

Lebanon's Embattled Sunnis Need Support

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Brief Analysis

Absent effective support from the United States and Saudi Arabia, Lebanon's traditionally pro-Western but increasingly fractured Sunni bloc stands little chance of preventing further gains by the Hezbollah-Syria-Iran axis.

With the world focused on Syria, not much attention has been paid to Lebanon, but changes in the state's sclerotic political status quo may soon put it back in the headlines. The biggest story is a prospective deal among Shiite, Sunni, and Christian parliamentary leaders to elect Michel Aoun -- the controversial coalition partner of the Iranian-backed Shiite militia Hezbollah and former commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) -- as the new president. The largely ceremonial but symbolically important post, which is reserved for Christians, has been vacant since May 2014.

Potentially more consequential, however, are developments within the state's traditionally moderate and pro-Western Sunni community. Since the 2005 assassination of former premier and Sunni leader Rafiq Hariri -- a crime the UN has attributed to Syria and Hezbollah -- Lebanon's Sunnis have largely been unified behind his son Saad, head of the "March 14" parliamentary bloc. But various factors appear to be undermining the younger Hariri's communal standing, including personal financial difficulties, problems in convincing his coalition partners to elect Aoun, and the emergence of alternative leaders. His continued marginalization threatens to divide the Sunnis and strengthen Iran's position in yet another Middle Eastern state.

HARIRI'S HIATUS

Before and after Rafiq Hariri's assassination, the United States supported Lebanese efforts to end Syria's fifteen-year military occupation; following a string of massive protests, Damascus finally withdrew its troops in April 2005. Thereafter, Washington began to provide the LAF with \$70 million in annual military assistance, eventually

increased to \$150 million. It also lent diplomatic support to the March 14 coalition in its struggle against Hezbollah and continued Syrian interference. Yet this political support diminished in 2007 after the Bush administration invited Syrian officials to the Israeli-Palestinian peace conference in Annapolis. And as the U.S. policy of isolating Syria faded, Hezbollah reasserted itself in Beirut, storming the capital in May 2008.

When the Obama administration took office, it immediately launched an initiative to engage Bashar al-Assad's regime, which in turn prompted policy shifts among regional partners. Most notably, Saudi Arabia sought to repair relations with Syria, even compelling Hariri to bury the hatchet and hold a humiliating 2009 meeting with Assad in Damascus. Two years later, Hariri was ousted from his position as prime minister and left Lebanon, an exile that would last nearly five years.

SAUDI DIVESTMENT

In Hariri's absence, the March 14 coalition frayed as internal disagreements were publicly aired, and funding for party organs dried up. In December 2013, prominent Sunni figure Mohamad Chatah, the coalition's leading strategist, was assassinated (Hezbollah and Damascus remain the leading suspects in that murder). Meanwhile, as Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria's civil war deepened and the threat of terrorist spillover in Lebanon grew, the Interior Ministry, led by March 14 deputy Nohad Machnouk, decided to begin collaborating with the group on security matters.

As Lebanese Sunnis worked with Hezbollah to secure the state from Sunni jihadists in Syria, the Shiite militia's coalition partner -- Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) -- was busy diplomatically insulting Saudi Arabia. This February, for example, foreign minister and FPM member Gebran Bassil abstained from a nearly unanimous Arab League resolution condemning the January 3 attacks on Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran. Subsequently, Riyadh threatened to withdraw its deposits from Lebanon's Central Bank; it also cancelled a \$3 billion grant to the LAF and a \$1 billion grant to the Internal Security Forces (ISF).

HARIRI'S FINANCIAL WOES

Before Hariri departed in 2011, his construction company, Saudi Oger, was one of the largest in the region, and his personal fortune was estimated at \$3.7 billion. This wealth -- along with reportedly substantial funding from Riyadh -- enabled him to maintain a formidable political machine, including a party television station, a daily newspaper, and a large retinue of full-time advisors and staff. During his time abroad, however, oil prices dropped, Saudi Arabia tightened its belt, and rumors of cash flow problems emerged as Hariri enterprises in Lebanon routinely missed payroll, sometimes for months on end. While his ostensible reason for remaining abroad was safety, some in Beirut whispered that he was just avoiding financial commitments at home.

Despite these problems, Hariri returned to Lebanon full time in February. By summer, however, his financial troubles had taken another turn for the worse. Saudi Arabia reportedly owes his construction firm about \$8 billion for completed work, and these enormous arrears forced Hariri to take billions in bridge loans to pay contractors and suppliers. Without revenue, the company's work came to a standstill, and more than 6,000 Indian workers were laid off in August after months of no pay. Some speculate that Saudi Oger will be dismantled and its assets confiscated by Riyadh, much like the kingdom appears to be doing with another construction firm, the Saudi Binladin Group. Even before this crisis, *Forbes* estimated Hariri's personal wealth at \$1.45 billion, less than half his 2011 tally.

EMERGENCE OF ASHRAF RIFI

Amid Hariri's difficulties, less senior Sunnis in the March 14 coalition have gained prominence. In particular, former ISF chief Gen. Ashraf Rifi's political star has been rising. Shortly after retiring from the ISF in 2013, he was appointed minister of justice, but he resigned this February to protest the early release of Michel Samaha, a

former parliamentarian imprisoned in August 2012 for collaborating with Syria to plant bombs in the northern Sunni region of Akkar. When he resigned -- just days after Saudi Arabia announced its divestment from Lebanon -- Rifi also denounced Hezbollah for damaging Beirut's relations with Riyadh and "trying to dominate the state and its institutions." Previously, he had condemned Hezbollah's weapons as "illegitimate," accused the militia of assassinating a leading Sunni ISF official, and rejected what he described as "the Iranian project" in Lebanon.

Consistent with these views, Rifi is also a harsh critic of the Syrian regime. Last month, he called on Beirut to expel the Syrian ambassador and sever ties with Assad. He likewise rejects the presidential candidacies of both Aoun and parliamentarian Sleiman Frangieh, a close personal friend of Assad. At the same time, he has repeatedly condemned Hariri for negotiating with Hezbollah and advocating the election of Frangieh and Aoun, calling his fellow Sunni leader "finished." Rifi's attacks have been so venomous that the Sunni Mufti of Tripoli intervened to defend Hariri last month, asking, "What is the benefit from launching [these] incendiary missiles [against a fellow Sunni]?"

Rifi's unabashed sectarianism has clearly increased his popularity, at least in the Sunni heartland of Tripoli. In May, an electoral list affiliated with him won eighteen of twenty-four seats in Tripoli's municipal council, routing the March 14 slate. This stunning performance led some to speculate that Rifi is receiving outside funding, perhaps from Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, whose relationship with Hariri soured after the 2005 leak of an audiotape purportedly slighting the prince. Rifi's appeal to Riyadh, according to the Beirut Observer website, is that he "represents the pulse of the Sunni rejection of concessions."

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For much of the past eight years, the Obama administration's Lebanon policy has focused almost exclusively on bolstering security in the embattled state, financially sanctioning Hezbollah, and encouraging the election of a president. Lately, however, Washington's second-tier priority of supporting local pro-Western moderates has faltered, especially within Lebanon's Sunni community. Hariri's financial collapse and political marginalization have been accompanied by increasing polarization among Sunnis and dilution of their political power in Beirut. This has benefited not only populist politicians like Rifi, but also Islamists, who are nibbling into Hariri's support base and undermining the already weakened March 14 coalition. Should the trend continue, Lebanon's Sunnis could begin to resemble the divided Christian community, leaving the Hezbollah-led Shiites as the only unified sectarian political bloc.

In this regard, Washington's hands-off policy and Saudi Arabia's financial and political retreat will all but ensure increased Iranian and Hezbollah influence in Lebanon. With Assad on the offensive next door, preserving Beirut's pro-Western orientation should once again be a primary U.S. policy objective. Limiting Iran's already oversized role in Lebanon means reversing Washington's de facto pro-Iranian policy in Syria, which has been strengthening the Assad regime and undermining U.S. relations with traditional Sunni allies in the region. At the same time, the administration should target Hezbollah on two fronts: first, by hitting it with more financial sanctions, and second, by working with Lebanon's Sunni leadership to foster consensus and revitalize the March 14 coalition so it can confront Hezbollah politically. The United States should also prevail on Riyadh to reengage in Lebanese politics. For better or worse, the country has long been the purview of foreign powers, and Iran and its proxies are certainly not pulling away. Absent effective external support for Beirut, Tehran will further consolidate its hold there, just as it has done in Iraq and Syria.

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