



Lebanon's predicament

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"I call upon all of you, politicians and citizens, to start a new phase called Lebanon and the Lebanese ... in order to achieve the interests of the nation." This was General Suleiman's appeal at his swearing-in ceremony in Beirut last May. His election as president was the result of the Doha accord which brokered a deal to end clashes between Hizbullah and its allies against Future Movement militias which brought back haunting memories of the civil war. However, recent developments imply that Suleiman's words do not reverberate in politicians' ears anymore. May's euphoria seems to be fading away as the problem of power sharing in Lebanon is still visible. Lebanese factions still draw strength and support from outside while allowing foreign forces to use them for the advancement of their cause.

General Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement and MP of the opposition, visited Iran on October 12 and evoked harsh criticism from the March 14 Alliance as the reasons behind his visit appeared to be questionable. Mainly, since it coincided with President Suleiman's visit to Saudi Arabia; an affront to Aoun's rivals who are allied to parties that are zealously backed by Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia.

Sateh Nouredine a columnist for Lebanon's independent leftist newspaper As-Safir spoke in this context of one of the miracles of Lebanese politics. However, it seems more appropriate to call it a continuation of Lebanon's predicament, whereas sectarianism is at its root which was enhanced later by pervasive intrusion of external powers. The external struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the former backing Aoun's Shia ally Hizbullah and the latter the Sunni Saad Hariri's ruling majority epitomizes its continuation.

Aoun who in 2006 had the 'audacity' to ally with Hizbullah now appears - in the eyes of his opponents - to strive for something higher by aspiring ties directly with Iran, the solidest state funding Hizbullah. His visit, where he met foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and parliament speaker Ali Larijani provoked various reactions from different factions.

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The Iranians described it as “historic” while it was an occasion for them to underline their support for Christians in the region. The Lebanese daily Al-Mustaqbal, which supports the views of the Future Movement and the March 14 Alliance, called Aoun an “Iranian general” and said that his visit was the apex of his policy, which had always preferred the Syrian-Iranian axis. Iran is accused of arming Hizbullah to use Lebanon as a ‘proxy’ nation in its conflict with the West and Israel. However, Iran denies charges of providing military backing to Hizbullah. Hence, the visit angered many Lebanese who still consider Iran as a major source of instability in Lebanon.

Particularly, Walid Jumblat the current leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, a one-time friend of Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah and strong-ally during the heyday of Syrian presence in Lebanon, stated that Aoun attempted to thwart the “policy of non-alignment that Lebanon is trying to adopt” with respect to regional disputes. His visit to Iran was meant “to rekindle divisions that had been settled by the Taif Accord regarding Lebanon’s Arab belonging”.

Aoun on the other hand, stated that Lebanon needed Iran’s friendship, as it was the only force that was standing on its feet. Many would agree with him once they realized that the region’s situation would change soon. Precisely, he asked “How is it possible not to visit the most powerful regional state?” Aoun, who in the past was a fierce opponent of Iran’s regional ally Syria, extolled the Islamic Republic for its support to the Lebanese people: “Iran is especially helping Lebanon today in confronting its problems and achieving national unity. ... Iran never helped one Lebanese party against the others and has never given assistance to Lebanon’s enemies.” The United States in turn, according to Aoun, would always be with the Israelis and would merely give weapons to the Lebanese Army needed for law enforcement. Aoun said he was “surprised and astonished” at criticism by other Lebanese politicians from rival factions about his visit.

Aoun’s visit coincided with Suleiman’s to Saudi Arabia where Saudi King Abdallah bin Abd Al-Aziz called for “hands off Lebanon” and asked all countries to respect it while emphasizing that Saudi Arabia’s support for Lebanon had nothing to do with personal interests. Moreover, the Saudi foreign minister stated that differences over Lebanon were behind some of the kingdom’s problems with foreign parties. Suleiman himself, described media attacks against Saudi Arabia as a blow to Arabism: “Any Lebanese individual who attacks any of his Arab brothers in the media, particularly Saudi Arabia, is moving away from his Arabism”, he said. Aoun on the other hand, stated that some Lebanese Christians were being swayed by Saudi petrodollars before leaving for Iran.



In a related development, Hizbullah head Nasrallah and Future Movement leader Hariri demonstrated “total adherence and respect for both the Taif Accord and the Doha Accord” after their long-awaited encounter on October 26. Furthermore, they emphasized that the purpose of their meeting was the provision of a safety net. Suddenly, memories of May’s euphoria were brought back and Aoun’s controversial visit to Iran seemed to be forgotten. Political factions in Lebanon reacted in a positive way to the meeting and were looking forward to President Suleiman’s endeavors to foster a new beginning in Lebanese politics. This was epitomized by the national dialogue meeting on November 5 where a new national defense strategy was to be discussed. However, Hizbullah’s disarmament, an issue that represents a larger regional dispute pitting Western states against Iran, was the major obstacle in the dialogue. Hizbullah refused to demobilize, claiming that its arms were essential for Lebanon’s defence against Israel. The March 14 Alliance on the other hand, asserted that Hizbullah’s arsenal undermined the authority of the state which should be the only bearer of the monopoly of violence. Additionally, Hizbullah’s demand to enlarge the number of participants in the dialogue by incorporating more figures from the March 8 Alliance was rejected by Hariri’s ruling majority. Hence, little headway was achieved and a next gathering has been arranged for December 22.

It seems as if all these more or less breathtaking meetings have a rather symbolic function as in reality none of the two sides is genuinely interested in compromise. Thus, Lebanon is still a battleground for foreign forces while Lebanese factions do not try hard enough to solve this issue in order to gain national unity. On the contrary, local actors make use of foreign powers in order to enhance their domestic agenda. However, apart from serving their external masters: the Lebanese political crisis is widely seen as an extension of chasms between Shia (Iran) and Sunni Muslim (Saudi Arabia) powers as well as the confrontation of playing off the West – particularly the United States – against Iran and Syria, they do not gain any advantages for their country. In other words, it is nothing but a zero-sum game in which the benefit of one party can merely be attained at the expense of the other. This behaviour has a long history and can be seen as the so-called Lebanese predicament which will not end unless a reform of the sectarian system will set in to achieve true independence and to end continuous calls from various sects in Lebanon for foreign aid.