



Dimensions
for Strategic Studies

Situation Assessment



The Political Crisis in Lebanon

Tangled Files Waiting for Overseas Solutions

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Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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PREAMBLE

The Lebanese parliament has failed to elect a president after eleven sessions, the last of which was on January 19, 2023. This has been the case since November last year, with the end of General Michel Aoun's term.

Although the country has been experiencing a severe political crisis in which several files have overlapped since 2019, the choice of the president or the presidential vacuum is the name of the era; and it is at the heart of the initiatives and solutions that concern the Lebanese arena at the internal and external levels; noting that the internal issue seems more vivid and effective than the external one.

At a time when thorny files such as the investigation of the port explosion, the positions of the Change Bloc resulting from the 2022 parliamentary elections, the judicial complaints against banks and the Governor of the Bank of Lebanon, the demarcation of maritime borders, and even the possibility of movements in the street; all appear as huge files that emerge strongly at the top of the political crisis in Lebanon. Nevertheless, they are seen by the Lebanese as well as Arab and international parties as mere issues that can be compromised for the sake of the most important matter, which is the presidency of the Republic, which could be accompanied by a settlement that protects the interests of everyone, no matter how conflicting or different these interests are.



THE PATH OF GAINS AND REASSURANCES

The internal Lebanese parties - and here we are talking about the same actors since 2005 (some of them since the Taif Agreement) - work according to the principle of preserving the gains they have accumulated through past settlements, as well as obtaining assurances for the next phase in order to accept a consensus among themselves on a name for the position of President of the Republic, considering that the election or appointment of any authority in Lebanon is subject to consensus. To this end, two main names have been put forward, each of which is adopted by what was known as March 8 and March 14, namely Suleiman Frangieh and Michel Moawad, with Frangieh being the candidate of the Shiite couple and their allies - except for the Aounists, while Moawad is the candidate of the second party, which today calls itself the opposition and is joined by some of the deputies of Change.

As for the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), and despite the survival of its alliance with Hezbollah - since the return of Aoun from his "exile" in France - it has only put Aoun's name to the post of president. Today, its sole actual hope is to nominate Gebran Bassil. Due to the difficulty of achieving these hopes twice in a row in the same position; however, the Aounis - amid the emphasis of the assurances they seek on the issues of US sanctions on the one hand, and the trial of the Governor of the Bank of Lebanon on the other - they are seeking to achieve gains at several levels. The most important of such gains are administrative, judicial and security appointments. This thinking comes at a time when they have had many gains during the mandate of Michel Aoun and the control of his son-in-law Bassil over several ministries during the past years; the last of which was before the end of Aoun's term, which coincided with the signing of the demarcation of the maritime border with the Israelis.

They are competing for these official posts and gains with House Speaker Nabih Berri. The theater of this competition is the sessions of the House that Berri has been calling for, whether to elect a president or to legislate and vote on laws, including the Capitol Control and security posts, which so far face strong rejection from other Christian forces and Change MP's (more than 46).



All that is happening according to conflicting jurisprudence in the interpretation of the Constitution by each team.

Moreover, the other political parties hope that reassurances will emerge in the subject of the Beirut port explosion investigations; specifically, stopping Judge Tariq al-Bitar's investigations that target ministers, deputies and officials from most political backgrounds. This investigation is subject to suspension, whether by external interference or by threatening Judge Baitar of liquidation by the strongest Lebanese party, Hezbollah.

The assurances that the Sunni side wants are keeping Prime Minister Najib Mikati in office to lead the next government or governments, and facilitate his work on the reforms required by the IMF and the Arab and international community, as the repercussions of the political and financial crisis weigh on state institutions, ministries and administrations and on playing their role.

No further strong positions emerge from the Sunni component after President Saad al-Din al-Hariri turned his back to political life. The positions of Future Movement members who remained in power and those of their close associates and followers are confined to public administrations, and to confrontation with the Lebanese Forces Party, which enjoys the approval of Saudi Arabia at their expense and the consequent material and moral gains. The course of the Lebanese Forces Party sometimes coincides with the attempts of former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to bring the Sunnis together politically.

On the part of the Change proponents, with their scattered structure, the only gain they have achieved so far is their entry into the Lebanese parliament. They hope that this penetration would continue, allowing them to obtain other gains or assurances, at least their access to the municipalities, and winning the municipal elections scheduled for next May, amid the ease of their communication with the "revolutionary" street in Lebanon and the international community, especially France and the United States of America.

Access to state institutions is important, because the economic and social repercussions of the political crisis continue to be magnified; and it may become more prominent if the presidential vacuum drags on.



INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TRACK

On the other hand, as international action in the context of the political crisis in Lebanon is the second factor in power determination in the country, and as in the midst of internal consensus comes international consensus, both France and Qatar are trying to play a key role in the initiatives of the solution. The two parties, therefore, share their vision on the possibility of playing a pivotal role in changing policies and authorities in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia and the United States; however, have quickly returned to grab the threads of initiatives and solutions keeping the rest of the international parties within the boundaries of intermediaries and limited economic investment, such as the European competition to rebuild the port of Beirut, and the participation of a Qatari company in gas exploration in the Lebanese sea, while ensuring that the state does not benefit directly from this investment, such as humanitarian aid and support for civil society institutions since 2019 until today instead of supporting the Lebanese state.

Russia and Iran are content with Hezbollah's position on the presidential issue; and there is a kind of stagnation in their movement, as they do not have any initiative on the subject of the presidency. This seems to be in harmony with Hezbollah's efforts and the absence of any initiative on this issue due to their focus on the solutions in the coming days in Syria, especially the lifting of the siege on the Assad regime after relying on the results of the nuclear agreement or the war in Ukraine.

In contrast to the conditions and specifications of the President of the Republic for the axis of Hezbollah, which is a president who supports the resistance and does not stab it in the back, there are Saudi-American specifications for the President of the Republic of Lebanon, which can be summed up in finding a statesman who does not follow Hezbollah.



Hence the unannounced nomination of Army Commander Joseph Aoun as the third candidate for the presidency, as the army leadership is a position that is presented "naturally" at every presidential entitlement, because such a position enjoys consensus and internal agreement. Today, his candidacy has little enthusiasm for Hezbollah and much anger at the Aounist movement; especially since the Lebanese army was the focus of attention and support of the US embassy in Lebanon led by Dorothy Shea during the current crisis, as well as the focus of contacts with Saudi Arabia, which limited its communication with the Lebanese parties through the state apparatus only and in a limited manner.

In addition, the United States has control over political movements and changes in Lebanon, the investigation of the Beirut port explosion, as well as other files that are supposed to be in the custody of the Lebanese state. The US is proving day after day that it can change the equations quickly despite the collapse of the state and what is left of it, at the level of communication with presidential leaders (Berri and Mikati), security and judicial apparatuses. The demarcation of the maritime border file that was led by the US is not far; especially with Hezbollah being one of the parties that agreed to and accompanied this demarcation. Add to that the decision to release the detainees in the port explosion case last month with American intervention and the suspension of the Bitar investigation, which outweighs the influence of Hezbollah and political parties on the path of the investigation.

The United States has influence on the issue of sanctions; not only those related to Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement, but also ones related to the Governor of the Bank of Lebanon. This is a new development related to the issue of the lira and banks crisis, where the Americans and French sought to protect the Governor of the Bank of Lebanon, Riad Salameh. Today there is an American approach to accountability in the context of returning to law and the state and identifying those involved in the crisis, including banks.



THE STATE AND THE MINI-STATE

According to the aforementioned issues, a portray of what might happen regarding the presidential vacuum can be sketched. The gains and reassurances of internal parties in Lebanon usually reflect a movement at the level of visits and alliances between leaders. However; the deepening of differences between allies - both within the strong majority on the ground led by Hezbollah, and among its opponents - make these moves far from fruition in the near future.

Therefore, the talk of these parties centres around the security situation and its explosiveness. This narrative by Lebanese politicians dominates when their solutions disappear and signs of street movement emerge; especially in light of the implementation of the State's decisions on the budget which was approved by parliament at the end of last year, and the policies of "dollarization" and the implementation of the reforms requested by the international community and the World Bank. Such policies are carried out by President Mikati and his ministers; as most of them will be implemented after mid-February.

There is also evidence of a simulation of the conditions that accompanied the 2019 protests like the closure of banks, the threat of strikes by labor sectors and the threat that the government will continue, although it is a caretaker government.

On February 16, Washington appointed Lisa Johnson as the new U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, in line with the Biden administration and its policies in the Middle East. The former ambassador; however, took office under former U.S. President Donald Trump.



The new ambassador, who will be the chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy until the election of the President of the Republic, when she could submit her credentials as ambassador, specializes in the field of law enforcement and counter-narcotics. This in itself is an indication of the course of the American position in Lebanon, especially in the file of the judiciary and the Lebanese borders; as Hezbollah is accused of smuggling Captagon through these borders, and of placing them outside the authority of the state and its institutions.

Therefore, there will be a balance between the judicial side and the state institutions that should impose their control over the Lebanese territory, on the one hand, and the position of the presidency of the Republic on the other. As such, the confrontation or balance will be limited to one between Hezbollah and the United States; i.e. between the guarantees of protecting the Lebanese State and the guarantees of protecting the Hezbollah Mini-state. That would depend on the willingness of each party to give up one for the other. This is a side from the other parties that will be satisfied with the gains in the files awaiting settlement, such as the issue of demarcation of the maritime border.

This perception is supported by the fact that, over the past years, Hezbollah has maintained that state institutions are not in its hands, and that the judicial issue is controlled by the Americans. On the other hand, not naming a specific candidate by the United States and Saudi Arabia opens the way for the possibility of their accepting a president of the republic such as Frangieh, who is easy to describe as a “statesman” unlike Aoun and Bassil. Moreover, his closeness to the Syrian regime and his alliance with Hezbollah may not be harmful; as long as there is a Gulf tendency to break the siege on the Syrian regime or at least on its return to the Arab bosom.

Political parties will; therefore, continue to divide among themselves the gains as consensual awards. Those parties comprise Hezbollah allies and the opposition. Their gains and awards include most importantly the replacement of the Lebanese General Security Director Abbas Ibrahim (a Nabih Barre and Free Patriotic Movement demand) and stopping Judge Bitar and supporting the judge of the Court of Cassation Ghassan Owaidat (an American and internal demand). Recent developments in the Lebanese file indicate that.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that there is no consensus or compromise in sight on the subject of the name of the President of the Republic, at least until the middle of next spring; i.e. until the maturity of the international initiative headed by the United States and Saudi Arabia. The fate of the aforementioned files- as a consequence- will mature. Like the demarcation file, these files could be quickly settled.

As the nomination of a president of the republic is followed by the nomination and consensus on the head of the new government and the distribution of the portfolios of its ministries, the Lebanese are waiting until this date, which may extend for a year or two of presidential vacuum; which happened previously. They expect a further rise in the exchange rate of the Lebanese pound against the dollar, the closure of banks and perhaps some trade union and revolutionary movements on the ground. In the meantime, contributions of Gulf States, headed by Saudi Arabia, will continue to provide humanitarian support in conjunction with the season of Ramadan and other occasions, albeit to a lesser extent. This waiting phase may also include visits and delegations under the banner of support and communication led by Mikati and other Sunni figures that the Kingdom is putting to the test in order to strengthen their positions in the face of Hezbollah.

It is worth noting that in light of the expected worsening of the living and financial crisis, support is now controlled by "thrift" policies pursued by Gulf States regarding development and humanitarian aid outside the borders of their countries. Add to this the increasing demand for aid in Syria and Turkey after the disaster that occurred at the beginning of February.

The steadfastness of the Hezbollah axis in Lebanon depends on the outcome of the attempts to lift the siege on the Syrian regime by the Arab countries. It also depends on the party's ability to satisfy all its allies, and deliver Suleiman Frangieh to the presidency. In addition, Hezbollah has to prove that the controlling of state institutions through backstage tactics is not in its hands.



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