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Lebanon

After five days that changed its face, where is Lebanon headed?

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The events that have unfolded in Lebanon between the election of a new president of the Republic on Thursday 9 January and the appointment of a new prime minister on Monday 13, constitute a major upheaval in the country's political situation. The fact is that these events are themselves primarily the result of a major upheaval in the actual balance of power that determines Lebanon's political situation. This is because, in key stages of the country's history since its independence in 1943, the Lebanese government was subject to an agreement between two rival external powers, and whenever this agreement and the equilibrium accompanying it were disturbed, the situation has become tense to the point of explosion when the tension reached its peak.

At the beginning of the Lebanese state's journey, a balance was established between the competing influences of British and French colonialisms. It got disturbed due to the fading influence of these two old colonialisms and the rise of US imperialism globally and the Arab nationalist movement led by Nasser's Egypt regionally. The situation then exploded until an agreement was reached between the two rising parties on the presidency of the army commander at the time, General Fouad Chehab. This balance was upset again after Nasserist Egypt was dealt a decisive blow by Israel in 1967, along with the left fraction of the Baath party ruling Syria, and Jordan. Suleiman Franjeh became Lebanon's president in 1970, at a time of US preponderance. This coincided with the fatal blow that the Palestinian resistance received in Jordan, the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Hafez al-Assad's coup against the left wing of the Syrian Baath. With the transfer of the Palestinian resistance's centre of gravity from Jordan to Lebanon, tensions escalated anew until the Lebanon War erupted in 1975.

The Assad regime intervened in Lebanon the following year with US and Israeli green lights. This resulted in the election of a president who stood at the intersection of the two influences, Elias Sarkis. However, the consensus soon collapsed after the Likud came to power in Israel, and the process that led to the Camp David Accords between Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Israel's Menachem Begin began. Tensions renewed until the Zionist state invaded Lebanon in 1982. It tried to impose as president Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the Lebanese Christian far right, but the attempt failed before Gemayel's inauguration due to his assassination, which was attributed to Damascus. He was succeeded by his brother, who tried to drag Lebanon into the path of normalization with Israel, following Egypt, but a rebellion of the Lebanese forces supported by Damascus thwarted his project. After a period of armed chaos, a new consensus between Hafez al-Assad's regime and the Saudi kingdom led to the end of the Lebanese civil war, fifteen years after its outbreak. The Syrian-Saudi consensus was blessed by the United States following the Syrian regime's participation in the coalition that was to launch war on Iraq in 1991 under US-Saudi command.

Lebanon entered then a phase of "reconstruction" under Saudi-Syrian supervision embodied by Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the Syrian High Commissioner in Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan. This consensus lasted until relations between Damascus and Washington deteriorated due to the latter's decision to invade Iraq and topple the Baath Party regime there. Tension returned, one of its most prominent signs being assassinations orchestrated by the Syrian regime, culminating in that of Rafik Hariri in 2005. It led to a popular upheaval that combined with international pressure to force Damascus to withdraw its forces from Lebanon. However, the balance remained fragile, especially after Michel Aoun's complete mutation from self-proclaimed champion of the opposition to the Syrian regime in Lebanon to ally of the Lebanese forces under Syrian and Iranian influence.

Lebanon once again entered a phase of turmoil resulting from the fragility of the political balance between the two coalitions, especially since the failure of the Zionist onslaught on Hezbollah in 2006 had strengthened the latter's influence. The region witnessed the expansion of Iranian influence, benefiting first from the US occupation of Iraq, which paved the way for it to impose its tutelage over that country, and then from the Syrian civil war, especially after

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the Syrian regime resorted to Iranian aid, primarily represented by Hezbollah itself, starting in 2013. The scales were thus reversed again, as Iran's influence became overwhelming regionally and Hezbollah's influence overwhelming in Lebanon. The latter was able to impose its ally Michel Aoun as Lebanese president in 2016, after a decade of alliance between them.

The Saudi kingdom, displeased with Lebanon's evolution and Iran's growing influence over the country, withdrew its support for Lebanon, which led to the collapse of its economy starting in 2019. The country's situation remained extremely turbulent due to the lack of agreement between its basic components, until the Gaza war and Iran's decision to intervene in it in a limited way. This backfired against Hezbollah when Israel decided to launch its attack on it and managed to decapitate it and destroy most of its military capacity. This was exacerbated by the collapse of the Assad regime a little over a month ago, and with it the collapse of the main supply bridge between Iran and its Lebanese auxiliary.

It is against the backdrop of this new shift in the balance of power that tipped the balance in favour of the United States in Lebanon, that the man whom Washington had supported to become president of Lebanon since the end of Michel Aoun's term got elected, namely Army Commander Joseph Aoun (not a relative of the former). Washington had bet for years on strengthening the Lebanese army to enable it to end the duality of power in Lebanon, represented by the existence of Hezbollah's state within the Lebanese state, and particularly by the coexistence of the party's armed forces with the country's official army. With the balance tipping in favour of US influence, the Saudi kingdom renewed its interest in the Lebanese situation, supporting Washington's efforts.

Hezbollah participated in endorsing Joseph Aoun in a second round of election at the Lebanese parliament, after abstaining from endorsing him in the first round to record the new president's debt to it. It accepted this compromise under pressure from its sectarian ally Nabih Berri, who had previously been dependent on the Syrian Assad regime. The two allies were shocked, however, by the appointment as Prime Minister of Nawaf Salam, whose assumption of this position they had previously opposed, Hezbollah in particular, just as they opposed Joseph Aoun assuming the presidency.

The result of all this is that the consensus that oversaw the years of stability in Lebanon, which were almost equal to, if not less than, the years of tension, has not been renewed. This portends that the country will enter a new phase of tension and bitter conflict, especially if the new government tries to impose the state's monopoly on arms in Lebanon, which Aoun promised in his victory speech, instead of taking the consensual path that he also promised. The fate of the Lebanese situation will largely depend on what happens between Israel, supported by Donald Trump as the new US president, on the one hand, and Iran on the other. It will also be affected by the developments in Syria, where there is no doubt that Iran intends to re-extend its influence in some way, which, if accompanied by the continued attempt by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to monopolize all the reins of power, could return Syria to a state of civil war.

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