

Approaching the 40th Anniversary of April 13, 1975 Lebanon's Attrition: Possibly Worse than War?

As Beirut was preparing to ring in the New Year, an explosion rocked the city on December 27, 2013. Facts about the incident unfolded quickly: a car bomb had killed former Minister of Finance and pro-Hariri strategist Mohammad Chatah, whom CNN characterized as “U.S. friend, Hezbollah foe.”¹

Despite the “collateral” injuries and material damage caused by the blast, however, the attack appeared remarkably *surgical* in nature. Many Lebanese feared that it might prompt a resurgence in the violence they had experienced the month prior (particularly in the capital city), but in the year since the assassination we have seen that while the bombing actually ended one cycle of political/security turmoil, it introduced another—with new and increasingly dangerous features. As that shift occurred, the Lebanese perception of the event also changed since the political “postmortem” and management of the assassination did not disclose any escalation from

those believed most likely to avenge his murder. Later developments simply added to the chagrin.² According to a report published on Huffington Post (United Kingdom) to coincide with the first commemoration of the assassination:

An hour before he was killed, Chatah tweeted messages slamming the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah. One tweet said: “*Hezbollah is pressing hard to be granted similar powers in security & foreign policy matters that Syria exercised in Lebanon for 15 years,*” he said, in reference to Syria’s nearly 30-year military and political hegemony in Lebanon that ended after Rafiq Hariri’s murder in 2005.³

When the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) held its opening session on January 16, 2014, it missed an opportunity to offer a potent reminder to end Lebanon’s long history of impunity. Lebanese viewers followed the STL’s opening session as

¹ Abedine, Saad, Holly Yan and Yousuf Basil. Lebanon’s Mohamad Chatah - U.S. friend, Hezbollah foe - killed in blast. CNN. December 28, 2013. <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/12/27/world/meast/lebanon-explosion/>.

² As the commemoration of the first anniversary of Chatah’s assassination drew closer, several pro-Hezbollah media outlets spread the rumor that security agencies had discovered that “Islamists” were responsible. Soon after, that rumor was dispelled by senior Future Movement personalities including General Ashraf Rifi, the current Minister of Justice and former head of Lebanon’s Internal Security Forces. For further information about the peculiar circumstances regarding disclosure of that news, see the *An-Nahar* article of December 19, 2014. For information about General Rifi’s disavowal, see <http://www.lebanese-forces.com/2014/12/24/ashraf-rifi-29/>.

³ Ismail, Nehad. A Fatal Tweet Has Killed Another Critic of Bashar al Assad. Huffington Post (UK). December 30, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nehad-ismail/a-fatal-tweet-has-killed-_b_4507356.html.

if it were the monotonous trailer for a new and terribly boring television series. Even the trailer's conclusion proved disappointing when Saad Hariri announced from The Hague that he was not only ready to share power with Hezbollah but remained optimistic that an agreement could be reached."⁴ Essentially, Hariri's statement indicated that the Future Movement was ready to participate in a "national unity" government in coordination with the organization to which those accused of having killed his own father are affiliated. But the fledgling government cloaked a significant problem.

Lebanon's new "national unity" government was formed with Tammam Salam serving as the prime minister (Salam hails from the decaying Beirut Sunni family that gave Lebanon its six-time Prime Minister Saeb Salam), an outcome based on a reciprocal "nihil obstat" from the regional patrons of the Future Movement (Saudi Arabia) and Hezbollah (Iran) negotiated by the French. Once the new government was seated, it became clearer to the Lebanese (and others) that any possibility of electing a new, perhaps even *symbolic* president of the republic was little more than wishful thinking. Yet on May 25, when former President Michel Suleiman elegantly departed the Baabda presidential palace, many Lebanese learned why Tammam Salam chose not to refer to the new body as a "national unity" government and instead preferred to use the more prosaic moniker, "national interest" government.

Several months later, despite some feigned suspense generated by a few political actors, the parliament—

which had already extended its mandate in 2013—repeated its claim that security conditions in the country were not conducive to holding parliamentary elections. And with that assertion, the elections were postponed again, this time until 2017. The aftermath of the parliament's vote ensured that its members, elected following the Doha Agreement, would serve two full mandates rather than one. Today, amidst the tumult and violence that have become perpetual elements on the Lebanese scene, the national interest government continues (despite predictable travails) to administer the country's day-to-day affairs. But the process is anything but streamlined. For example, since this 24-minister government must also perform the responsibilities of the president, it must obtain unanimous agreement before any decision can be made or law passed. Hence, this cabinet is little more than a sanctuary in which deals are made to keep Lebanon running. Clearly fallible, each time the cabinet attempts to tackle a contentious subject on which no previous agreement has been concluded, Lebanese citizens are told that their cabinet is near collapse!

Upon closer examination, Lebanon's domestic events seem to parallel conditions related to its military and security affairs. While not a day passed without at least one incident having been attributed to the country's tense sectarian impasse, the observation can easily be made that 2014 re-mapped the country's security situation according to the role of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which increased officially near the end of 2013. The LAF's

⁴ Escritt, Thomas. Lebanon's Hariri says could share power with Hezbollah. Reuters. January 17, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/17/us-lebanon-government-hariri-idUSBREA0G15Q20140117>.

fundamental reorganization was met with approval based on the New Year's Eve announcement that Saudi Arabia would provide it with a \$3 billion grant. According to an expert interviewed by *The Wall Street Journal*, "The Saudi grant is intended as a five-year package to the Lebanese armed forces, allowing them not just to buy new French weapons systems but also to make broad improvements in areas including military bases and recruitment."⁵ Interestingly, announcement of the grant was made two weeks before Saad Hariri described his desire for "dialogue" at The Hague.⁶

The exceptionally generous Saudi grant neatly outlined the extent to which regional and foreign powers rely on the LAF's last-ditch efforts to secure what is referred to politely as Lebanon's stability. Critically, however, that stability has suffered tremendously due to reasons imposed by the Syrian conflict, such as the growing number of refugees in Lebanon, increasing radicalization within the country's Sunni community and Hezbollah's sustained involvement in the fighting there.⁷

The magnitude of that international reliance on the LAF was underscored following the Battle of Orsal, which commenced August 2, 2014. Beyond the fact that the Lebanese witnessed the first direct combat between the LAF and armed Syrian opposition elements in control of the Qalamoun region, they also experienced other

unfortunate precedents. For the first time in its history, two dozen LAF soldiers (and a dozen members of Lebanon's Internal Security Force (ISF) became prisoners of war. As of the date of this writing, four of those soldiers have already been murdered, and the fate of the others remains largely unknown (although they have become a collective tool being used by the Islamists to intervene in Lebanon's daily affairs by coercing the prisoners' families to protest against the government). But it is known that their future depends on negotiations that have not progressed satisfactorily. Another precedent was the defection of several Sunni soldiers during that battle. Since it can be argued that "unauthorized absence" is a very typical crime in most military organizations, the fact that the soldiers who deserted were Sunni indicates that not even the LAF can escape the effects of Lebanon's sectarian tensions.

The Battle of Orsal was also important to Lebanon for another reason. When it began, the Hariri establishment still claimed to be the champion of Lebanon's Sunni community. Before, during and after the battle, however, the opinion expressed by members of that community, especially those in the north, was that the events in Orsal were demonstrative of a chain of actions undertaken by the LAF, at the behest of Hezbollah, all of which have been directed against Lebanon's Sunni population.⁸ That sentiment prompted the Hariri

⁵ Knickmeyer, Ellen and Maria Abi-Habib. Saudis Pledge \$3 Billion to Support Lebanon's Army. *The Wall Street Journal*. December 29, 2013. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304361604579288430866906254>.

⁶ Sleiman: Saudi Arabia grants Lebanese Army \$3 billion. *The Daily Star*. December 29, 2013. <http://dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2013/Dec-29/242579-sleiman-saudi-arabia-grants-lebanese-army-3-billion.ashx#sthash.C7XCaNIh.dpuf>.

⁷ Importantly, the thorny issue of Palestinian refugee camps has not been addressed in this piece. Nevertheless, those Sunni pockets continue to attract numerous Palestinian refugees from Syria, not to mention the repeated floods of Syrian refugees. In addition, they provide shelter for outlawed Lebanese Islamists, a group that has become another source of concern relative to the country's security situation.

⁸ "Salafists: Surviving in Hezbollah's shadow?," https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/salafists_surviving_in_hezbollahs_shadow

establishment and its Saudi patron to play an even greater role in events occurring in Lebanon's Sunni community. Accordingly, Saad Hariri ended a self-imposed, two-year absence when he was dispatched to Beirut post haste. While there, he announced that Saudi Arabia would provide another billion-dollar grant to fortify Lebanon's security institutions and presided over the election of a new Sunni Grand Mufti.⁹



The Lebanese tend to believe that a nebulous and undisclosed mega-arrangement between the regional and international actors with active interest in the Middle East is the glue that holds Lebanon together and ensures its *stability*. And while that perception may not be entirely misguided, it is certainly focused on Lebanon. Pointedly, however, the real factors behind the country's somewhat fleeting stability should worry rather than reassure its citizens.

One of the chief components of Lebanon's stability is the *Lebanese* balance of power between the two regional axes that are in competition throughout the Middle East. That balance of power is determined by the strengths and weaknesses of the domestic actors involved and the presence or absence of strategic vision among the regional patrons. Also included are the variable policies espoused by international actors, with the U.S. and the Russian Federation topping the list. In other words, to understand Lebanon's definition of stability, an examination

must be made of the country's status in the eyes of the belligerent regional actors. Done properly, we might be able to determine accurately whether Lebanon should ultimately be considered a *battlefield* or a *neutral zone*.

Highly placed officials within the Iranian power spectrum do not deny that its ambitions are far more overarching than those being pursued by countries that still respect regional stability and the sovereignty of their regional neighbors. That fact, which is frequently obfuscated by the meandering discussions between the P5+1 group and Iran regarding its nuclear programs, perhaps needs to be reemphasized using the very same language being used by those Iranian officials:

Yahya Rahim Safavi, the former commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the current military adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said in May 2014, "[Iran's] real borders are not what they appear, but extend to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in southern Lebanon."¹⁰

Near the end of September, "Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Gholam Ali Rashid announced that Iran's military advisors are present in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine to provide those nations with necessary military recommendations."¹¹ Then, in October 2014, "Representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC Hojjat al-Eslam Ali Saidi [said]: 'The

⁹ For more information about this issue, please review the ShiaWatch Alert, "The 'Dispenser Policy' - Is Saudi Cash Enough to Contain the Identity Crisis of the Lebanese Sunni?" That alert is available at <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/603>.

¹⁰ Nader, Sami. Former IRGC leader claims Iran's border to Lebanon's shores. Al-Monitor. Undated.

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2014/05/lebanon-presidential-elections-iran-us-negotiations.html#>.

¹¹ Top Commander: Iran Providing Military Advice to Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon. FARS News Agency. September 27, 2014. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930705001446>.

Islamic system's strategic depth is in various dimensions. Our borders today are in Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast...."¹² On December 16, Ali Akbar Velayati, the foreign affairs advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei, reasserted that Iran's influence stretches "from Yemen to Lebanon." And finally, the late December visit to

Lebanon, Syria and Iraq (the three "western reaches" of the "Iranian empire") by Ali Larijani, speaker of Iran's parliament and a pillar of the so-called conservative wing of the Iranian regime (assuming any distinction between Iranian "extremists" and "moderates" is even relevant) speaks volumes about the Iranian version of realpolitik.

Hezbollah's Division of Labor: Fighting for Assad, Singing for Jesus

Hezbollah, which vigorously defends the Assad regime in Syria and is involved in terrorist attacks worldwide, is also the proud sponsor of the al-Mahdy Scouts Harmonic Orchestra. On December 19, 2014, that musical group held a Christmas recital at the Holy Family University in Batrun, north of Beirut—a location that is both a Christian stronghold and is central to Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. Interestingly, the al-Mahdy Scouts performed at more than one Lebanese location during the holiday season, and it should come as no surprise that



A YouTube clip of the recital is available online:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCubYto-XeE>

those performances were essentially public relations stunts. The purpose behind those concerts was to entice Lebanese Christians and offer Hezbollah's Christian allies a better argumentative comparison between its "enlightenment" and "obscurantism" of Sunni Islamists. That same day, news from Saïda (the traditional home and stronghold of the Hariri family) reported that someone had attempted earlier that day to burn down the Christmas tree erected by the municipality of that conservative Sunni village.

Yet the issue at hand goes well beyond recitals or Christmas trees. The first and perhaps most important issue at stake relates to Hezbollah's readiness to adopt (at least publicly) capricious interpretations of some Islamic dogmas. Its apparent fluctuation stems from the often-overlooked fact that Hezbollah is indeed a religiously oriented organization. The same cannot be said, for instance, about the Future Movement, the distinctly Sunni character of which is far more sociopolitical than it is religious. Stated otherwise, while Hezbollah invites its constituents to feel relaxed about their religious observances and responsibilities, the Future Movement—vastly different—is frequently attacked by (Sunni) Islamists for its "secular" approach. The second concern regards Hezbollah's formulation, which is based on enduring organizational philosophies that telegraph the presence of long-term strategic planning and a highly developed system for the division of labor, both of which are supplemented by prescribed incentives and punishments. In comparison, no other Lebanese organization can even hope to equal Hezbollah's meticulousness, the least of which is the "easygoing" and amateurish Future Movement. At this point, yet another problem—funding—becomes critical. Most Hezbollah opponents argue that the organization has flourished because of its vast financial resources (regardless of their kosher or non-kosher origins). But while those opinions have merit, arguments that center on the organization's funding typically fail to make a decisive point. After all, since 2005 neither the Future Movement nor the March 14 Alliance can claim that the funding they have received has been meager!

¹² Moarefian, Mehrdad and Marie Donovan. Iran Situation Report: October 2014. IranTracker. October 31, 2014. <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/moarefian-donovan-iran-situation-report-october-1-2014>.

The information above should help explain that from an Iranian point of view, its own “co-prosperity sphere” (which encompasses the region stretching roughly from Bab al-Mandeb to the port of Beirut) should give it the luxury of choosing where to engage militarily. Once that premise is accepted, it becomes easier to understand that Lebanon is not considered a battlefield since its importance stems from the fact that it serves as a rear (or sometimes forward deployed) base for regional Iranian outreach efforts—which are becoming increasingly global.¹³ Despite UN Security Council resolution 1701 which addresses Lebanon’s border with Israel, the deployment of thousands of multinational peacekeepers and the LAF, the South Lebanon area has become a veritable balcony suspended over a portion of Israel from which Iran can hurl real or symbolic stones. It also enables Iran to remind anyone that its reach can affect regional stability both within and outside the Arab world. A capable example of the role played by the Lebanese/Israeli border relates to a recent announcement by Brigadier General Sayyed Majid Moussavi (a lieutenant commander of the IRGC’s Aerospace Force) that Iran had given Hezbollah its recently developed Fateh-class Conqueror missiles that could put Dimona within striking range.^{14,15} Where considerations (and negotiations) regarding capabilities such as Iran’s nuclear ambitions are concerned, Lebanon’s function as a rear base is apparently being tolerated by Western powers in accordance with U.S. foreign policy maxims. Sadly, the situation has

been growing steadily for the past several years. Unfortunately, the use by Iran of its nuclear capabilities as a bargaining chip, and the fact that its nuclear agenda and expansionist intentions are two sides of the same coin is often overlooked or misunderstood. These conditions cause international (especially Western) powers to place too much emphasis on Iran’s nuclear program, which has enabled it to score additional expansionist successes and continue its nuclear adventures. As an example, Iran’s offer to play a “positive” role in Syria has enabled the country to continue to advance its nuclear program. In sum, the relationship between Iranian expansionism and its nuclear project is and should continue to be particularly worrisome.

This seemingly universal tolerance of Iranian adventurism is evidenced by the blind eye being turned to Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria and the extant (if not increasing) cooperation between Hezbollah and Lebanon’s state security and military organizations. Interestingly, that tolerance becomes even more demonstrable when considering the added perspective of the Syrian refugee issue. While the world believes that the onslaught of Syrian refugees has become Lebanon’s biggest problem, it seems to have escaped the attention of the global community that some of the largest waves of Syrian refugees in the Orsal area (who have since spread throughout Lebanon) arrived there only *after* Hezbollah’s 2013 and 2014 “victories” in the Qalamoun region. To the best of our knowledge, that

¹³ Regarding this global reach, the works of Matthew Levitt are obviously the authority in this matter.

¹⁴ Iranian Commander: Lebanese, Palestinian Resistance Groups Possess Fateh-Class Missiles. FARS News Agency. November 12, 2014. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930821000321>.

¹⁵ Hezbollah: Our new Iranian missiles are a deterrent against Israel. Haaretz. November 23, 2014. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.628065>.

substantial human displacement was neither researched nor challenged by those who today consider the refugee tsunami not only a humanitarian, but also a security issue.

In view of the foregoing, and when seen from the Iranian perspective, Lebanon represents a free zone that boasts modern seaport facilities and a capable international airport (which is largely free of state control since the responsible agencies involved have been thoroughly infiltrated by Hezbollah and its local pawns). The country also has a dutifully compliant banking sector, a border with Israel and a Shia demographic from which Iran can draw fighters and/or terrorists as it sees fit.

Contrary to Iran's policy for Lebanon, which is characterized by its strategic vision, the Lebanese policy espoused by Saudi Arabia has never been either cohesive or successful. Instead, it is the polar opposite of the Iranian approach as evidenced by the numerous failures it has suffered relative to its "management" of the domestic affairs of its Lebanese friends, whether they fall within March 14 or the Sunni Future Movement. While the Saudis' Lebanese friends must certainly bear the lion's share of the responsibility for their failures, it is also obvious that Saudi Arabia demonstrated questionable vision and decisiveness regarding the functionality of Lebanon's regional politics. For instance, while the Saudis advocate today that Assad should play no role in any future Syrian political processes, they tried in 2009 to organize a Lebanese-Syrian reconciliation and dispatched Saad Hariri to Damascus based on their belief that an arrangement could still be reached with his regime. Clearly, Saudi Arabia is weaker in

Lebanon than its Iranian foe, but the scope of the problem surpasses that constraint. After all, things have become more serious for the Saudis since The Kingdom began losing its foothold in Lebanon's Sunni community—which the Saudis have always seen as part of their own backyard. That steady loss seems to have been particularly painful for the Saudis, especially when those losses benefitted their smaller, younger brother, Qatar. The Battle of Orsal sent the Saudis an exceptionally alarming message, to which they responded by rushing Saad Hariri back to Lebanon. In view of these developments, we can only conclude that this status quo will probably persist until something astonishingly unforeseen occurs at the regional level.

In view of the differences between the Lebanese policies of the two nations that exert the greatest influence in Lebanon, it is obvious that the Iranian approach has far outstripped that of its competitor with respect to imposing its presence and defining the rules of the game. At the same time, however, it seems prudent to wonder about the price associated with that status quo and the impact it will likely have on Lebanon.

As 2015 begins, three pivotal issues will remain on the Lebanese political table. These are (1) the dialogue between Hezbollah and the Future Movement, (2) the empowerment of the LAF courtesy of the Saudi grant mentioned above and (3) the persistent presidential void. But that number could easily stretch to four if the Syrian refugee issue is included. After all, the matter has eclipsed the purview of domestic challenges since Lebanese authorities took it upon themselves to close Lebanon's borders to any more newcomers

(with some notable exceptions). But simply because that decision swept the matter off the table of Lebanese public debate, it has not, unfortunately, been solved.

Before Parliament's recent vote to extend its mandate, the matter attracted opposing opinions from Hezbollah and the Future Movement. But we can be certain that the postponement could not have happened without previous, quasi-binding "understandings" between the domestic actors and their respective regional patrons. The godfathers of the parliament's mandate extension were Speaker Berri and Druze/PSP leader Jumblatt, and the contradictory stands taken previously by each individual stemmed from their shared desire to ensure the survival of the Taif Agreement (and the systems it imposed) regardless of the cost involved. In that sense, the parliament's mandate extension not only assures parliamentarians of job security, but it makes the arrangements necessary to coin a political environment based largely on the lessons "imparted" to Lebanon during the period of Syrian tutelage.¹⁶ The parliamentary extension and the lessons learned as a result are now a model for the voting that may one day give Lebanon its next president. Stated otherwise, the Christian bloc (and community) notwithstanding, agreements between the Sunni and Shia blocs, coupled with the blessings of their respective patrons, will ultimately pave the way for the new Lebanese president. Beyond its obvious outcome, the vote

to extend the parliament's mandate created the conditions necessary to promote dialogue between the Future Movement and Hezbollah. And once again, the blessings of Lebanon's regional patrons, supplemented by the stagecraft of Berri and Jumblatt, have made that dialogue a reality. Of course, no one associated with the ongoing exchange has any particularly high expectations about its outcome. Still, the posturing involved helps sustain the power base described herein as well as the apparent willingness to make symbolic arrangements—such as the election of a new president.

On another level, the dialogue is intended to help ease Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon vis-à-vis improved relations between the Future Movement and Hezbollah. But while Nabih Berry and Walid Jumblatt (veritable fixtures on the Lebanese political scene) are responsible for advocating the idea of dialogue, they certainly would not have had the latitude to do so without first having received "permission" from their respective patrons. (On an almost comical note, the agenda being used for this much-touted dialogue fails to mention some of the most contentious issues facing Lebanon today, such as Hezbollah's weapons and its involvement in Syria.) Regarding the election of a new president, both camps agreed that the matter would be discussed "in general terms" without naming names or going into too much detail—a precaution taken to prevent added frustration for their respective Christian allies.

¹⁶ Of note, the parliamentary blocs that voted against the extension were Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), its ally the Armenian Tashnag Party and the Kataeb Party. Under the pretext of respecting the constitution and its organizational principles, the FPM never accepted the idea of an extension. Its "nay" vote was consistent with its actions in 2013 to decry the postponement of parliamentary elections since doing so would prevent it from broadening its presence in parliament. In comparison, the motivation behind the actions of Amin Gemayel's Kataeb Party are very different. Through its vote, Kataeb wanted to prove to its Christian public that it is not the same lapdog as the Lebanese Forces (LF) which, after staunchly rejecting the idea of such an extension, ultimately fell in step with its Sunni ally, the Future Movement and voted for the postponement.

Lebanon's Debilitating Security Syndrome

The Lebanese parliament decided—again—last November 5 to postpone parliamentary elections until June 2017 (the first postponement was voted into action in May 2013), a decision that essentially granted the parliament a second full term. A few days after the vote, Minister of Health Wael about Faour, a favorite of Progressive Socialist Party Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, launched an unprecedented campaign of naming, shaming and prosecuting Lebanon's food providers. Not even were highly regarded malls, restaurants and chain franchises spared from his wrath. Interestingly, the campaign has come to be known in popular parlance as the campaign for "food security" (*Amn ghizai*). Regardless of the coincidental association between the postponement and about Faour's food crusade, it succeeded in



Health Minister Wael about Faour holds his nose closed in disgust as he inspects food and medicine warehouses at Rafik Hariri International airport on Tuesday, December 23, 2014. Pro-Amal Minister of Public Works Ghazi Zayter (blue tie) stands to Faour's left. It is a poorly kept secret that the Amal Movement has monopolized the appointment of most airport officials....

shifting public attention away from "politics" and toward individual safety. In fact, Walid Jumblatt's complete support of "his" minister's agitation immediately made the food campaign the political issue du jour. While such an investigation is intrinsically laudable despite any manipulation that may be involved, it is important to note its two particular characteristics. First, it was surprisingly easy to connect the issue of "food" with that of "security."

More to the point, the entire issue seems to prey upon the lingering sense of fear among the Lebanese. Second, Lebanon's public figures involved in "the campaign" have leveled exaggerated accusations of scandal and enacted sharp reprobations based on their findings, whether those assessments disclose dirty food or the corrupt administration of the country's food chain. Indeed, while the actions being taken by the officials involved far outstrip all historical precedents, they also make it easy to exonerate themselves from any culpability in the situation. Critically, it seems as if those involved in this sudden crackdown have been doing little if anything to administer the country's critical stocks during the decades they have already been at their posts. Unfortunately, the lack of public response to this situation coupled with the complete absence of accountability for how the food chain became so tainted is yet another sign of progressive Lebanese decay....

As noted above, opinions regarding the likely outcomes of this dialogue are being shared widely by the participants themselves and the personalities affiliated with the Future Movement—who warn publicly of marginal expectations and secretly fear that the process may be interpreted by Lebanon's Sunni community as yet another concession by the Hariri establishment to its pro-Iran Shia counterparts. Nevertheless, if the pawns and their respective patrons desire dialogue, then it will

almost certainly achieve a very specific result, one that is understood most easily from the Hezbollah/Iran perspective. Even as political and security events ratcheted up tensions in Lebanon, Hezbollah's unwavering policy has been to offer an extended hand to encourage Future Movement representatives to participate in dialogue. Not only did that approach demonstrate Hezbollah's cynical realism, but it also enabled Hezbollah to assert that its involvement in Syria is a supranational issue which

it will not discuss with its Lebanese peers. In other words, Hezbollah has achieved de facto legitimacy via that situation.¹⁷

In contrast, the games being played by the Future Movement about engaging in dialogue are far less important, especially since it appears that the only benefit the Future Movement (and its Saudi patrons) will receive is renewed recognition by Hezbollah that the Hariri establishment remains the primary representative of Lebanon's Sunni community. Thus, *the greatest "victory" to befall the Future Movement would not be against Hezbollah, but against its competitors in the Sunni community, regardless of any other achievements by the two sides.*¹⁸

Ultimately, this "episode" of dialogue is largely symbolic since it helps demonstrate the degree to which all other components of the Lebanese society (not only the Christians, the Druze and others, but also those who do not fall within extant confessional and sectarian criteria) are being marginalized. Yet the exchange is also emblematic of the failure to elect a new Lebanese president. Despite assurances by Hezbollah and the Future Movement that they will not personify discussions about the matter (i.e., they will only discuss the issue in general terms and will not mention the candidates), the fact remains that the two "strongest" candidates for that office, Samir Geagea (who heads the Lebanese

Forces) and Michel Aoun (who heads the Free Patriotic Movement), will simply be tossed out of the race. Finally, the dialogue also signals the official end of any ambitions either man might have about becoming Lebanon's next president, as any eventual agreement between Hezbollah and the Future Movement (and consequently between their respective patrons) will exact reciprocal concessions and almost certainly stipulate the election of a Maronite. This leaves Geagea and Aoun looking like household pets being led about by their Shia and Sunni masters.¹⁹



The debate over the infiltration of Islamist militant groups from Syria into Lebanon and the impact their presence will have on Lebanon's security and stability is not new. Indeed, a landmark point in that debate was achieved in a statement made in December 2011 by Lebanon's former pro-March 8 Minister of Defense Fayez Ghosn. When Ghosn made that statement, March 14/Future Movement support for the Syrian revolution was unconditional, and the debate his statement triggered was highly politicized. Those who asserted the presence in Lebanon of cells affiliated with al-Qaeda were implying that the war in Syria was leading to conflict with the terrorist groups while those who denied their presence in

¹⁷ As an aside, that newly attained validity may help explain the operational coordination evident between the LAF and Hezbollah. Such cooperation is instantly recognizable in "Shiiland," where joint checkpoints have long since become de rigueur. Another aspect of LAF-Hezbollah coordination (somewhat more challenging to evaluate) is the maintenance of general security. But while it is somewhat difficult to quantify the effectiveness of that endeavor, we cannot ignore the growing perception within the Sunni and Syrian refugee communities that the LAF, particularly its intelligence branch, is willfully implementing an agenda conceived by Hezbollah.

¹⁸ Though recommendation-oriented, Raphaël Lefèvre's piece "Tackling Sunni Radicalization in Lebanon" offers a competent and updated overview of the state of the problem. <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/12/24/tackling-sunniradicalization-in-lebanon>

¹⁹ Outspoken, pro-Hariri Minister of Interior Nouhad al-Machnuk stated clearly in the aftermath of the first dialogue session (in which he was a participant): "It is time for March 8 and March 14 to give up their candidates and adopt an approach that could establish the consensual nature of the presidency." Is too much hope pinned on Geagea, Aoun meeting? YaLibnan. December 29, 2014. <http://yalibnan.com/2014/12/29/is-too-much-hope-pinned-on-geagea-aoun-meeting/>.

Lebanon did not subscribe to that notion. Since then, however, things changed dramatically in Syria, in Lebanon and along the borders that separate the two countries when rabble pockets of fighters emerged in the Qalamoun region. Today, thanks in great measure to the area's topography, the destruction of that Islamist sanctuary seems all but impossible.

Aside from the actions taken by the LAF in June 2013 to crush Lebanese Sunni Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir (who is resolutely against Hezbollah and favors the revolution against the Syrian regime) and during the Battle of Orsal, two main factors have propelled the LAF to Lebanon's center stage, the first of which is associated with Lebanon's current political vacuum. As alluded to previously, the Tammam Salam government was seated primarily as a quick-fix solution to the absence of a new president and to continue quasi-normal management of the country. It is important to note that according to the Lebanese Constitution, the president of the republic is typically a Maronite—despite the fact that the Taif Agreement stripped the incumbent of a substantial portion of his responsibilities. Nevertheless, the president continues to be recognized formally as the commander-in-chief of the LAF. Thus, it was not coincidental that the last two presidents of the republic had roots in Lebanon's military institution.

While the origins of the two previous presidents underscore the crisis being experienced by Maronite political elites, it also echoes the profound sentiment among Lebanese

Christians that the LAF is ultimately the custodian of the Lebanese system. The second factor relates to the fact that in the eyes of substantial portions of the Lebanese populace, the LAF became a stakeholder in the country's survival following the Battle of Orsal. As such, the LAF is considered to possess not only the technical capability to defend Lebanon's eastern border, but also to defend Lebanon and its citizens against the vague "Takfiri" threat. The dramatically inflated role of the LAF was accompanied by activation of a plan to provide the LAF with more arms and means thanks to the huge Saudi grant described previously. Unfortunately, Lebanese politicians consider this reinforcement of the LAF's capabilities to be the solution to all of their problems. And when we refer to "the Lebanese" in general, we include Prime Minister Tammam Salam. For instance, in a recent interview with the French *le Journal du Dimanche*, Salam stated, "We are still in talks for the helicopters to be delivered at the beginning of the program rather than at the end, so that we can use missiles as soon as possible against the jihadis in the mountains."²⁰

Unfortunately, the panacea that derives from the notion that rearming the LAF will guarantee Lebanon's security overlooks the obvious fact that many of Lebanon's problems have originated within its own borders and have not spilled over from the other side. Despite that fact, the optimistic notion that "the army is the solution" is regularly echoed by Western diplomats and emissaries visiting Lebanon, including those from the United States.²¹ Incredibly, that

²⁰ Lebanon says it needs French helicopters quickly to fight jihadis. Reuters. December 21, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/21/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-france-idUSKBN0JZ0EW20141221>.

²¹ "The Army is the Solution," is the title of a book published in 1988 by General Fouad Aoun, a close supporter of General Michel Aoun. At the time of its publication, it was considered the manifesto of the pro-Aoun movement.

shortsighted approach has sometimes assumed absurd dimensions. For example, on September 19, U.S. Ambassador David Hale hosted a ceremony during which he transferred 23 vehicles to Lebanon's Internal Security Forces. During his keynote speech, he remarked:

The vehicles delivered today, valued at \$1.6 million, include 23 prisoner transport vehicles that will allow the ISF to increase the number of prisoners that can be escorted to courts for hearings. This will alleviate prison overcrowding by addressing a key factor in the backlog of court cases and facilitating an important part of the judicial process."²²

It appears, therefore, that the chief problem being faced by the Lebanese judiciary has its roots in *transportation*.... If still needed, these vehicles are a good example of the technical "downstream approach" to problems that demand clear policy decisions and actions rather than well-considered Christmas gifts!

Obviously, this and other approaches to assisting Lebanon's institutions, especially its military and security-oriented agencies, is not the result of a myopic interpretation of the country's reality. Rather, they express political acknowledgment of a *fait accompli* about which the U.S. (and other nations) seems uninterested in challenging, at least

for the time being. Apparently, the international community does not consider Lebanon's future to be a particular priority. That perspective may explain the response by an American diplomat who was asked recently to address the converging interests of the U.S. and Iran with respect to support of the LAF. "We know why we support it. You'll have to ask the Iranians why they do the same!"²³ Ultimately, "the appearance of the LAF frequently targeting Sunni militants and protecting targeted Shia communities may be giving rise to increased perceptions among some Lebanese Sunnis that the LAF is acting in effect for the benefit of Hezbollah. [...] The LAF is likely to face challenges to its reputation as long as it simultaneously remains under pressure from Sunni extremists and is unauthorized (and unable) to halt Hezbollah's continuing operations in Syria."²⁴

Nevertheless, this is just one aspect of the persistent over-reliance on "big sticks" to maintain Lebanon's stability. In reality, the greater challenge is related to the *objective* intersection within the war on terrorism, a war in which the LAF and other security agencies have been invited to participate. Unsurprisingly, Hezbollah claims to be fighting this same conflict in Syria and Lebanon.... Indeed, this objective intersection is not just a matter of battlefield tactics. Rather, it leads us to the higher ground of, for instance, the agenda being used to guide the supposedly ongoing

²² US donates vehicles to Lebanese police. The Daily Star. September 19, 2014.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Sep-19/271250-us-donates-vehicles-to-lebanese-police.ashx>.

²³ Iran has never stopped offering armaments to the LAF. The most recent offer was made last September when Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, visited Beirut. That visit was followed shortly thereafter by a courtesy visit to Tehran by Lebanon's Defense Minister to pursue discussions with his Iranian counterpart. While Lebanon politely declined the Iranian offer to prevent accusations of breaching the sanctions still imposed on Iran, the Iranians continue to provide armaments to Hezbollah!

²⁴ Blanchard, Christopher M. "Lebanon: Background and U.S. Policy." Congressional Research Service. February 14, 2014. http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.fas.org%2Fsgp%2Fcrs%2Fmideast%2FR42816.pdf&ei=3wuiVMHHFcebgwTH8YCwBA&usq=AFQjCNHzRs6lFH84eohgbZ0CHj0yMdzZ4g&sig2=f-9LMAz8_2Dura4m2Hcktq.

U.S.-Iranian negotiations. Ultimately, how much Iranian influence will the U.S. tolerate in the western realm

of the Iranian empire, which today is comprised of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon?²⁵

Understanding the Lebanese System...

The Lebanese "system" often appears opaque and impenetrable. The problem is, further investigation confirms that the system is as trivial as it is petty. The following narrative published by the pro-Hezbollah newspaper al-Akhbar, (December 23), offers some insight into how an example of patent nepotism can become confused with matters of national security.

It is increasingly evident that as the Lebanese learn more about the corrupt nature of those responsible for managing their affairs, the knowledge they gain will be infinitesimal compared with what they do not know.

Perhaps the following remark, made by a Beirut-based ambassador at a conference on exploiting Lebanon's hydrocarbon resources, will lend some insight: "I hope [those resources] remain buried deep in the sea so that a future generation of Lebanese might take advantage of this natural gift."

"Before today's dialogue commences between Hezbollah and the Future Movement, another type of "reconciliation" took place last week between "two friends," Speaker Nabih Berri and Minister of Interior Nouhad Machnouk, at the Speaker's residence in

Ain Tinneh. Despite the good will the two men expressed, their relationship has been strained of late due to the looming crisis over nomination of a new head for Beirut's municipal police body. Notably, that position is reserved by convention for a retired officer who belongs to the Shia sect.

After Berri informed Machnouk of the officer he wished to nominate, Machnouk replied that he would give Berri a list of three names from which a selection could be made. But when Berri insisted on his original candidate, Machnouk acquiesced but then informed Saad Hariri. In response, Hariri asked that the issue be postponed until he returns to Beirut, a trip scheduled to take place before year-end. When Machnouk followed Hariri's instructions, Berri became agitated and communicated his unease by canceling an upcoming meeting between the two. Then, Brigadier General Assaad Tofayli, a recognized Berri supporter who heads the Internal Security Forces' (ISF) Administrative Unit (a State agency that leans heavily toward the Hariri camp and is headed by a Sunni), ceased disbursement of the ISF director general's secret funds, which are typically distributed to its intelligence branch.

Following negotiations mediated by an individual close to Speaker Berri, it became obvious that Berri was indeed interested in maintaining cordial relations—and Machnouk ensured that nothing was leaked to the media about their "misunderstanding." During Machnouk's visit to Ain Tinneh last week, he and Berri exchanged friendly banter before they agreed to postpone the nomination process. Of note, the matter of reinstating the disbursement of secret funds was also resolved."



Nabih Berri was born in Sierra Leone to Lebanese Shia parents in January 1938 (official date). He has headed the Amal Movement since 1980 and has been the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament since 1992. Although Berri leads the "other" component of the "Shia duo" (comprised of Hezbollah and Amal), Hezbollah gives him considerable leeway. In the eyes of Hezbollah's opponents, Berri can play the role of the "moderate" and "wise" elder statesman. Of course, from Hezbollah's perspective, keeping Berri in its arsenal is certainly a plus. In fact, Hezbollah's officials often refer to him as "our foreign affairs minister!"

²⁵ To assess the extent of the Iranian involvement, see the recently released report "Iran in Syria" produced by the Naame Shaam initiative: <http://www.naameshaam.org/>

When one considers that Lebanon's future will be shaped in the near term by each of the elements listed above, it seems reasonable to believe that nothing can be expected to return Lebanon to the world's center stage. Nevertheless, while it can be assumed confidently that "Lebanon is likely to remain an arena for sectarian and geopolitical competition [wracked by] political paralysis and insecurity," it can also be stated that the situation referred to diplomatically as "stability" comes with a particularly bloody price tag accompanied by long-term, sanguinary charges that are difficult if not impossible to predict.²⁶



As mentioned above, while *The Wall Street Journal* may have noted that the Christmas tree in Byblos (north of Beirut) is among the most beautiful in the world this year, just a few dozen kilometers to the north, the LAF was fighting a pitched battle against Islamist groups immediately prior to the photograph being taken on November 25. A few kilometers beyond that, the Lebanese villages that dot the country's border with Syria are being buffeted relentlessly by events occurring in Syria but seem entirely unaffected by events in Lebanon.²⁷ In the area of Orsal to the east, not a day passes without clashes between the LAF and armed Islamists who have made the mountainous Qalamoun region their sanctuary.

Excluding other portions of that same border, if this particular pocket (which includes Catholic Ras Baalbeck and Sunni Orsal) is "outsourced" to the

LAF while other areas remain under Hezbollah control, then it becomes clear that the decision to share the responsibility for policing the border was made simply to ensure that Shia-centric Hezbollah does not need to engage Lebanese Sunni (who are supportive of their brethren in Syria) in a direct fight on Lebanese soil. And while Hezbollah controls the border areas to the north and south of Orsal, the tri-border (Lebanese-Syrian-Israeli) area to the south, which is home to the complex and incendiary relationship between Sunni and Druze, is certainly no less dangerous.²⁸

With respect to Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria, although it no longer attracts the press coverage it did when its combat role was announced, the situation cannot be evaluated based on figures alone. After all, the only remotely factual metric that offers some hope of describing the real extent of Hezbollah's involvement is the number of its members the organization admits to having been killed—under the pretext of securing sacred Shia shrines or protecting the "back of the resistance." Regardless, it is prudent to restate the obvious: Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is perceived by Sunni (Lebanese and Syrian alike) as the commitment of an entire Lebanese community, in behalf of a minority Syrian community, against the largest single community in Syria. In other words, Lebanon's Shia community is considered to have Syrian Sunni blood on its hands.

The problems facing the Lebanese are therefore both pressing and alarming, and the dialogue described

²⁶ Christmas Trees Around the World. *The Wall Street Journal*. December 9, 2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/christmas-trees-around-the-world-1418134763>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ayman Sharrouf, "Assad's Druze game exposed," November 11, 2014. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/564387-assads-druze-game-exposed>

herein represents a joint effort to cool Sunni-Shia tensions. Still, the event speaks volumes about relations between Lebanon's two largest sects. But even if resolving tensions between Lebanese Sunni and Shia is little more than an honorable and acceptable excuse for the two communities to sit down together at this particular time in Lebanon's history, it remains a credible and valuable undertaking.

This year, Lebanon will observe the 40th anniversary of the beginning of its "civil" war. Despite this, the country is not likely to witness any major developments—save for the possibility

of the Lebanese (including those of us at ShiaWatch) agreeing that electing a new president is no more or less urgent than preventing economic collapse or poisoning Lebanese society, all of which are actions that will open the door to tremendous instability in the country.

At this point, only "more of the same" is expected on Lebanon's political and security fronts, and we can be sure that the steady attrition being suffered by the country will continue—or possibly increase. Sadly, that process makes us wonder if in Lebanon, attrition might be even worse than war....