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New Government – Persistent Challenges:

FRAGILE BALANCES IN POST-ELECTIONS LEBANON:

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Following an eight-month-long political deadlock, a new Lebanese government was ultimately formed on January 31. Although many key politicians have retained their presence in the new administration, the reflection of last May's national election results, and the dynamics generated thereof, is evident. PM Saad Hariri's significant electoral losses were translated into gains for the Shi'i coalition that also includes Hezbollah. Domestically, the latter's increased cabinet share indicates a political elevation, which in turn causes considerable anxiety to the West, Israel and the Gulf. More importantly though, its growing influence, if combined with other political forces, may as well impact significantly the country's foreign policy vis-à-vis Syria.

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It is no secret that the greater participation of Hezbollah in the government implies on one hand an increase of Iranian influence in Lebanese politics, and on the other, a legitimate and mostly useful entrenchment in state institutions. Even before the assignment of the Ministry of Health to Hezbollah, the US had expressed concerns that such an arrangement may give the group the means to bypass imposed sanctions aiming at restricting the transfer of Iranian material and economic aid.¹ These concerns are probably reasonable. Essentially, to the extent that the group faces difficulties in fully operating its network of social services, the ministry can indeed be used as a convenient platform to ensure continuity of its activities. In any case, American threats of sanctions have not -yet- materialized, a fact that demonstrates caution and reluctance on behalf of the US. Options such as withholding military aid for the Lebanese army or restricting medical exports are on the table, but in a potential realization of such a scenario they may have negative repercussions by allowing Tehran or Moscow to fill the vacuum.² This 'wait and see' approach comes after both Hariri's and Hezbollah's statements that provided reassurances for the transparency of the entire government's function.³

Meanwhile, one should not underestimate neither the group's eagerness to capitalize on its political position, nor the US -and Trump's- intentions to confront it, albeit better integrated in the country's administrative infrastructure. Mounting economic pressure on the Lebanese government whose utmost priority is to deal with the country's dire economic situation can be used as leverage to confine Hezbollah's capacity to run its ministries. As Hariri aims at pushing forward reforms that will unblock a 11\$bn package of economic aid pledged to Lebanon in 2018 at the CEDRE conference in Paris,⁴ international coordinated action could pose obstacles to further future economic assistance. From this angle, if more European countries follow the recent UK's example to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in its entirety,⁵ the possibilities of intensifying the pressure on state level are rising, thus giving the PM a constant 'headache'.

However, even if it is too early to draw any conclusions on if and how the organization intends to use its cabinet positions to prop up its agendas, Hassan Nasrallah's restrained tone in a recent interview⁶ may demonstrate two significant Hezbollah's considerations. Firstly, regardless of the designation of the announced US withdrawal from Syria as a victory for the so called 'Shia axis', the constant Israeli targeting of Iranian assets and Hezbollah-destined convoys on Syrian soil has probably taken a toll on the group's ambition to entrench its activities in a more regional level. That, combined with a relative distress within Shi'a popular base about the group's affected capacity to run its social welfare networks, may have influenced a re-orientation towards the domestic front.⁷ Secondly, as the war in Syria nears its end, Hezbollah may very well try to avoid raising tensions with Israel, while shifting its focus on politically pushing for Lebanon's normalization of ties with the Assad regime.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Lebanon has struggled to remain neutral regardless Hezbollah's active involvement. The latter's increased government share not only politically upgrades the organization, but at the same time its alignment with the 'Aounists' and other parties on the Syrian agenda constitutes a remarkable reinforcement of the pro-Syria block.⁸ In addition, a resurgence of politicians who had active ties with Damascus during the Syrian occupation in Lebanon, further complicates Hariri's persistence on "dissociation policy" vis-à-vis regional conflicts. A thaw in relations with the Syrian regime is regarded by many political figures as a necessary way to effectively address major issues in Lebanon; namely the refugee crisis and security. The country's Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil constitutes a telling example. A member of President Aoun's party and married to the latter's daughter, Bassil has reportedly pressed -before the formation of government- for cooperation with the Syrian state in matters of refugees' repatriation.⁹ Furthermore, analysts argue that the dissociation policy is merely a façade, as the official government has repeatedly turned a blind eye to the refugees' "voluntary return" organized by Hezbollah in close cooperation with Damascus.¹⁰ Although such a claim may be a political generalization, it is indicative of the existing polarization within the country's political elites. The PM will probably be called to navigate between his western backers' and his pro-Syrian government partners' conflicting agendas, let alone the Gulf's major Hezbollah concerns.

Nevertheless, the rigid diplomatic landscape with regards to Damascus seems to enter a transformation period. The UAE and Bahrain have recently announced the reopening of their embassies in Damascus, while several other Arab countries reportedly push for Syria's readmittance in the Arab League. For the two Gulf states -and Bahrain in particular- the ultimate decision is unlikely to have come without Saudi Arabia's prior consultation. In this context, even if the dominant narrative/rationale behind the move is to counter Tehran's influence, the immediate outcome -Assad's recognition- is totally in line with Iran's and Hezbollah's desiderata.¹¹ Hence despite the equilibrium that Lebanon needs to preserve in its foreign policy between its US and Gulf partners' agendas and its growing pro-Damascus domestic dynamics, Hariri's margin of maneuver may be slightly widened. In case the net on Damascus is progressively loosened by other Arab countries, Beirut could cautiously follow, without being blamed for succumbing to pressure from Hezbollah and its allies. What is more, by leaving open the possibility of closer cooperation with Russia on the refugee repatriation issue, the PM may be able to pursue specific initiatives while at the same time avoiding direct contacts with the Syrian regime. Or at least so he believes.¹² Still, while Russia's influence in the region is expanding considerably, in Lebanon's case, the US still retains a greater influence in the government, especially when Syria is concerned. Moreover, the intensity with which Hezbollah and its allies will choose to push the normalization with Syria, in the short and mid-term both institutionally and extra-institutionally will probably have an impact on his maneuverability. Notwithstanding the backfiring of last year's Saudi effort to sideline him, Hariri is still heavily under the Kingdom's monitor. Therefore, further concessions towards the group will likely generate more discomfort for the Saudis with unpredictable consequences for the PM's backing.

To be sure, Lebanon's elections result and their imprint on the current government did not come as a surprise for neither the Lebanese nor the interested international or regional players. Hezbollah's reinforcement was rather expected taking into account the nearly-outcome of the Syrian war and the disastrous effect of Saudi Arabia's last attempt to intervene in the country's domestic politics. However, the impact its enhanced participation in the government will have, is a matter for the future to tell. That is to be expected, it will be determined by the level to which Hezbollah may attempt to intertwine its governmental powers with its regional role. On the issue of Lebanon's Syria policy, the delicate balances that Saad Hariri's government has to maintain are indeed challenging. The seeming transformation of other Arab countries' perception on the Syrian issue might provide some conditional flexibility. In any case, it would probably be much safer if the "dissociation policy" prevail over domestic pressures until further openings can be done without provoking retaliation from other major players.

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