

Hariri walks the tightrope again as Aoun's prime minister

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Beirut

Since he entered Lebanon's fractious politics after the assassination of his father, former prime minister Rafik Hariri, Saad Hariri, a former premier himself, has never been on good terms with Hezbollah or its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah.

Hariri accuses them, both privately and sometimes in public, of being directly responsible for killing his father in a massive bombing in Beirut in February 2005.

Hezbollah figures write Hariri off as a Saudi stooge who wasted his father's wealth and political legacy and would never have made it to power without Saudi consent, either in 2009 or 2016.

Although Syria's once-formidable influence has declined sharply, the Syrians agree with Hezbollah when it comes to Hariri. Like Hezbollah, they have had to deal with him to ensure that their ally, Michel Aoun, a Maronite Catholic, became president of Lebanon.

Neither Hezbollah nor Damascus, however, is content. Both are waiting for the right moment to either clip Hariri's wings or bring him down altogether.

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It was politically painful yet personally rewarding for both Aoun and Hariri to swallow the regional deal on Lebanon and both are politely playing by its rules of engagement but that might not last very long.

Aoun, a former army commander, wanted to become president at any price, even if that meant snuggling up to Hezbollah, reviled by many Maronites, deeply ruining

his relationship with the United States, ending his long-time animosity with Damascus and accepting Hariri as prime minister, whom he helped topple from that post in 2011.

The Syrians would have preferred seeing their long-time Maronite ally, Suleiman Frangieh, as president but they reasoned that, because he is only 51, he could wait a while. Time was running out for the 83-year-old Aoun and Nasrallah wanted him rewarded for his loyalty to Hezbollah.

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Aoun surpassed all expectations by living up to his alliance with Nasrallah, hammered out in February 2006. He stuck with it during Hezbollah's ruinous war with Israel five months later.

These days he insists that for the Hariri cabinet to survive, it must include a clause in its programme to "protect" Hezbollah's insistence on retaining its supposedly massive arsenal, even though other armed groups surrendered their weapons after the 1975-90 civil war.

Hariri is prepared to set aside his dispute with Aoun to secure approval for his 30-man cabinet but there are worries in Damascus and Tehran about how the relationship between the two will progress from there.

Hariri is still backed by the Saudis and committed to regime change in Damascus, something that Aoun and Hezbollah adamantly oppose. Hariri is well connected to heavyweights in the Saudi-backed Syrian opposition and insists that he will not talk to Damascus if Syrian President Bashar Assad stays on.

That is something that will be technically difficult for him as prime minister because of the mul-



Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri (R) meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in Beirut, on November 9th. (Reuters)

titude of overlapping issues between Syria and Lebanon and the fact that Lebanon has one border with the Arab world and that happens to be with Syria.

Aoun wants to eject the 1 million Syrian war refugees from Lebanon while the March 14 coalition that Hariri heads wants them to stay as a pressure point on Damascus.

Aoun does not mind Hezbollah's military support for Assad in the Syrian war while Hariri wants the party's forces pulled out – at any cost.

At a micro level, Hariri wants some Hezbollah officials to stand trial for the assassination of his father but this is a red line for Lebanon's new president.

For all these reasons, Hariri opposed Aoun's presidential bid for years but he also did so because he wanted a weak Christian president

or at least a ceremonial one who would not challenge a Sunni prime minister.

Memories are still sharp over how much of a headache the Syrian-backed president Emile Lahoud was for Rafik Hariri in 2003, where he blocked nearly all of the prime minister's economic and political decisions and sat in on cabinet meetings to overshadow the prime minister.

Much of that is likely to re-emerge now from the forced Aoun-Hariri partnership. If the prime minister becomes too loud, Hezbollah and its allies can walk out of cabinet meetings, making them unconstitutional and forcing Hariri to resign, just as they did to him in January 2011.

Hezbollah wants to give its allies in the Hariri cabinet veto power to smother any legislation deemed

harmful to the Party of God, locally or regionally.

Earlier, this veto power was used to obstruct the UN-mandated Special Tribunal on Lebanon investigating Rafik Hariri's death and any debate about Hezbollah's arms. Now it will be used to block any ambition Hariri may have of imposing a cabinet decision on Hezbollah to eject them from Syria.

It insists Aoun reward Hezbollah figures in other parties who helped bring about his presidency.

If Hariri accepts these people today, out of sheer necessity, it is doubtful he will be able to live with them for very long, which is exactly what Aoun and his allies in Tehran and Damascus appear to want.

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of *Under the Black Flag* (IB Taurus, 2015).

Aoun's election is first step for Lebanese economic relief, Syria war risks remain

Viewpoint



Abdel-ahman Ayas

The election of Michel Aoun as president of Lebanon after a two-and-a-half-year vacancy is seen as an important step towards improving political effectiveness and oiling the country's economy.

However, sustaining the political accord that led to his election is necessary for finding solutions to mounting economic problems.

If the election heralds greater political consensus and the formation of a functioning unity government, prospects for policy-making would improve and could provide support for the struggling economy, Fitch Ratings said. "However, risks remain to cementing a more effective political environment and the Lebanese economy will remain constrained by the war in neighbouring Syria and very weak public finances," Fitch Ratings said.

Political instability since 2005 paralysed economic decision-making, leading to exacerbated cronyism, corruption and waste of public funds, said economist Jassem Ajaka. "With slowing global gross domestic product (GDP) growth, the economic situation in Lebanon worsened even more since at least six

months ago," he said.

Lebanon's political factions have differing positions on the Syrian war and had been unable to choose a president since May 2014, leaving the government and parliament largely paralysed.

The deadlock was broken when Saad Hariri, prime minister in 2009-11 and the leader of the Sunni Future Movement, lent support to Aoun after alternative proposals failed. Aoun is allied with the Shia group Hezbollah. It is linked to Iran and supports the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria. Hariri, who has close ties to Saudi Arabia, became prime minister again, and he is consulting with parliament about his cabinet's composition.

"While the election of a president is an important piece in the political puzzle, Lebanon's various political factions now need to distribute ministerial portfolios and form a functioning government," Fitch Ratings said. "Agreement on whether to use the existing electoral law or legislate a new electoral law – often a divisive issue in Lebanon – is needed ahead of long-delayed parliamentary elections now due in June 2017."

A source close to Aoun said the president agreed with Hariri on focusing on economic problems and a new election law. Those issues include curbing public debt, stabilising the water and power supply, producing a budget for the first time since 2005, developing the infrastructure and

dealing with 1.5 million Syrian refugees in the country.

Public debt reached \$73.38 billion – 163% of GDP – by the end of June, a report by the Association of Banks in Lebanon said. This gives Lebanon the third highest debt-to-GDP ratio worldwide after Japan and Greece. Weak annual growth of 2% in recent years makes lowering that ratio difficult.

Normalising water and electricity supply is a dear matter to Aoun's son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, who is the Foreign minister in the outgoing cabinet of former prime minister Tammam Salam and served as Energy and Water minister. Bassil, who heads Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement, is expected to play a key role during the six-year presidential term of his 83-year-old father-in-law.

"Plans are there in this regard and have been on hold for years. Aoun and Hariri agreed to apply the plans," a government source said. He would not say whether Aoun and Bassil would take into consideration amendments that Hariri and his team proposed in the past or whether Hariri would drop his reservations to the plans.

The two sources sounded optimistic about an agreement between Aoun and Hariri regarding a budget. Lebanon has failed to produce a budget since 2005 due to political disputes, especially between Hariri's Future Movement and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. "Two things

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to worry about: Speaker Nabih Berri, who was openly unwelcoming of Aoun's election, and Hezbollah, which wants to cut off Lebanon's financing of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)," the government source said.

The STL, a Lebanese-international tribunal based in The Netherlands, is trying *in absentia* Hezbollah members charged with killing Hariri's father, former prime minister Rafik Hariri, in 2005. Lebanon is obliged to pay half of the UN-backed court's budget.

It is not clear if an agreement between Berri and Bassil to launch the process of bidding for Lebanon's prospective offshore oil and gas resources still holds, now that the Aoun-Hariri agreement seems to have eclipsed earlier agreements and alliances.

Some of the steps to follow Aoun's election "may already have been decided before Hariri backed Aoun but the process could still prove challenging given domestic divisions and regional tensions, including between Iran and Saudi Arabia," Fitch Ratings said. "Aoun's election by 83 out of 127 MPs may also lead to shifts in domestic alliances ahead of the next parliamentary election, after which another new government will have to be formed. Therefore, a sustainable return to a more effective policy-making process cannot yet be relied upon."

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