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The Presidential Crisis in Lebanon Demands Urgent Attention

By Paul Salem

Lebanon, an important piece of the precarious Middle East puzzle, is threatening to come undone in the coming few days. With the term of the Lebanese president Emile Lahoud coming to an end on November 24, the parliament has yet to meet, rival groups in the country have not agreed on a new president, and the country risks ending up with two governments and a serious breakdown of security and order. Despite a flurry of diplomatic and political activity, the parties—and their international backers—seem dangerously far apart; if a president is not agreed upon in the next few days, the country's central institutions might soon collapse and the country might spiral slowly into a state of civil war. A high dose of intense international attention to Lebanon right now can save the country and the region years of open conflict and bloodshed. A number of leaders in Lebanon, the region, and around the world are focusing on bringing about a political resolution to the current crisis, but a redoubled effort from the United States and other major players is needed in these remaining days.

The anti-Syrian "March 14" coalition led by Saad Hariri, Walid Junblat, and Samir Geagea wants to elect one of their own, or at least a candidate who will stand firm on the international tribunal related to the assassination of former prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the eradication of Syrian influence from the Lebanese army and security services, and the robust implementation of UN Resolutions 1559 and 1701, which call for extending government authority throughout the country, disarming all non-governmental militias, and preventing arms smuggling. The "March 8" coalition composed of Hizbollah and Amal, Shi'i parties openly allied with Syria, and of the Free Patriotic Movement, a mainly Christian group headed by Michel Aoun, who claims more distance from Syria, want different things. Hizbollah wants a president who is not hostile to itself and Syria, accepts that Hizbollah will remain an armed movement, and does not take Lebanon into an alliance with the United States, but rather keeps it within the Syrian and Iranian alliance system. Michel Aoun's main goal is to become president.

The battle between the two factions centers at present on the election of a new president (by Lebanese compact, the post is reserved for a Maronite Christian), and much of it focuses on seemingly obscure but politically important conflicting interpretations of the constitution. The president is elected by the parliament, but the March 8 opposition

insists that the election is only valid if a two-thirds quorum is present; this would give the opposition the power to block the election of a president it does not want simply by not showing up for the vote. The March 14 coalition argues that elections can proceed without the two-thirds quorum and require only a simple majority. The March 14 coalition has been nervously guarding that majority—by sequestering its members in a heavily-guarded hotel in downtown Beirut—against a steady string of assassinations that have left it with only a slender edge in parliament. The opposition refuses to attend a parliamentary session and provide the two-thirds quorum unless an agreement has been reached beforehand about the presidential candidate; the March 14 coalition threatens that if no normal parliamentary session is held, their majority will meet and elect a candidate of their choosing.

The opposition has warned the March 14 coalition against taking such a step. It has not specified what exact actions it would take to stop it, but sources in the army and intelligence services indicate that Hizbollah might try to close down roads and highways in Beirut to block a meeting of March 14 parliamentarians. Such renewed action on the ground is very likely to immediately lead to armed clashes. The army has indicated that it would not be able to control such a situation were it to develop. Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has also stepped up the political pressure by calling on incumbent President Emile Lahoud to form a rival government if no consensus president is elected before his term ends.

In the current tense atmosphere, clashes between the March 14 and the March 8 forces would take on a directly sectarian character with Shi'i–Sunni clashes possibly erupting in the capital and Shi'i–Druze clashes to the south and east of the capital. Tensions in the Christian areas of East Beirut and Mount Lebanon are less pronounced, and the situation there could be kept from escalating for a longer period. The clashes that do erupt, however, are liable to quickly escalate, creating a new reality in which different militias would scramble to secure different parts of the country and two governments would preside over rival cantons. Syria and Iran would back one side, while the United States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt would back the other. Lebanon would become again a failed state, as it was during the 1975–1990 civil war, and as Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan are today.

Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, the European Union, France, and the UN Secretary General have all undertaken diplomatic missions to square the circle of the presidential election by promoting agreement on a compromise candidate, so far with no success. The United States has neither participated in nor opposed the diplomatic missions, maintaining its backing for the March 14 coalition and pressing for elections to take place, preferably with a two-thirds quorum, but without it if necessary. Syria and Iran have also maintained their official distance, leaving their allies in the country to hold the line and prevent the election of a president hostile to them. As in the past, Lebanon is on the brink of being torn apart by the combination of internal and external polarization. This would reignite a civil war that would add a serious and dangerous fire to those already ravaging the Middle East.

Speculation is rife in Lebanon that some countries might see benefit in igniting such a fire. Opposition figures fear that a breakdown of order might serve Israeli interests, dragging Hizbollah into a sectarian civil war that would sap its strength and popularity;

Israel might then undertake a war of eradication against Hizbollah. This, they argue, is what happened in the lead-up to 1982, when the PLO was dragged into civil war in Lebanon, weakened, and then destroyed by a full-scale Israeli invasion. The March 14 coalition, for its part, fears that Syria will deliberately try to create chaos in Lebanon in the hope of emerging once again as the key player as it did during the 1970s and 1980s as a result of Lebanese civil war; they see the wave of assassinations and car bombs that started with the assassination of Hariri and continues as part of such a plan to destabilize the country.

Within the country some leaders seem more eager for compromise than others. Among members of the March 14 coalition, Saad Hariri has been in the forefront of attempts to find an acceptable compromise candidate whereas his partners Walid Junblat and Samir Geagea have been more hard-line. These differences may reflect the sense of vulnerability of different communities: Sunnis, whom Hariri represents, are dispersed throughout the country, thus are more vulnerable, whereas Junblat and Geagea lead more insular and regionally compact communities. Hariri may also be more inclined to seek compromise because he is backed by Saudi Arabia, whose foreign policy has been eager to avoid the outbreak of Sunni–Shi'i clashes in Lebanon and who generally favors compromise. Firthermore, Hariri has perhaps inherited the deal-making propensity of his father—Junblat and Geagea have a history as warlords. Among opposition members, Speaker of Parliament and Amal leader Nabih Berri has been vigorous in his attempts to broker a deal, while Hizbollah and Aoun have taken a more hard-line position. Hizbollah is strong, has a clear set of interests, and will try to prevent the election of any president it views as hostile to those interests; Aoun is hard-line in the sense that he wants to be president and will support no other candidate. Speaker Berri's interests, however, rest on the survival of the state and himself in it as speaker of parliament; if there is a breakdown of central authority, he no longer has a strong following or militia to fall back on—his Amal movement has long ago been overtaken by Hizbollah.

Many players in and outside the country are aware of the grave danger facing the country—indeed this is what has mobilized the flurry of political and diplomatic activity of the past few weeks. But the constitutional clock is ticking fast—the players have until November 24 to pull a rabbit out of the hat—and the major players are still far apart. Despite the complex, indeed arcane, details of this presidential crisis, the consequences of failure are dangerously clear: the breaking apart of the Lebanese state and a rapid drift into civil war—a situation that the country and the region can scarcely afford.

The international community, and particularly the United States, need to focus urgently on Lebanon. Despite the importance of the war in Iraq, the Iranian nuclear issue and the upcoming Israeli–Palestinian meeting in Annapolis, over the next few days it is the crisis in Lebanon which deserves the most urgent and intense attention at the highest international political levels. The world was otherwise distracted in 1975 when Lebanon stumbled into civil war; it took fifteen long years to bring that bloody conflict to an end. This history must not be repeated.

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