



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Lebanon's cracks might once again be papered over, but don't expect fundamental change



With the triple success of a ceasefire, the election of a new Lebanese president, and the **appointment** of a prime minister that doesn't belong to the pro-Hezbollah camp, the US and its regional allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, would appear to be on a roll in Lebanon, but they should not crow victory yet.

The developments have sparked hopes of a recovery in the ravaged country and also for positive developments in neighbouring Syria and increased stability on the border with Israel.

In reality, there is a long way to go on all these fronts, and Lebanon's underlying, long-present, structural problems might well prove to be insurmountable.

Lebanon's epic economic crisis, now compounded by the damage suffered during Israel's recent assault, can only be solved through a renewed willingness of the Gulf Arab countries, specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to open their purses.

But the likelihood of these countries once again stepping up will depend on how much the influence of Hezbollah can be curbed and how effectively the emerging new government will be able to control the levers of power.

What has changed?

Past efforts in this direction do not provide much comfort, and the economic and infrastructure situation now is much worse than it was, let's say, two decades ago.

What has changed, though, is the **situation** in Syria, which has a twofold effect: It removes a player in Damascus that favoured the anti-Saudi and anti-US forces. And secondly, the incentive for Saudi Arabia to invest its money and its influence is higher now that Syria is also in play.

Yet, the Saudis in particular were burnt before by Lebanon, and the Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), has personally helped create a power vacuum in Lebanon's

Sunni Muslim community by undermining its once dominant political machine, the Future movement, founded by the assassinated former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

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It's a cliché to talk about Lebanon's complexity, with its precarious and shifting sectarian balance and its correspondingly complex political system that apportions power on the basis of a long-bygone demographic make-up.

But that's just a cover for the very simple power dynamics that rule the country, where armed might largely determines who is in charge. This has traditionally been the Syrian Assad regime, followed, after its military withdrawal in 2005, by its Iran-supported Shia Hezbollah allies.

When a more independent, pro-Western and pro-Saudi Arabian government was briefly in charge, Hezbollah caused the 2006 war with Israel. It then laid siege to the government buildings in the centre of Beirut and fought a mini-civil war in 2008, after which it and its allies progressively extended their control over the country.

The Army

Following the blows to Hezbollah during the recent confrontation with Israel, the election of army chief Joseph Aoun to the presidency is seen as a challenge to the movement's hegemony, but in all likelihood, it is nothing of the sort.

The Lebanese army, often portrayed as the only strong state institution that enjoys support from all sectors of society, became, in effect, allied to Hezbollah after 2008, through necessity and also due to the influence of Hezbollah's Christian allies that still wielded

influence in the military.

The army has not been able or willing to stop Hezbollah's deployment in the South of the country, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, and has in effect shielded the movement from scrutiny.

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The only time in the past 20 years that the army took strong action was against Sunni Islamic militants in the North of the country, in the Palestinian camp Naher el-Bared, in 2007.

While the US is a major supporter of the Lebanese army in terms of funding, equipment, training etc., Washington has never been able to translate this into practical action on the ground. The US is well aware that forcing the Lebanese army to take sides will destroy it.

Balance of power

Even if the new **president**, Joseph Aoun, were personally inclined to take a firmer stance on Hezbollah, and nothing in what he has said indicates that he is planning to, he is constrained both by the limitations of his largely symbolic role as well as by the still enduring balance of power.

The same is probably even more true for the new Prime Minister, Nawaf Salam. This judge and career diplomat has inexplicably been awarded a reformist label. In fact, he has served both under pro- and anti-Hezbollah governments and strongly emphasises 'neutrality', a code word for the status quo.

What's much worse in terms of his actual power to effect change, should he want to, is that he completely lacks any political and

popular mandate of his own. The same was true of his predecessor, Najib Mikati, and many others in the past who have been equally ineffective.



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An early indication of the way things are headed could come when the new cabinet will have to find a replacement for the powerful position of the head of the Internal Security Forces. The current commander, who's retiring, was still appointed by Hezbollah's political opponents.

Hezbollah and its allies effectively control many security and secret service branches, including, for example, security at the airport and ports. This allows it to still bring in weapons and also facilitates the smuggling of drugs that Saudi Arabia might also wish to put a stop to.

Hezbollah's arms and its state-within-a-state position will continue to deter Saudi and Gulf Arab involvement in Lebanon. But these countries appear not to have much confidence in Hezbollah's opponents either.

In 2017, Saudi Arabia's MBS forced Lebanon's then Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign and effectively detained him, in all likelihood because he saw the Lebanese Sunni leader as too soft on Hezbollah and possibly also because of Hariri's Saudi financial complications.

Another former beneficiary of Saudi largesse is the now discredited and **arrested** former head

of Lebanon's central bank, Riyad Salameh, who is also under US sanctions. He is alleged to have enriched himself during his thirty-year tenure, when the central bank at times enjoyed huge injections of Saudi and other Gulf Arab cash.

It will take more than two political non-entities as president and prime minister to untangle all these various, disastrous, security, political, and economic jumbles.

What is ultimately needed is a complete overhaul of the country's system of representation and government, driven by the Lebanese themselves, not by foreign powers. But that remains a distant pipedream, and the result is likely to be at most a papering over of the cracks in the interest of a new regional alignment.