

Will Lebanon's New Leaders Walk the Walk?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The new president and prime minister do not have a strong track record of confronting Hezbollah, but Washington should still be bold in supporting their stated commitments to reform, disarmament, and economic recovery.

On January 13, former academic, diplomat, and jurist Nawaf Salam was named Lebanon's next prime minister, replacing three-time premier and incumbent billionaire Najib Mikati. Four days earlier, parliament selected Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) commander Joseph Aoun as president, filling an office vacant since October 2022. Many in Lebanon and abroad are hailing this new team as a welcome break from the dysfunctional status quo and the beginning of the end of Lebanon's long national nightmare. For example, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein described Aoun's appointment as a "step toward peace, security, and stability," while French president Emmanuel Macron said it will pave the way "for reform and the restoration of Lebanon's sovereignty and prosperity."

Aoun and Salam do indeed represent a departure from business as usual. Yet the challenges facing Lebanon remain considerable, and the real test for both leaders will be translating the enthusiasm of the moment into practical, lasting reforms.

Aoun's Track Record on Hezbollah

In all likelihood, Aoun could not have won office without the string of military setbacks that Israel has inflicted on Hezbollah, which left the group with insufficient domestic sway to continue monopolizing the choice of president. His elevation is a positive development given his popular support at home and his pro-American orientation—a sharp contrast to the problematic political allegiances and sordid character of some of the other candidates. Yet Aoun alone cannot be a game changer. In Lebanon, the president is not the chief executive and has a limited (though still important) role in forming the government and appointing senior officials.

The most crucial test for Aoun will be his willingness to capitalize on Hezbollah's battlefield defeat and enforce the

state's monopoly on possessing and using military weapons. During his seven-year tenure as LAF commander, his record on these issues was questionable. The only prominent example of him confronting Hezbollah took place in 2021, when the group instigated a violent confrontation with Christians in Beirut's Tayouneh neighborhood to intimidate investigators probing the deadly 2020 port explosion. Other than that, he never directed the LAF to take direct action against the militia. Instead, the armed forces consistently collaborated and deconflicted with Hezbollah under his tenure, **often obstructing** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/back-future-lebanon-ceasefire-lessons-2006>) the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) as it pursued its mandate under Security Council Resolution 1701 to keep illegal military assets out of the south.

Since being named president, Aoun has been more forward-leaning on this issue. In his **inaugural speech** (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1442764/weapons-justice-syria-joseph-aouns-acceptance-speech.html>), he said he would carry out his duties as supreme commander of the armed forces by “working to ensure the state’s right to hold a monopoly on weapons”—a powerful riposte to Hezbollah and a de facto commitment to implement Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559 (which mandated disarming Hezbollah throughout the rest of Lebanon). He also pledged to secure Lebanon’s borders, consistent with the U.S.-brokered **ceasefire agreement** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-ceasefire-status-and-prospects-israel-hezbollah-truce>) between Hezbollah and Israel. In addition, he unambiguously committed himself to widespread reform, promising to push for an independent judiciary, prioritize “competence over patronage” in administrative appointments, prevent monopolies in the private sector, and advance transparency.

Salam as International Diplomat and Judge

Unlike Aoun—whose name had been in the presidential mix for at least two years—Nawaf Salam’s candidacy for prime minister was a recent development. Many parliamentarians opposed another term for Mikati, viewing him as a status quo candidate who was not conducive to a new agenda focused on economic reform and militia disarmament. The early frontrunner among these critics was Beirut businessman Fouad Makhzoumi, but he was unable to garner sufficient Sunni votes. (By tradition, Lebanon reserves the post of prime minister for Sunni candidates.)

A graduate of Sciences Po and Harvard Law School and a lecturer at the Sorbonne and the American University of Beirut, Salam previously served as Lebanon’s representative to the UN (2007-17). In that capacity, he was the point man for the government’s Syria-friendly policies at the time, repeatedly vetoing or abstaining on resolutions that censured the Assad regime for horrific violence against civilians. He also famously eulogized Fidel Castro in 2016, describing the late Cuban dictator as an “icon of rebellion and resistance and the last of a generation of towering world leaders.” In addition, he **reportedly** (<https://unwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/The-Bias-of-ICJ-President-Nawaf-Salam-1.pdf>) voted in favor of UN measures condemning Israel more than 200 times.

After leaving the UN, Salam was chosen in 2018 to serve as a judge at the International Court of Justice. In 2024, he was elected president of that body, where he presided over the multinational lawsuit alleging Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Despite his loyal service to Lebanon’s previous Hezbollah-dominated governments, Salam is widely viewed as a quiet critic of the group and a corruption-free advocate of reform. He supported the Special Tribunal for Lebanon when it was tasked with investigating Hezbollah’s 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Notably, his extensive writings in favor of reform include the 2023 book *Lebanon Between Past and Future*, which discussed the harmful effects of sectarianism in “public institutions and in society as a whole,” correctly arguing that “it makes Lebanon extremely vulnerable to foreign intervention.” He also advocated reforming the electoral system, revising the constitution, and implementing unexecuted provisions of the 1989 Taif Accord. Oddly, the book did not mention economic reform or illegal arms, despite being published amid a crippling economic crisis and Hezbollah’s

increasingly dangerous military provocations against Israel and intimidation of critics at home.

The New Team's Obstacles

The remarkable events of recent months—from Israel's decapitation of Hezbollah to the Assad regime's swift collapse—have weakened the status quo camp in Beirut and opened an opportunity to disarm militias, reverse the country's self-inflicted economic collapse, root out corruption, and rebuild an effective state. The team of Aoun and Salam may be capable of implementing that hopeful vision. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss the **considerable obstacles** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-post-october-7-beaten-still-dangerous>) they face, including the persistent (albeit diminished) threat of Hezbollah violence and the deeply entrenched interests that still control much of Lebanon's political and economic system.

For example, Aoun needed a two-thirds supermajority vote in parliament to win the presidency—a threshold he could not have reached without votes from Hezbollah and Amal, the so-called “Shia duo.” Given this reliance, will he be able to promote militia disarmament and economic reform—policies that directly threaten this duo's interests? What promises, if any, did he have to make to win their votes?

Salam will face different problems. He needed only a simple majority to win his post, so he will be less beholden to Hezbollah in parliament. Yet this assumes that he is able to emerge from the grueling government formation process with a sufficiently independent cabinet. Salam has never held an executive management position of this magnitude, and his reform agenda will face severe, perhaps violent opposition in certain quarters, especially if he backs militia disarmament. He might also encounter difficulties with the U.S. Congress and incoming Trump administration due to his long record of anti-Israel votes.

Policy Recommendations

Aoun and Salam have a hard row to hoe in the coming months. Still, considering where the country was just a year ago, some optimism is justified. With Hezbollah diminished and a new, reform-minded team in place, Beirut is better situated to draw on the international community's growing goodwill and secure the assistance needed for rebuilding and rehabilitating its decimated state institutions.

Washington can take several concrete steps to encourage the new leadership's spirit of reform. Once in office, the Trump administration should provide modest additional assistance to the LAF to help it implement Resolution 1701 in south Lebanon, delivering these funds in tranches conditioned on performance. Later, more U.S. money should flow if Beirut begins implementing Resolution 1559. At the same time, Washington (and France) should stay the course on a prospective economic bailout, continuing to condition an IMF package on Beirut's successful implementation of economic reforms. To help Aoun and Salam overcome political resistance, the Trump administration should also be prepared to quickly sanction Lebanese actors who obstruct the reform process.

Any irrational exuberance about this opportunity should be tempered, of course. Yet the current moment also calls for Washington to be bold and pursue an incremental “support and verify” process, helping Aoun and Salam as they set forth on this ambitious agenda of change.

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