end of 2015. Having lost the support of Al-Hariri, Geagea announced in January 2016 that he supported Michel Aoun as alternative to Frangieh.⁵ Despite this support, neither party could assure the majority in the parliament to elect its candidate as the president. However, this political intimacy between two significant leaders of the Christian community in Lebanon, which slightly opened the door of the Presidential Palace to Michel Aoun, was enthusiastically welcomed by their own circles.⁶ Some analysts argue that the popular support for Aoun's presidency in the Christian community has risen to 85 % after Geagea and his party granted him full support.⁷

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Having gained further strength while heading towards Baabda Palace with the support of Samir Geagea, Aoun succeeded in taking office as the President by receiving the support of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt after he guaranteed that of the Sunni leader on condition that he was going to assign Al-Hariri as the Prime Minister. Michel Aoun had left the Baabda Palace in 1990 upon the threats of Samir Geagea, Sunni groups and Syrian bombs, and returned again after 26 years with the support of the same groups. This clearly shows once again that the alliances of the past may not be important or binding within the present or future context of Lebanon's complicated politics.

Although Aoun has been criticized by his own circles because of his alliance after his return to Lebanon in 2005, one of the most important political base that Aoun has is the support from Hezbollah. For this reason, the election of Michel Aoun as the President may contribute to the strengthening of Iranian influence both in Lebanon and its wider region,



Unsustainable Compromise⁸

given the fact that Lebanese state had been weakly established due to the confessional system and it has been further weakened by the ongoing regional conflicts. Within this line, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Beirut in November 2016 and Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, hailed the election of Aoun as the new president and described the choice as a victory for the Islamic resistance movement in Lebanon.⁹

Saad Al-Hariri Government and the Elections

What President Michel Aoun first did was to assign the leader of the Future Movement Saad Al-Hariri to form the government. Essentially, this assignment was the natural consequence of domestic and regional compromise which allowed him to take office as the President. Al-Hariri, on his part, was able to form the national unity government within a record time of one and a half month in Lebanese history after he was assigned to this duty. This short time shows that there was also an agreement on the balances of the government between the alliances of 8th March and 14th March during the compromise reached in the presidential election in Lebanon which is heavily influenced by regional developments.

Having taken office after receiving the vote of confidence in the parliament on 28 December 2016, the thirty-member cabinet led by Saad Al-Hariri included eight ministers from Michel Aoun's party Free Patriotic Movement, seven ministers from Lebanese Forces, three ministers from Amal Movement, two ministers from Hezbollah and two ministers from Progressive Socialist Party whereas each of the other political groups supporting the government were represented

Al-Hariri government will not be a unitary power due to the delicate balances it was formed upon and it will barely address fundamental issues as a result of the bargains among the political parties.

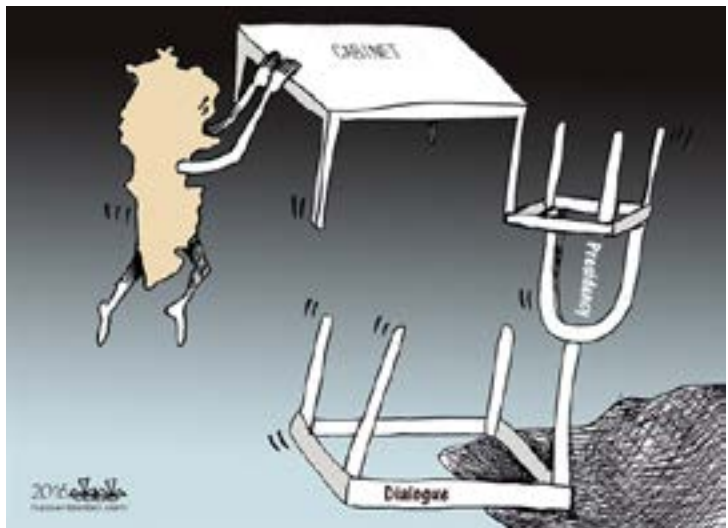
estimated that he will content himself with his efforts to focus on the May 2017 elections with a new electoral law –if it can be realized- rather than addressing the major problems in Lebanon.¹¹ However, possible elections in 2017 would be a considerable success in Lebanon where it has been suspended since 2014. The challenging task in this matter is to adopt a new electoral law on which various political parties agree.¹² President Aoun, General Secretary of Hezbollah Nasrallah and the leader of Amal Berri are in favor of the proportional system, while Druze leader Walid Jumblatt rejects this offer. On the other hand, Prime Minister Hariri and the leader of Lebanese Forces Geagea support the majority system existing in the 1960 law. Therefore, it will be quite difficult to maintain consensus on a new electoral law in these days and to regulate the elections accordingly in Lebanon where sectarian quotes and feudal remnants are still persistent. Within this context, the Ministry of Interior being in the hands of the Future Movement was interpreted as an important issue for Al-Hariri but it will be quite difficult task for the prime minister to draft a new election law that aligns Hariri’s aims. Nevertheless, Hariri is considered by his own supporters and allies that he made enough compromises due to his support to Aoun for the presidency and his compromise to the March 8 Alliance in forming the new government, therefore his maneuver during the legislation debates would be very limited in order to preserve his popular support.¹³

Reaching a consensus on a new electoral law and regulating the elections accordingly will be quite difficult task in Lebanon where sectarian quotes and feudal remnants are still persistent.

Unsustainable Compromise under the Iranian – Saudi Tension

Conflicts among religious groups are hardly new in the Middle East and the crisis of the territorial states of the region did not begin with the American occupation of Iraq in 2003. The

root causes of the current crisis have dated back to the early years of post-World War I settlement and the subsequent regional and domestic developments because both the states and the boundaries had been artificially created contrary to the historical legacies.¹⁴ Therefore, it is more convenient to argue that the clashes between various sectarian groups in Iraq after 2003 under the auspices of regional powers during the years of power vacuum unleashed the sectarianization of political discourse at regional level in a more violent manner. Although the re-intensification of sectarian discourse based on perceived interests is comparatively recent at regional level, it has always been the driving force in Lebanese politics especially after the early institutionalization of sectarianism as a part of administrative structure in the mid-nineteenth century. Within this political and administrative structure in Lebanon which has been influenced by regional power balances, the compromise of President Aoun – Prime Minister Hariri is built on unsustainable delicate balances. This compromise requires cooperation of various



Delicate Balance in Lebanon¹⁵

Lebanese actors – like Hezbollah under Iranian influence, Hariri under Saudi patronage, and Christian leaders Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea - with different political aspirations and alliances at both regional and international level. Therefore, it would be very optimistic to anticipate a functioning political system in Lebanon, having regard to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, even though the high authorities of the executive power have already been filled.

The appointment of Saad Al-Hariri after General Aoun took office and the delivery of influential positions in the cabinet to the political groups which have close ties with Hezbollah raised increasing concerns as to how long the compromise will be maintained in Lebanon. It is thought-provoking how and under what conditions a compromise has been reached through the intermediary of General Aoun between Saad Al-Hariri and Hezbollah which has been defined as a “terrorist organization” by the members of Gulf Cooperation Council within the past few months. It is still early to interpret that Future Movement which has had good relations with Saudi Arabia since its establishment has changed its axis with this compromise. However, it can easily be said that this compromise will serve to the increasing role of Iran in Lebanon because it will enable Lebanese foreign policy to back Syrian regime in accordance with Iranian agenda.¹⁶

One of the key issues in Lebanese politics since the Taif Agreement has been the disarmament of Hezbollah like the other militia and armed groups involved in the civil war. As a consequence of Syrian protection shield in the 1990s, Israel’s invasion and Hezbollah’s identification of itself as the resistance against Israel, Hezbollah has not so far surrendered its weapons and there is still no state mechanism which will impose this sanction in Lebanon. However, the

Nasrallah and his allies perceive the fight in Syria as an existential threat. Sunnis, on the other hand, consider Hezbollah’s involvement into the conflicts both in Syria and in the surrounding countries as a massacre against the people of their own sect under Iran’s directives. Within this framework, Hezbollah can neither surrender nor legitimize its military capacity.

Syrian civil war and Hezbollah's presence in Syria allowed the groups in Lebanon to revise their interest calculations as a whole. Nasrallah and his allies perceive the fight in Syria as "an existential threat" to itself. Sunnis, on the other hand, consider Hezbollah's involvement into the conflicts both in Syria and in the surrounding countries as a massacre against the people of their own sect under Iran's directives. Within this framework, Hezbollah can neither surrender nor legitimize its military capacity. At this point, significant questions are raised with respect to the attitude that Aoun will adopt to convince Hezbollah and the method he will follow to divert the pressure on him or to a possible revision of his alliance with Nasrallah which has existed since 2006. As Ali Hashem indicates, a potential tension between Nasrallah and Aoun may lead to strained relations between two parties that have popular support and there are also certain risks of potential street clashes in this regard.¹⁷

If Aoun shuts his eyes to the challenging nature of Hezbollah against the state authority in Lebanon, this will harm the relations both with Al-Hariri and Geagea. Considering these conditions, as indicated by Makram Rabah, the only potential scenario for the coalition of President Aoun and Prime Minister Al-Hariri is the model of President Emile Lahoud and Prime Minister Refik Al-Hariri as in the pre-2005 period.¹⁸ This model is built on an agreement which allows Prime Minister Al-Hariri to carry out domestic politics, notably economic policies on the condition that Hezbollah-backed Aoun leads a pro-Syrian foreign policy. While to what extent this scenario may contribute to the stability of Lebanon and how long it can be sustainable are subject to debate, it is not difficult to foresee that the Lebanese politics in 2017 will be highly controversial.

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