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Research Report

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SWP Comments, No. 46/2016

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Wimmen, Heiko (2016) : Lebanon's state of erosion: Divisions over the conflict in Syria sustain a dangerous stalemate, SWP Comments, No. 46/2016, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256421>

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Lebanon's State of Erosion

Divisions over the Conflict in Syria Sustain a Dangerous Stalemate

Heiko Wimmen

The repercussions of the war in Syria have produced a prolonged political stalemate in neighboring Lebanon. As the major political blocs in the country are aligned with opposing sides in the Syria conflict, fear of spillover has led major actors to avoid controversial decisions and suspend elections. This has left room for minimal consensus around maintaining the security that has helped shield Lebanon from the chaos next door. But it has also caused the progressive erosion of political legitimacy, which threatens to unravel political institutions and lead to the further fragmentation of political forces. As all sides are tied to external patrons who no longer consider the country a priority, domestic compromise is likely to remain out of reach. Germany and its European partners should step into the void, in particular the one left by the withdrawal of Saudi Arabia, and push for parliamentary elections as a first step toward due process.

The Lebanese presidency has been vacant since May 24, 2014. Over two and a half years, arcane political maneuvering, dramatic realignments, as well as discreet and not so discreet external intervention have failed to yield a candidate who can rally sufficient support among the major political actors in the Lebanese theater. On September 28, 2016, electoral session number 45 had to be adjourned due to lack of a quorum, once again (Lebanese presidents are elected by parliament and require a quorum of two-thirds of the legislators).

On the one hand, the stalemate is the result of the principle of power-sharing between sectarian groups (of which 18 are officially recognized) that has structured Lebanese politics since the establishment

of the state. Because this system requires broadly inclusive coalitions in order to function, lengthy and cumbersome processes of bargaining over public offices and resources have always been a staple of Lebanese politics. The propensity of Lebanese politicians to look for external allies, on the other hand, has always left Lebanon receptive to the intervention of external powers, who would shore up local clients to keep the minuscule – but strategically located – country aligned with their broader interests.

Because the regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has evolved into open (proxy) warfare in neighboring Syria and in Yemen, the ties that connect major Lebanese actors to these regional powers

have led to debilitating polarization, and almost the total paralysis of Lebanon's political institutions. The presidential void is therefore only the most visible expression of a process of progressive state failure. This comes at a time when Lebanon is facing challenges that already overwhelm those institutions still functioning.

Struggle over Symbols

On the surface, the pitched battle over the presidency is oddly mismatched to the rather modest prerogatives of the office itself. Following the Taif Peace Accord of 1989, which ended the 1975–1990 civil war, the extensive authority wielded by Lebanese presidents was reduced to a largely ceremonial role. The struggle over who is to become Lebanese president is therefore less about a position with real political power than a symbolic one. Yet, symbols matter as much as substance in Lebanese politics.

Political custom reserves each of the three top executive positions for one of the largest sectarian groups in the country, with the presidency going to a Maronite Christian. The prerogatives of these offices are, in turn, seen as being indicative of the balance of power between these groups. Hence, the demotion of the President of the Republic, as stipulated by the 1990 constitution, stood for the end of Maronite-Christian supremacy, which had characterized pre-civil war Lebanon, just as the upgrading of the (Sunni) prime minister and the (Shiite) Speaker of Parliament reflected the (demographic and political) ascendance of the two largest Muslim communities.

This post-Taif power balance is precisely what the current main contender for the post – the former army general Michel Aoun – is proposing to reverse. It is thought that securing the presidency for the leader of the strongest Christian party (with 18 out of 128 seats in parliament, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement comes second after the Sunni Future Movement) would endow the officeholder with real leverage over legislation and nominations, thus putting the

holder of the highest (Christian) office on a more even footing with his Sunni and Shiite counterparts.

In reality, the consequences of such a rebalancing of sectarian power relations are likely to be minimal: An array of institutional checks and veto rights – in addition to non-formal and customary arrangements – leave very limited room for actual change, even if the bargaining power of one party were to increase considerably. Yet, the urgency of Lebanon's dwindling Christian population to obtain some assurances about its presence in the country – at a time when Christian communities are under threat across the region and radical Islamism appears to be on the rise – is strong enough to provide Aoun with consistent electoral support, despite his highly controversial alliance with the Shiite party-cum-militia Hizbullah.

From Confrontation to Stalemate

Elections in Lebanon, however, are never exclusively – and often not even mainly – about the Lebanese. On many occasions, they became the stage where external powers attempted to score (again, mostly symbolic) advantages in pursuit of their larger regional agendas.

Over the past decade, the country has been a political proxy battleground for the regional competition between Syria and Iran on one side, and Saudi Arabia and the United States on the other. In particular after the war of 2006, when Hizbullah's well-prepared guerrilla forces inflicted unexpected losses on Israel's over-confident military, rolling back the organization's autonomous military capacities became a priority for the US administration of George W. Bush. Saudi Arabia and other Arab allies of the United States, in turn, became increasingly concerned about Iranian power projections by means of the party. Strengthening the coercive capacity of the Lebanese state (in particular the Internal Security Forces, ISF) and propping up the pro-Western parties aligned in the so-called

March 14 Alliance were the two key components of their strategy to domesticate the party and force it into the institutional fold.

As the March 8 Alliance formed around Hizbullah (both alliances take their names from rival demonstrations that occurred in the spring of 2005) pushed back, political paralysis ensued, including a presidential vacuum that lasted for about six months.

The pitched political battle escalated to actual violence in May 2008. As became abundantly clear then, Hizbullah had the means, the determination, and the solid support of its external allies to resort to violence; the pro-Western parties had neither. Beirut was occupied by militias, and the government faltered within two days.

Despite the “national reconciliation conference” in the Qatari capital, Doha, which resolved the immediate conflict (on Hizbullah’s terms), the shadow of the mini-civil war of 2008 has been hanging over Lebanese politics ever since. Fear of escalating violence, which only intensified as the conflict in neighboring Syria heated up in early 2012, has prompted the main political forces to avoid or postpone any political confrontations or decisions that could potentially jeopardize the status quo.

Compromises, on the other hand, continue to be equally unattainable as long as the war in Syria continues. Since all Lebanese parties expected (and still expect) that the outcome of the conflict would have a direct impact on the political balance of power in Lebanon, no one is prepared to yield or accept what may turn out to have been too much or too little. Their foreign patrons, in turn, were – and still are – far too preoccupied with Syria to invest political capital in what has become a mere sideshow since 2012. After the short-lived attempt at reviving the political institutions inaugurated by the Doha conference, the same lines of division that had caused the violence in 2008 emerged again, this time in the form of a stalemate that has persisted until today.

The first casualty was the government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who resigned

in March 2013 over contested appointments in the security sector and disagreement over the upcoming parliamentary elections. His designated successor, Tammam Salam, remained unable to form a new cabinet, leaving Mikati to run the country with a caretaker government and reduced competences. By late spring of 2013, parliament divined to suspend elections and extend its own term. Security concerns were cited to justify the constitutionally questionable maneuver, yet parliament remained paralyzed by multiple boycotts that prevented a quorum. Only in March 2014 was a new all-party government finally patched together so that the looming presidential vacuum would not lead to a complete institutional breakdown. It has since been crippled by resignations and the insistence by some parties that decisions must be taken in consensus. Parliament granted itself yet another extension in November 2014, further undermining its own legitimacy, and with it that of the government. In June 2017, its twice-extended term will expire once more, with few indicators that the political rivals are prepared to hold the ballot this time around.

This near breakdown of the political institutions has become the source of multiple governance failures. Most problematically, appointments in the ISF and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have become the object of protracted tugs-of-war, threatening to undermine their credibility as national institutions beyond the political and sectarian fray as well as their capacity to mount a coherent security response to the challenges of the conflict next door. After years of bargaining over the spoils of Lebanon’s coastal gas fields and the privatization of the electricity sector, daily power cuts continue, and gas exploration has not even started. In 2015, the failure to renegotiate lucrative service contracts led to a collapse of the waste disposal system, causing massive public protest. The growing exasperation of the public became apparent in the municipal elections held in May 2016. Local lists campaigning on platforms to

wrest control over municipal councils – and their sometimes significant budgets and patronage potential – from the political elites did well in localities conventionally considered to be under the safe control of the big political blocs. These local lists, however, remained locked out of the representative institutions by the majority (first-past-the-post) electoral system that applies in Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia's Shifting Strategies

Since 2015, this stalemate has been rattled by the increasingly assertive turn in Saudi foreign policy. Up to then, Saudi Arabia had encouraged its main Lebanese client, the Sunni Future Movement, led by the Hariri family, to adopt an accommodating position vis-à-vis the uncompromising stances of Hizbullah and its ally Syria. This strategy of accommodation – which some parts of the movement now criticize as appeasement – was part of a larger attempt by Saudi Arabia's late King Abdallah to bring Syria back into the Arab fold and wean Damascus off its close alliance with Iran. Despite winning a majority at the polls in 2009, Future leader Saad Hariri went more than the extra mile to form yet another “government of national unity.” In the process, he once more confirmed Hizbullah's right to maintain the arms it had just used against the government that his party had headed. As prime minister, he went hat in hand to Damascus to make peace with the very regime he held responsible for the murder of his father in 2005. And while remaining rhetorically committed to the international tribunal set up to investigate this and other assassinations, Hariri kept Hizbullah in government, even as the investigation zoned in on a core group of suspects among Hizbullah's leading cadres. When Hizbullah finally walked out by itself in early 2011 and subsequently formed a new cabinet exclusively with its own allies, Future calmed street protests by its supporters, as it did in October 2012, when a high-level intelligence officer considered

especially close to the movement was assassinated. Despite consistent rumors about links to jihadi networks, the Hariri party also provided critical political cover for an operation of the LAF against a militant anti-Hizbullah cleric in Hariri's hometown, Saida, in the summer of 2013. It disowned – if somewhat belatedly – radical elements who appeared to facilitate recruitment and arms supplies for jihadis fighting in Syria and helped control the situation in Tripoli, after multiple rounds of fighting between Sunni and Alawi quarters, who support opposing sides in the Syrian civil war.

Yet, the Saudi position shifted decisively when the current King of Saudi Arabia, King Salman, ascended to the throne in early 2015 and embarked on a much more assertive foreign policy focused on rolling back perceived Iranian inroads into the Arab region. Alongside stronger engagement in Syria, the most dramatic shift was the Saudi-led intervention in the civil war in Yemen, leading to sharp attacks on the Kingdom by Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah in March 2015, and equally sharp responses from Riyadh and pro-Saudi media outlets. Already back then, it was being insinuated that the Kingdom might reconsider a major donation for the LAF pledged by the late King Abdallah. The war of words escalated further after Saudi Arabia executed the prominent cleric and leader of its own Shiite minority, Nimr al-Nimr, on January 2, 2016. This prompted Nasrallah to predict the downfall of the Saudi dynasty and explicitly accuse Riyadh of sponsoring jihadi terrorist groups.

What finally broke the camel's back was Lebanon's refusal to sign up to a condemnation – adopted by the Arab League on January 10 – of mob attacks against the Saudi embassy in Tehran in the wake of Nimr's execution. On February 19, Saudi funding for the LAF and the ISF to buy equipment in France to the tune of four billion dollars was canceled, with Saudi officials citing Lebanon's failure to stand by the Kingdom in its rivalry with Tehran, and Hizbullah's domination over the Lebanese gov-

ernment. Riyadh proceeded to mobilize its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council to list Hizbullah as a terrorist entity and ban their citizens from traveling to Lebanon, amid rumors that scores of Lebanese expatriates living in the Gulf Countries would see their work contracts, and hence residencies, terminated within the year.

Christian Realignment and Sunni Disarray

Paradoxically, the effects of the Saudi push-back against Hizbullah have been particularly destructive for its main Lebanese client, the Future Movement. As Riyadh's position against Hizbullah hardened, the balancing act of party leader Hariri between rhetorical solidarity with his external patron on the one hand, and pragmatic cooperation with the party on the other, became increasingly untenable. To escape the dilemma and win back the initiative, Hariri embarked on a bold wager: By November 2015, he abandoned the (nearly hopeless) presidential candidacy of his ally, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and endorsed instead Sulaiman Franjieh, a loyal ally of Hizbullah.

Although counterintuitive at first glance, the scheme nevertheless looked compelling: As president, Franjieh would certainly confirm the legitimacy of Hizbullah's arms, thus reassuring the party on its most important policy concern, while relieving the prime minister he was going to appoint from the onus of that concession – from all available signs, Hariri expected to take on the job himself. Appointing Franjieh, who is the grandson of a former president and heir to a long line of influential Christian political figures, also appeared likely to draw support from Christian elites while confirming that the Christian Maronite president can only be elected with the explicit endorsement of the strongest Sunni party. Unlike Michel Aoun, Franjieh has only a small group of three members of parliament who owe him loyalty, making it unlikely that he could become an effective

rival to the prime minister – which is a concern among those Sunnis who fear a reversal of the gains achieved with the 1990 constitution.

Finally, Franjieh's alliance with Hizbullah could be attributed to the long-standing Arab-nationalist orientation of his family, and thus as a regrettable error, but for an honorable cause. Prying away such an ally from Iran's proxy would instead work against Teheran's persistent attempts to style itself as the true champion of Arab and Islamic causes, and label Saudi Arabia and its allies as American puppets. Finally, to Christians in Lebanon and the region, electing Franjieh could convey the message that, instead of pacts between the minorities (which allegedly motivated Aoun's alliance with Hizbullah, besides personal ambition) under Iranian auspices, their future lies with the (Sunni) majority and the pro-Western Arab regimes spearheaded by Riyadh. Thus, with his realignment, Hariri could hope to tempt Hizbullah and sow dissent between the party and its main Christian ally, while placating his main foreign ally and his own increasingly restive followers. All failing, the offer would at least place responsibility for the political vacuum squarely on Hizbullah for rejecting not only a candidate with undeniable pedigree and consensus potential, but also a generous offer extended across the political aisle.

But the calculation backfired badly. Hizbullah, for its part, turned down the bait and stood by its pledge to Aoun. Worse, Hariri's own Christian allies rebelled, with discarded presidential hopeful Samir Geagea officially switching sides and endorsing Aoun. The latter can now boast an even larger share of the Christian political forces aligned to support him, making it virtually impossible to come up with a plausible alternative. By August 2016, Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah spelled out the deal he was prepared to endorse: the election of Michel Aoun for president, in return for endorsing Hariri as the new head of government. Worst of all, Hariri's own

party started to disintegrate during the process. On February 21, 2016, Minister of Justice Ashraf Rifi resigned from government in protest against the continued cooperation with Hizbullah and the endorsement of Franjeh. As an outspoken former head of the ISF, the major Sunni stronghold in the security sector, Rifi commands significant support among followers of Future, who are exasperated with Hariri's appeasement strategy. He proceeded to contest the municipal elections in his native Tripoli, roundly defeating the list formed by Hariri with local heavyweights.

As the Future leader appeared to consider even further concessions – perhaps even yielding to Hizbullah's insistence to impose Aoun after all – his party began showing further strain. In addition, Hariri's increasing financial difficulties – the “billionaire politician” has been unable to pay salaries to many of his employees – compounded the impression of a complete unraveling. According to the recent defector Ashraf Rifi, Hariri is politically “finished.”

That Hariri's political demise is being trumpeted by media known to be mouthpieces of Saudi Arabia fuels speculation as to whether Riyadh is intent on replacing Hariri with a new political force ready to confront Hizbullah more aggressively. Alternatively, Saudi Arabia may have adopted a strategy of diversifying its assets while shifting its focus on higher stakes elsewhere (Syria, Yemen). Statements from the Saudi ambassador (since recalled), in which he states his country will refrain from intervening in internal Lebanese affairs as a matter of principle, are certainly disingenuous. Yet, for the moment, the lack of clear guidance from Riyadh has left Future without its Saudi compass and its leadership in disarray.

With these realignments, by late September the needed majority to elect Michel Aoun as president appeared to be within reach, even over the objections of parts of the Future Movement. This, however, would have done very little to resolve the institutional deadlock, and could have possibly

made it even worse. According to the constitution, once a new president is elected, the government is automatically considered to have been resigned. Michel Aoun's first task would therefore have been to select a new (Sunni) prime minister – a mission impossible if his election were to alienate the most moderate Sunni party, or let it fracture.

Without a larger consensus over the next steps – how to form a new government, when to finally hold elections – the current, already nearly defunct government will likely have to limp on in a caretaker function, alongside a deadlocked and compromised parliament; and after June 2017, possibly no parliament at all. Such unpromising prospects prompted the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, who is also the leader of the second Shiite party, Amal, to hinge the support of his group of 13 MPs for any candidate on a package deal that resolves all outstanding issues. Thus, by early October 2016, the debate was once more back to square one.

Beyond the Stalemate

Suspending political contention while cooperating to maintain security and a minimal level of governance may have been a workable strategy to tide the country over until a solution for Syria could be found. Yet, after more than three years, these survival strategies have reached a dead end, with the erosion of the last vestiges of political legitimacy being written on the wall.

Paradoxically, unlike the last cycle of crisis 10 years ago, the current system breakdown is now being caused by the fact that internal Lebanese politics has fallen below the radar of regional and international actors. Maintaining a stable stalemate in the Lebanese backyard of the Syrian war serves the Saudi and Iranian war sponsors well enough. Western countries, in turn, are too absorbed with the Syrian catastrophe – in particular the influx of refugees – to offer more than occasional mediation for stopgap solutions. Their major concern

remains preserving Lebanon as a comparatively safe host country for the current up to 1.5 million Syrian refugees that still has sufficient state capacity to channel aid and prevent refugee vessels from sailing to Cyprus or other European shores.

However, walking away from Lebanon because it cannot be fixed is only the flip-side of trying to fix it by force – and may turn out to be equally destructive. Along the same lines, banking on the current inertia to persist until some unspecified turn in regional relations resolves the impasse ignores how deceptive the current level of “stability” in the eye of the regional storm really is. One major reason why Lebanon, until now, has been spared the worst consequences of its systemic paralysis is the fact that for the past four years, all attention of the warring parties has been focused on Syria and Iraq. So far, recruits for the jihadi cause have mostly *left* Lebanon to join jihadi groups fighting *elsewhere*, just as Hizbullah has waged the war with the clients of Saudi Arabia and the United States next door rather than at home. The conflict potential that remained was manageable through tacit understandings between Hizbullah, the LAF, and political actors with access to radical Sunni Islamists. It remains far from clear whether the Lebanese security apparatus would hold up if regional developments were to reverse that trend. Contrary to common expectations, a *partial* “solution” for Syria (and there is little reason to expect that a *comprehensive* settlement may be available anytime soon) may raise the stakes rather than clear the ground for a compromise. For instance, if groups such as the so-called Islamic State or the former Jabhat al-Nusra were to be forced out of parts of Syria and Iraq, and large numbers of battle-hardened jihadi fighters were to pour across the border, they could well overwhelm the LAF and impose control in Sunni-dominated areas, in particular the impoverished north. Although Hizbullah may have the military wherewithal to engage the jihadis, doing so in Sunni core areas would be a guaranteed

recipe to ignite a full-fledged sectarian war. Already a marked rise in terrorist attacks would be enough to initiate the formation of proto-militias in the guise of local protection units, as divided politicians and paralyzed institutions are unlikely to generate a coherent security response that inspires trust across the sectarian divides. Under such kinds of pressure, the remnants of the Lebanese state that now mostly run on inertia will quickly unravel.

What Role for the EU and Germany?

For the EU and Germany, preempting such a scenario must be a priority. Lebanon hosts more up to 1.5 million Syrian refugees, many of whom will likely attempt to reach Europe if the security and economic situations in the country deteriorate. So far, attempts by European actors such as France and Great Britain to mediate behind the scenes have achieved little traction. Given the multilayered character of the conflict and the external entanglement of its main protagonists, it is unlikely that additional efforts along these lines can achieve better results. Germany and the EU should step into the gap left by Saudi Arabia and replace some of the funding for the LAF, which would have translated into commissions for European companies anyway. However, such support should not be tied to unrealistic expectations of the LAF creating a counterbalance to Hizbullah, as any such attempt would almost certainly lead to the disintegration of the force. Rather, the LAF is the only line of defense Lebanon has against the threat of armed jihadism, which it will have to face sooner rather than later. Western actors should instead come to terms with the reality that Hizbullah will remain an entrenched player on the Lebanese political scene and that it has to be a part of any attempt to solve the political and institutional crisis. This basic fact will not be changed by labeling the party as a terrorist organization or similar rhetorical exercises.

Yet, effective partners in the other camps are equally indispensable. Although the

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ISSN 1861-1761

creation of a second Sunni party would not necessarily be a bad thing, the current state of fragmentation and failing leadership within the Future Movement is a serious obstacle to finding a way out of the stalemate. A complete unraveling of the party would also make it even more difficult to stem the influence of jihadism at the more radical fringes of the Sunni community. By all available signs, the internal crisis of the Future Movement cannot be resolved without a clear votum from its regional patron, Saudi Arabia. This does not imply that Europe should lean back and wait. Future has established a far-flung network of relationships with European partners, among them the German political foundations. Now would be the time to offer mediation and other forms of support to stabilize this crucial political actor.

Finally, restoring a basic level of legitimacy that can stem institutional erosion cannot be achieved without finally holding the parliamentary elections that have already been postponed twice. Following the municipal elections of May 2016, security concerns are no longer a valid argument, if they ever were. Debate will inevitably return to the electoral law and the advantages that different ways to tweak the process and gerrymander the districts will offer to this or that side. There is, however, already a new electoral law that was designed in an extensive consultative process some 10 years ago. By introducing a hybrid system that combines the traditional majority system with proportional representation, the draft law may even make it possible that some contenders from outside the entrenched political elite – such as the citizens' lists that did so well in the recent municipal elections – enter parliament.

Either way, the experience of the past decade has shown that shifting a few seats from one camp to the other will not change the reality of the existing political divisions and power relations, and hence the need for continued consensus and cooperation between (relative) winners and losers. Whether the blocs around Hizbullah or

Future will end up with a small majority in parliament, who that parliament elects as president, and who is appointed as commander in chief of the LAF all remains of small importance compared to the restoration of legitimate representation.

External actors should thus impress on their Lebanese counterparts that no additional extension will be accepted. They should also make clear that political leaders will no longer be considered legitimate representatives of Lebanon on international platforms before elections take place.