

There Can Only Be One: Tamam Salam and Lebanese Politics

by [Jamil Mouawad](#) جميل معوض

Apr 08 2013

On Saturday 6 April 2013, the Lebanese Parliament overwhelmingly nominated Tamam Saeb Salim Salam to become the new Prime Minister. That the premiership in Lebanon should return to Beirut is not strange in and of itself. However, the return of the premiership to the Mseitbeh residence of the Salams—an old notable family that has played a pivotal role in Lebanon’s political life since the late Ottoman and French colonial periods—does not necessarily conform with the traditional meaning of notable politics. Rather, it sheds light on the current nature of (post-war) Lebanese politics, and specifically the transformation of the Sunni *za’ama*.

To speak of the Sunni *za’ama* does not simply imply one family’s representation of the Sunni sect. Rather, it refers to the process of one family’s political consolidation and monopolization under the pretext of



[View of al-Amin Mosque constructed by Rafiq al-Hariri between 2002 and 2007. Photo by James Gallagher via Flickr]

protecting the interests of “their” sect. The process of “sectarian crystallization” is thus not legitimized by sectarian criteria alone, but rather by other considerations as well. For example, Hizballah’s resistance legacy, combined with the support of Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri’s clientelist network within state institutions, allows it to claim a monopoly over the representation of the Shia sect. In the case of the Sunni community, the monopolization of representation began with the advent of Rafiq al-Hariri’s totalizing economic project and his underpinning of it with a sectarian discourse beginning in 2000.[1] This project has excluded, or at least weakened, any other potential competition for the Sunni-held premiership, and, by extension, representation of the Sunni community.

While Rafiq al-Hariri economically marginalized any potential political competition through his connections with Saudi Arabia, his son Saad Eddine has rhetorically and discursively eradicated this competition by singling out as traitors those who do not defend the blood of his father. This has negatively impacted the activities of several cabinets that have fallen outside the sponsorship of Hariri. This includes the outgoing government of Najib Mikati, which was accused of not legitimately representing the Sunni community. At the same time though, Mikati’s policies were in complete harmony with the Hariri camp, particularly with respect to the latter’s neoliberal policies—but also its sectarian calculations. The main administrative appointments remained under the influence of Hariri, and were never revised. Most notably, when Mikati’s cabinet failed to extend General Ashraf Rifi’s term as Head of the Internal Security Forces, Mikati resigned for fear of upsetting what has been dubbed the Sunni street and implicitly the Saudi-Hariri camp.

It would be inaccurate to argue that Saad al-Hariri's endorsement of Tamam Salam's nomination for the premiership stems strictly from Saudi dictates, as some have claimed. This support also has roots in the relationship between the two men’s fathers. In order to move forward with his political and economic project, Rafiq al-Hariri co-opted the Salam family as well as other Beirut notable families, which in return could not resist or compete with his project. On 20 September 1994, the former Prime Minister Saeb Salam returned to permanently settle in Beirut after ten years of self-imposed exile in Geneva. His return partially came at the request of then-Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri to participate in the inauguration of the reconstruction project of downtown Beirut. On 21 September 1994, Salam participated in the inauguration ceremony, along with Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and President Elias Hrawi. Therein, Salam gave a speech in which he said: “Allow me to say that reconstruction outside Beirut is indeed important; but reconstruction begins in Beirut and anything else remains marginal.” The following day, al-Nahar newspaper published a caricature in which Hariri was portrayed in an old “Abu al-Abd” Beirut outfit, smoking a cigar, with a carnation flower in the front pocket of his jacket, *à la* Saeb Salam. In it, Hariri says "One corporation, rather than two"—alluding to Salam's well-known slogan, "One Lebanon, rather than two". The caricature implies that Hariri will not share the Beirut Za'ama—and by extension the leadership of the Sunni community—with anyone. This was reflected in the election of Tamam

Salam to the Lebanese parliament in 2009, which was achieved only through his incorporation into Saad al-Hariri's electoral list in Beirut.

Thus, Saad al-Hariri's current endorsement of Salam's nomination is inscribed in the process of his father's gradual cooptation of the traditional Salam leadership, and the inability of the latter to revive its traditional political role. In the same way that Hizballah has drawn a red line with regards to its weapons, the Hariri camp has drawn its own red lines: first in relation to its economic approach; and second in relation to its position within state institutions. Hariri's endorsement of Salam is thus a function of the latter's confidence that Salam will not breach the red lines, despite hailing from among one of the oldest Sunni Beirut families that has been involved in politics since the late Ottoman Empire.

There are other practical, albeit hidden, considerations that have also played a role in Salam's accession to the premiership. These are related to the socio-economic problems that are currently at play in Lebanon. The new government has been portrayed as a "salvation government" that will guarantee stability and resolve the political deadlock stalling Lebanese political life. It has also been promoted as a government that will organize and administer the upcoming parliamentary elections. Indeed, this implicitly facilitates addressing two major challenges: the Syrian crisis and the future prospects of Lebanon's "dissociation policy;" as well as the ministerial statement that Hizballah points to in order to legitimate its retention of arms and preservation of the trilogy formula of "the Army, the People and the Resistance." Although these two issues are extremely critical to the future of Lebanon, in addition to the interests and calculations of the Lebanese ruling elite they remain inextricably tied to regional considerations. Beyond the realm of elite negotiations and their mutual interests, the socio-economic issue will remain the main concern of any government, particularly after the recent emergence of a serious debate related to taxes and social justice (e.g., real estate taxes, sea ports fraud, etc.).

Consequently, other considerations have led to the nomination of Salam by a majority of the Lebanese political groups (Salam was backed by 124 out of 128 MPs in the parliamentary consultations). In fact, unlike Saad al-Hariri, Mohamed al-Safadi, Adnan al-Qassar, or even Layla al-Solh, Salam is not considered an affluent businessman and is not even in a position to compete with any of the former. Salam does not have financial and business assets, neither domestically nor abroad, that give the impression that he is another tycoon who may upset certain elements of society recently that have recently mobilized against the ruling elite and its interests.

Perhaps one of the objectives of this government is to grant a certain *période de repos* for the Lebanese elite, after it was put under pressure due to the recent social and economic mobilizations. This period will permit it to reposition itself

and return once more to taking advantage of the system to the detriment of the interests of society as whole. This is clear in Walid Jumblat's statement on the necessity of imposing taxes on the "feudal groups and bourgeoisie" in Lebanon.[2] Such statements are neither cynical nor naïve on the part of Jumblat, who is an otherwise calculating politician. Conceivably, this might be a message for the ruling elite to compromise part of what it has gained and shared among itself in the post-war period, before it vanishes along with the system as a result of the effective mobilizations. Accordingly, it would be better to say that this is a "elite/system salvation government" rather than a "salvation government."

*[This is a modified English translation of an article that originally appeared in **Arabic** on Jadaliyya.]*
