

Small Nation, High Stakes: The Decline of Lebanon and its Regional Implications

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Aug 22, 2016

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Brief Analysis

The League of Arab States has 22 members. The heads of state in all but one are Muslim. Up until two years ago, Lebanon was evidence that pluralism in the Arab region was more than just a pipe-dream. Since May 2014, however, with the mandate of the former president expiring and the Lebanese parliament failing to elect a new one, the Arab world has lost its diminutive claim to diversity. The demise of the Christian Presidency in Lebanon is not the result of an Islamist takeover or a Muslim obstruction, but the product of the raw personal ambition of one Christian leader manipulated by external powers.

In 1988, amidst a previous constitutional crisis, Army Commander Michel Aoun was appointed to head a caretaker government. Aoun engaged instead in reckless fights against local opponents as well as against Syria, which occupied large swaths of the country. This uneven confrontation resulted in Syria strengthening its grip on Lebanon, forcing Aoun into exile. In the decade that followed, Aoun enjoyed a cult-like following among steadfast militants who felt helpless resisting Syrian domination. In 2005, with the US presence in Iraq heralding a potential new order, changing regional geopolitics forced Syria to loosen its grip on Lebanon. Syria withdrew its military forces, but safeguarded its hegemony through a robust alliance with Iran—which had built Hezbollah into an overpowering para-military force—as well as through an unexpected alliance with former archenemy Aoun. Shortly after his return from exile, after failing to assert himself as the leader of the anti-Syrian, pro-Western coalition, Aoun sought prominence in the pro-Syrian camp. He dropped his claims to inclusive patriotic leadership, proclaimed himself leader of the Christians, and signed a cooperation pact with Hezbollah. His rhetoric was adjusted to cast the misguided and hypocritical West, Israel, and Sunni Arab states as the enemy, with Iran and Syria as benevolent partners.

Today, the presidential ambitions of Michel Aoun are unabashedly phrased as an entitlement. The Lebanese political formula is a precarious balance of communitarian and democratic considerations aimed to ensure equal Christian and Muslim representation in government, against the backdrop of a declining Christian presence. Aoun and his supporters have engaged in multiple contortions, within and without the agreed-upon system, to claim the 'right' to presidency – but Aoun does not have the votes in parliament to be elected. Together with Hezbollah, however, he can deny parliament the quorum required to elect a president, according to a far-fetched interpretation of the constitution that has been bullied into the Lebanese body politic. The position of the Aoun camp has been that there

will be no president but him; either the opposition forces concede to his leadership, or no elections will be held. Parliament has thus failed to reach the quorum in dozens of successive dates for the putative election.

While at their parochial level Aoun and his supporters nurture the unrealistic hope that their hard stances could net the presidency, Iran has taken advantage of the current impasse at the regional geopolitical level. Lebanon has no president, a weak Cabinet, and a parliament that has exceeded and extended its own tenure twice already. Thus, because Lebanon has no meaningful state to claim or over which to enforce sovereignty, the para-military and para-state structures of Hezbollah are no longer an encroachment, but a welcome alternative. The role of Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies in draining Lebanese institutions strongly suggests that Iran is not merely benefiting from the current situation but is actively catalyzing it. An immediate result has been that Iran has faced little opposition dispatching Hezbollah to Syria and on other external missions.

Even when defying common sense, plausible deniability of an Iranian machination saturates the public sphere. Pandemic pro-Iranian media ascribes Lebanon's ills to a moving target of US, Israeli, and Saudi conspiracies, with the latter invocation also serving to incite local anti-Sunni sentiments. A plausible counter-assertion is that Lebanon is unequivocally under a covert Iranian occupation that relies both on the deep organizational and ideological ties that Iran has secured within the Shi'i community — through its investment in Hezbollah — and on the petty ambitions of Aoun, which has been successfully mated with the communitarian fears of many Christian Lebanese. The message from the Aoun camp has consistently been to question the loyalty of Sunni Lebanese, and interpret any opposition to the Syrian regime as an attempt at Sunni hegemony. According to Aounists, only minor shades of difference distinguish the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from the self-declared liberal democratic pro-West Sunnis: “Not all ISIS operatives have beards; some of them also wear ties.”

The heart of the Lebanese conundrum has been, and continues to be, communitarianism —practiced here as factionalism based upon nominal religious identity. Communitarianism taints all aspects of public life in Lebanon, even when hidden behind seemingly legitimate causes. This past spring, political outrage broke out in Lebanon against the Saudi daily al-Sharq al-Awsat for the publication of a cartoon calling the Lebanese state an April Fool's joke. The local offices of al-Sharq al-Awsat were ransacked, and politicians and activists, notably from the Aoun camp, called for the prosecution of its editors. While presented as an issue of national pride, this was largely an opportunity for Sunni-bashing. Many of the same politicians and activists who raised their voice in outrage had, only weeks prior, proclaimed their solemn support for the satirical French magazine Charlie Hebdo in its right to lampoon religion - in this case Islam - without inhibition.

Communitarianism invites its adherents to seek excuses, however meager, for actions undertaken on behalf of one's community, and dismiss excuses, however valid, for deeds occurring in other communities. No inconsistency on free speech was noted by the Aounists in the Charlie Hebdo versus al-Sharq al-Awsat cases, and no dissonance acknowledged in the definition of democracy, with Aoun declaring that his party shall adhere to the “democratic principle” of expelling any member who opposes its anointed leader, Aoun's own son-in-law.

Evidently, Aoun and his party are not the only examples of the communitarian-enabled absurdity in Lebanese politics. The head of Hezbollah — which rivals many standing armies in terms of size, equipment, and training — recently lamented that the role of his group as a “civil society” organization has not been recognized. Sa'd al-Hariri, son of slain former PM Rafiq al-Hariri — whose assassination, by all indications, was carried out by Hezbollah operatives — has nominated a close ally of Hezbollah for the vacant Presidency. But the degeneration of Lebanese politics is but one aspect of Lebanon's ongoing decline.

In the recent past, Lebanon was a bastion of progress in a slowly developing region. Education, health, and political rights seemed to be realized well beyond other Arab settings. Lebanon had provided considerable human talent to the Gulf during its oil boom, boosting development in the latter part of the last century. The Lebanese self-image of a

cultured cosmopolite, a pioneering entrepreneur, and a regional role-model lingers, and often metastasizes into illusions of superiority even though many of the assets that gave Lebanese the edge, particularly regarding education and liberal politics, have almost expired through decades of internal strife. The ascendancy of urban centers in the Gulf has progressed well beyond Beirut's cosmopolitanism of yesteryear, and Lebanon has missed major opportunities to emerge as a center of innovation and creativity. With generations passing, it is witnessing its appeal wane to Gulf investors and tourists, and has not developed 21st century models to channel its own potential.

The backward slide of Lebanon over the past decades is in part the result of the exodus of middle class, well-educated Lebanese with limited prospects of upward mobility in a socio-political and economic system governed by restrictive communitarian power-sharing rules and controlled by plutocratic patronage. Such emigration strengthened the grip of the claimants of each community on their more dependent and compliant base. With seemingly unlimited financial resources flowing from Iran, Hezbollah established itself as the main employer in the Lebanese Shi'i community. Funds from both Iran and Saudi Arabia seem to be at the origin of the most communitarian faction leaders' financial power.

Lebanon's decline is not incidental. Its lack of immunity to the centrifugal effects of communitarianism exposed it to long, destructive conflicts between 1975 and 1990, and has since enabled communitarian leaders to lay an exclusive claim to power. Yet despite lamentations against the political class, Lebanon, with all of its remaining capacity, has yet to produce a convincing alternative way out of the communitarian order and towards national identity. Internal corrosion and exposure to external manipulation are ordinary consequences of communitarianism, not outside afflictions. Until and unless an organic Lebanese effort at national identity bears fruit, Lebanon, which recognized its communitarian character while others were in denial, offers a grim view of the widespread decline anticipated across the region. ❖

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