

Lebanon's Lahoud:

A New Start?

by [Frederic Hof \(/experts/frederic-hof\)](/experts/frederic-hof)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Frederic Hof \(/experts/frederic-hof\)](/experts/frederic-hof)



Brief Analysis

The November 24 inauguration of General Emile Lahoud as Lebanon's president is generating optimism in a country which, for fifteen violent years, bled itself relentlessly. The civil war of 1975-1990 blackened Lebanon's name internationally and gutted the country internally. Lebanon's "reconstruction" has entailed considerable corruption and public indebtedness, as well as the continuation of Israeli occupation in the South and Syrian control throughout the rest of the country. Does President Lahoud have the will and ability to change this situation?

Background: Born in Beirut in January 1936, Emile Lahoud is from one of the most prominent political families of Lebanon's Metin region. His father, General Jamil Lahoud, served as a career army officer and as minister of Labor and Social Affairs. Trained in Lebanon, Britain, and the United States, Emile Lahoud entered the military as a cadet in 1956 and became a naval officer. Despite the multiple crises that rocked the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) during the formative years of his career, Lahoud stayed aloof from Lebanon's political factions and militias. Although his Maronite faith is a prerequisite for the Lebanese presidency, Lahoud has never been known as a "political Maronite." In 1988, he embarked on the path to the presidency by refusing to back General Michel Aoun's "war of liberation" against Syria. He eventually crossed over to West Beirut and placed himself at the disposal of President Rene Mouawad and Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss. In November 1989 he assumed command of the LAF. After the ouster of Aoun by Syrian forces in 1990, Lahoud set about the task of reuniting and rebuilding the military.

Lahoud in the Military: By most accounts, his stewardship of the LAF has been successful, though this judgment is far from unanimous. He has greatly expanded the personnel strength of the ground forces and abolished the sectarian orientation of individual brigades. He has been criticized for cracking down hard on the remnants of the once-powerful Lebanese Forces, a Maronite militia, while turning a blind eye to the operations of Hizballah in southern Lebanon. Detractors have also accused him of recruiting disproportionately from Lebanon's Shi'i community, thereby rendering the army unable to confront the Syrian-supported Shi'i Hizballah militia. Defenders point to the fact that young men from Lebanon's Christian communities have not exactly been lining up to enlist. Observers close to Lahoud believe he may move to reduce the size of the LAF in such a way as to restore a measure of overall balance in the enlisted ranks.

At the root of criticism aimed at Lahoud is his relationship with Syria. The exiled Aoun and his supporters say that Lahoud decided long ago to place himself at the disposal of Damascus in order to become president. Aoun's

supporters have characterized the LAF as an adjunct to the Syrian Army and have vigorously opposed U.S. efforts to send excess defense articles to Lebanon.

> Nevertheless, Lahoud's performance as commander-in-chief, given the post-civil war realities of Syrian suzerainty and the Israeli "security zone" in the South, is seen by most Lebanese as praiseworthy. Of particular note is that he is viewed as "clean" in a country where political corruption is ubiquitous, debilitating, and demoralizing. What is not known is whether Lahoud's impressive military skills in issuing and executing orders will serve him well in his new role, or whether these skills constitute the full extent of his executive repertoire, which will require a deft sense of political wheeling, dealing, and compromise.

Lahoud and Asad: The key question on the minds of most Lebanese is, "Why did Hafiz al-Asad anoint Lahoud as Lebanon's next president?" That the selection itself has aroused great hope and enthusiasm in Lebanon is beyond dispute. The "why" however, is all-important.

If Asad chose Lahoud merely to put a more respectable face on "business as usual" in Lebanon, then the general's appointment will have no political importance and Lahoud himself will be a footnote in a larger drama. On the other hand, if President Lahoud is willing and able to assert himself in a way that steps on some toes -- even those connected to feet in Damascus -- he may impart to Lebanon's governing institutions a respectability they have lacked. Indeed, if he has or asserts this kind of freedom, then he should be able to use the power of the presidency to advance a reform agenda, notwithstanding the relative diminution of the presidency, in favor of the prime ministry, embodied in the 1989 Ta'if Accords. Yet, the task of cleaning up a system in which corrupt Lebanese act in concert with their Syrian partners will be daunting and perilous in the extreme. Even if Asad wants a reforming president -- a proposition that begs testing -- Lahoud must deal with an economy in dire shape while at the same time driving away the vultures, some of whom are extremely well-wired into the Damascus power structure.

There are those who think that the elevation of Lahoud is part of the Syrian succession process; that the Syrian president wants a respectable, mature leader in Lebanon -- someone capable of acting independently, albeit with Syrian equities very much in mind. Proponents of this thesis argue that Asad has grown weary of the helplessness and fecklessness of Lahoud's predecessor and wants someone who can build a good working relationship with his son (and presumed successor) Bashar. This scenario is reportedly rattling nerves among Lebanon's Sunni Muslim politicians, who are rallying to Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri out of fear of a Syrian-supported Maronite ascendancy.

Lahoud and the South: Syrian intentions will also influence President Lahoud's handling of southern Lebanon. An increasingly tense situation in the town of Jezzine will provide an early test. Will Syria permit President Lahoud to defuse matters, or will Syria continue to stir them up by encouraging local LAF units to undertake Hizballah-style "resistance?"

Lahoud's inauguration might also create a new opportunity to test Syrian intentions regarding Israel's stated desire to withdraw from southern Lebanon. For instance, Israel could give the United Nations a notional withdrawal date while demanding that the U.N. secure Lebanon's full cooperation in sealing the border and securing the South. If the government of Lebanon proves unwilling or unable -- under a scenario of straightforward, "unconditional" implementation of Resolution 425 -- to help (in the words of the Resolution) "in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area," an important question concerning Syrian intentions will have been answered.

Conclusion: In sum, Lahoud's fate is not in his own hands. He will certainly not be free to act in a manner contrary to vital Syrian interests. Yet, if Asad wants a reforming, respectable regime in Lebanon, Lahoud -- notwithstanding the challenges presented by a sick economy -- would seem to be the right man for the job. If Asad is willing to countenance an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon unconnected to the fate of the Golan Heights, and if Israel were content to withdraw without "Lebanon first" complications, Lahoud has the professional competence to deliver

on Lebanon's responsibilities. Yet if all Asad really wants, or if all Syria can sustain, is corrupt, divide-and-conquer, make-the-Israelis-bleed "business as usual" in Lebanon, then Lahoud's presidency will, like that of his predecessor, have no political significance.

Frederic Hof is a partner in Armitage Associates of Arlington, Va. He has served as a military attache in Lebanon and is the author of *Galilee Divided* (Westview Press, 1985). Paul Jureidini is an associate at Armitage Associates, director and senior associate of Jureidini and McLaurin, and the author of seven books on the Middle East.



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