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The Gordian Knot of the Lebanese Presidency

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Lebanon is in a state of numbness. The deadlock over the presidential election and the Saudi pressure has fired up a political debate and animosity between the two opposing camps, the March 14 alliance and the March 8 alliance. Sa'ad Hariri has attempted to create some sort of momentum towards electing a president and, at the same time, to protect his interests, but it has not bore any fruits. Hezbollah on the other side, continues to essentially control the political developments, by boycotting the election process and perpetuating the stalemate.

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On February 19, Saudi Arabia announced that it was cancelling a three billion dollars military aid package to the Lebanese army plus another billion aimed towards the security sector.¹ This move stemmed, firstly from an overall reshaping of its policy towards peripheral countries, after its setbacks in Yemen and Syria, and secondly from an effort to apply pressure on Hezbollah, in the context of the ongoing animosity between Riyadh and the Iranian axis. On March 2, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and on March 11, the Arab League Council of Foreign Ministers followed suit. Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has kept, however, a defiant note and has dismissed the GCC decision in many occasions. On March 11, in a speech at a commemoration ceremony, he said that “Saudi Arabia is furious because of its failed bets in Syria and Yemen and is trying to blame Hezbollah for it”.² Nasrallah even mocked Saudi Arabia by stating that “I understand the Saudi anger. When one fails, he becomes angry”.³ Moreover, the fact that the GCC decision was not unanimous (Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria and Tunisia disagreed) has given Hezbollah even more room to question its validity.

While the sanctions imposed by Saudi Arabia are intended to put pressure on Hezbollah,⁴ they do not seem to be very effective. Nasrallah in an interview on March 21, declared that Hezbollah is more than ready for a war with Israel, warning it not to engage in such “an uncalculated adventure”.⁵ By projecting a certain confidence and strength, Nasrallah tried to portray Hezbollah as being unscathed by the recent Saudi measures. In essence, this is true. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is superior in military terms than the Lebanese army. With Saudi sanctions being directed at the army, this can only solidify Hezbollah’s power in the country militarily, and maintain its narrative of being the only force that can protect Lebanon efficiently from Israel or other external threats, like Sunni extremism. In that context, the Saudi move to halt the aid package towards the Lebanese military seems poorly calculated. To cancel the funding of the only force in the country that can theoretically oppose Hezbollah, does not make for good strategy, if one aims at weakening it. In Syria, the recent victories of the Assad forces with the support of the Iranian axis and the Russian airstrikes have kept Hezbollah on the winning side, and has given the organization an even further sense of empowerment, despite the more than 1000 dead fighters in the battlefield. Unsurprisingly, in the March 21 interview, Nasrallah continued to attack Saudi Arabia over Syria, accusing it of “blocking any political solution to the conflict”, and rejected any notion of withdrawing from Syria, due to the Russian pullout.⁶

Hezbollah is in a position of power in the region at this point, and this is reflected also in the Lebanese political scene. The political system of the country has been crippled for the past two years, as it has been unable to elect a new president, after Michel Suleiman’s term ended in May 2014. The current impasse is accentuated and perpetuated by the rivalry between the two opposing camps in the political arena; the March 14 alliance, which includes the Future Movement (FM) of former Prime Minister Sa’ad Hariri, the Lebanese Forces (LF) of Samir Geagea, and other smaller groups and independent MPs, and the March 8 alliance, which includes Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun, the Marada Movement of Suleiman Franjeh and smaller parties. Nevertheless, in recent months there have been major shifts in the political arena between the two main opposing camps. The main reason behind these shifts is the attempt, mainly by the March 14 alliance, to “reshuffle the deck”, in an effort to both hurt the March 8 alliance politically, and to push for the election of a new president.

The main protagonist of this policy shift is Sa’ad Hariri, who after five years of living abroad returned to Lebanon in February permanently. While there have been speculations as to the reasons of his return, pointing to financial difficulties,⁷ FM parliament member Ammar Hourri dismissed these theories by saying that “the security risks that prompted Hariri to leave Lebanon still exist. Yet the constitutional, political, security and economic risks have, altogether, formed the key motive for his return”.⁸ In November 2015, Hariri in a surprise move, endorsed Suleiman Franjeh of the Marada Movement and the March 8 alliance for president, abandoning Samir Geagea’s candidacy that the March 14 alliance is backing. Geagea was infuriated by Hariri’s decision and in a historic move, he endorsed Michel Aoun for president, apparently ending a decades-old rivalry between the two main Christian parties in

Lebanon, and a personal feud between himself and Aoun.

Hariri's move was designed to achieve several goals. Firstly, Hariri attempted to divide the March 8 alliance, by backing one of its most prominent figures. He hoped that he could lure Hezbollah away from Michel Aoun's candidacy, which Hezbollah fully supports. Franjeh has strong ties with President Assad, so he could in theory be accepted by Hezbollah as president. This scheme apparently failed, as Hezbollah's loss would be greater, if it was to break its relations with Michel Aoun and by extension, with the Christian community. Also, by supporting a candidate from the opposing camp, Hariri attempted to portray himself as a unifying force in the political scene, ready to make compromises for the greater good of the country. The fact that Hariri's enterprises are almost completely dependent on foreign investments, suggests that his desire for reconciliation may indeed be rooted elsewhere. The election of a president will provide a very much needed political stability in the country, which means in turn that foreign funds, especially Saudi, may begin to flow again, and this could be the last opportunity for Hariri's corporations. Another theory suggests that Hariri endorsed Franjeh, in an attempt to at least preserve the current balance of power in the country, given the developments in Syria, where Hezbollah for the time being, comes out victorious and reinforced.⁹ Whatever the reasons may be behind Hariri's endorsement of Franjeh, they have not produced the desired results. Hezbollah remains unwaveringly loyal to Aoun (at least for now) and the stalemate continues.

Since 2014, there have been 36 parliamentary sessions to elect a president, and all have failed. The 37th is scheduled for April 18, but the chances of this one being successful are almost nonexistent. With the deadlock continuing, the two camps have resorted to a verbal confrontation. The Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces have accused Hezbollah of boycotting the election process. Samir Geagea of LF said that "Hezbollah does not want General Aoun for president, although it cannot afford to lose him, which has pushed it to obstruct the presidential vote. This way it does not lose Aoun and it postpones the problem".¹⁰ Nasrallah has, in return, accused the Lebanese Forces of trying to create a rift between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement. Nevertheless, Hezbollah has not denied the fact that it is boycotting the process, and has actually announced that it will continue to do so, until it has guaranteed that its candidate Michel Aoun is elected president.¹¹ At the same time, the Future Movement has vehemently condemned Nasrallah's continued confrontation with Saudi Arabia. A statement made by the parliamentary bloc of the movement declared that "Hezbollah and Nasrallah's persistent attacks against the kingdom and the Arab countries undermine the interests of the Lebanese people, as well as their stability and source of income".¹²

The continuing stalemate suits Hezbollah's interests at the moment. The vote allocation in the parliament between the two camps right now, makes the election of a president nearly impossible. Analysts estimate that, while Michel Aoun's election is not possible, there is no clear majority in the parliament in favor of Suleiman Franjeh either, even with the recent endorsement of his candidacy by the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and several independent MPs.¹³ Hezbollah acting in accordance with its best interests, did not fall for the Franjeh endorsement by Hariri, although Nasrallah has not stopped expressing his appreciation for him. Given the current circumstances, Hezbollah has no interest in changing the political landscape in Lebanon, especially now that the March 14 alliance is weakened and fractured after the Franjeh endorsement by Hariri. Moreover, Hezbollah, in the worst-case scenario of an imminent election, has the luxury of choosing between two presidents (Aoun and Franjeh), where both of whom as presidents would sever its interests. On the other hand, Sa'ad Hariri is in a tough spot. His plan to break the March 8 alliance and bring about a realignment in the political map by endorsing Franjeh, failed. In addition, a possible election of Franjeh as president, who is a personal friend of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, will essentially revive the Syrian-Iranian axis in Lebanon, and it will put Hariri in an even more uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the Saudis. Nevertheless, the two sides have both declared, if only just for show, that they are willing to continue negotiations towards reaching a solution. Hariri announced that he will continue to pursue the bilateral dialogue with Hezbollah, while Nasrallah stated that he is willing to meet with him "if the Hezbollah-Mustaqbal dialogue requires a meeting".¹⁴

The fragile ceasefire in Syria and the eventual outcome of the war will bring about political developments in Lebanon as well. Hezbollah currently dominates the political scene, but has however been unable to impose its will and have Michel Aoun elected as president. While it holds significant power in the country, this is not enough to turn the organization into the paramount political force of Lebanon. In that regard, time may be running out for the political system in Lebanon to find a solution in this two-year impasse, since there is a strong possibility that if negotiations fail, there will not be another opportunity to elect a president any time soon. If the void in the presidency and the power gap are prolonged, this could lead in further instability in the country, at a time when a steady, functioning administration is needed more than ever.

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