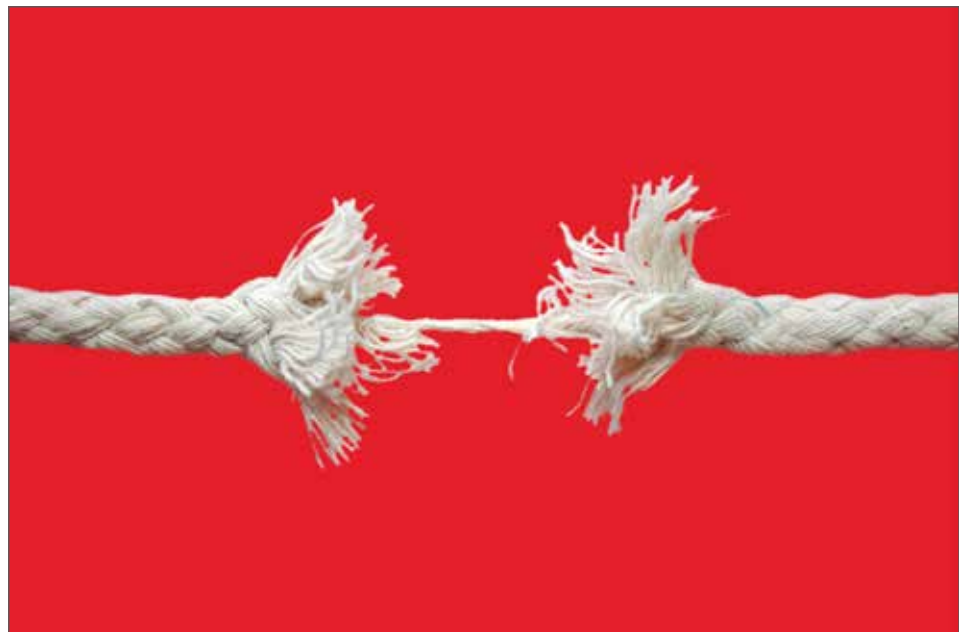


Questioning the sustainability of a (Hezbollah) partisan-oriented stability **Lebanon's Irreversible Slow but Steady Relapse...**

Pause in your trek O Time! Pause in your flight,
Favorable hours, and stay!

Lamartine's *Le Lac*
Translation by A. Z. Foreman

Until a couple months ago, Lebanon's supposed political crisis could be described as its parliament's inability to convene and elect a new president. However, on October 31 last year, General Michel Aoun, the one-time Lebanese army commander-in-chief and the (former) fickle head of the Free Patriotic Movement, was finally elected president in yet another eye-roll-inducing and unmistakably *Lebanese desperate deus ex machina reversal*. While the result of that election was based largely on Hezbollah's determination to see its candidate fill the only office in the Middle East, as such earmarked for a Christian, some credit



(or blame, depending on one's perspective) must be given as well to Saad Hariri. After all, because the political and financial durability of the son of the late former Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, (whose 2005 assassination has been blamed on Hezbollah and the Assad regime) had waned considerably, the younger Hariri has had little choice but to abandon his standing veto of Aoun's election. As part of the "deal," and to give the impression that

some degree of normalcy had returned to Lebanon, Saad was given the responsibility for forming yet another “national unity government” where most of the Lebanese political spectrum is represented. Unfortunately, the impression of normalcy was short-lived....

Just weeks afterwards, flagrant disagreements began chipping away at the harmony being asserted by the architects of Aoun's election. Soon enough, the situation in Lebanon took on an even greater and more clamorous dimension when the messianic promises associated with the election of Aoun, the appointment of Hariri, and the formation of a new government, began unraveling even faster than expected. It quickly became apparent that the Lebanese establishment, whether its president, the parliament, or the “Recovering Confidence” government, was incapable of addressing the many imperative and overdue agenda items, such as agreeing on a budget law, revising the wage scale, or passing a new electoral law. Moreover, despite assurances given periodically by that establishment about Lebanon's promising future, it had become clearer than ever that the fate of the country was in the hands of Hezbollah, and more specifically, it depended on the “goodwill” of Iran.

It is true that out of its 30 ministers, the government has only two members who are officially Hezbollah, but where minor or major decisions are concerned, these are not made within the cabinet but brokered, first, outside the cabinet, then formalized within it. In this sense, the actual balance of power is not in the number of ministers that any “party” has in the cabinet, but in the level

and nature of extra-institutional pressure that a “party” can exert. In this regard, it is a fact that none could compete with Hezbollah!

Talking about this, it is perhaps worth remembering that it was only in 2005, following the assassination of PM Rafiq Hariri, that Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon, and through the subsequent parliamentary elections Hezbollah entered the cabinet for the first time. This move was naively praised as “good behavior” signaling the beginning of a transition from “armed organization” to “political party.” However, in Hezbollah’s own justification, with the Syrian regime no longer on the ground to defend the “Resistance,” it was obliged to dabble in the lowly business of governance. Additionally,

It is perhaps worth remembering that it was only in 2005, following the Syrian withdrawal, that Hezbollah entered the Lebanese government for the first time. Twelve years later, Hezbollah has gone from newcomer to ultimate decider in the formation or dissolution of any cabinet. As of 2016, Hezbollah can also add “keeper of the presidency” to its list of self-assumed prerogatives.

over the last 12 years, it has done precisely that, and has never hesitated to use rogue means whenever needed—the most famous illustration of the use of “non-democratic” means being the punitive military campaign of May 2008 which reasserted its primacy. Now,

12 years later, Hezbollah has gone from newcomer to ultimate decider in the formation or dissolution of any cabinet. As of 2016, Hezbollah can also add “keeper of the presidency” to its list of self-assumed prerogatives. In short, today we can say that Hezbollah is, in fact, over-participating in the country’s political processes to the point of redefining them.

Considering the balance of power which

currently influences domestic and regional conditions, it seems the Hezbollah “cartel” is especially keen on preserving Lebanon’s relative stability and appearances of normalcy. After all, it utilizes Lebanon as the headquarters of its regional expeditions and, whenever needed, freely uses its borders with Israel to send comminatory messages on behalf of Iran, since the country is immune to serious challenges from other domestic groups and regional heavyweights.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, the cartel’s major competitor, made it clear years ago that aside from Lebanon being a lost cause owing to the total absence of reliable allies, the country cannot serve as a battlefield on which the Saudis could feasibly challenge Iranian expansionism. In line with this, it is interesting to note that Major General Asiri (newly appointed vice-director of Saudi General Intelligence after having served as spokesman for the coalition fighting in Yemen) said that Saudi Arabia would not tolerate the Houthis becoming another Hezbollah in an indirect recognition of Hezbollah as an Iranian success story and of its achievement.¹

Similarly, the current U.S. administration continues to make bellicose statements about Iran and the evil role it plays in the Middle East, and threatens new sanctions against Hezbollah. Aside from considering Lebanon simply one front among many in the war against violent Sunni extremism, the United States has yet to demonstrate any real interest in Lebanon...

While the assistance that the U.S. offers to the Lebanese army is the only tangible expression of political support to Lebanon,

⁽¹⁾ Statement made on April 14, 2017 during a seminar held in Paris.
<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/04/14/Assiri-We-will-not-allow-Houthis-to-become-Hezbollah-of-Yemen.html>

⁽²⁾ See, for instance, the speech delivered on May 2 by Hassan Nasrallah on the Wounded Day.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT8uL_BFEE

⁽³⁾ Clearly Saudi Arabia do no more share, for the moment at least, the US view regarding the LAF as a “reliable” institution. On April 1, *al-Hayat* reported Assiri as saying while asked about the frozen Saudi grant via France to the Lebanese Armed Forces, “It’s useless to provide Lebanon with arms which will end up in the hands of Hezbollah and be used in Syria to kill the Syrian people.”

this assistance plays into the hands of Hezbollah as it is Hezbollah that finally takes credit for protecting Lebanon’s eastern borders from the “takfiri” threat to the east, in addition to the “Zionist threat” to the south...^{2,3}

By extension, as the EU continues its vigorous efforts to prevent the additional headache represented by the million-plus Syrian refugees who currently call Lebanon home, it has become preoccupied with investing in so-called “humanitarian” efforts and continually urges the Lebanese actors to demonstrate—genuinely or by sleight of hand—that the country is among the few in the Middle East that enjoys the presence and function of “democratic institutions.”

In light of these premises, it indeed seems a stretch to categorize this “revised” Lebanese situation as a “new reality.” However, based on Lebanon’s recent past, and more specifically on the precedent of the pre-civil war era, the situation in which Lebanon finds itself today is indeed a “new reality” in comparison to what the country has gone through since its pacification in 1990 in the wake of the Taef Agreement, by putting it under the Syrian tutelage, and since 2005 when the Syrian tutelage status quo was revised. Never, since 2005, has one single party, in the larger sense of the word as opposed to its organizational sense, commanded freely and without any serious opposition over the fate of the country and has been able to impose *its* version of *stability*, from outside the state institutions and also from within them. In this sense, the use of “political crisis” and other “democratic” metaphors and allegorical devices to describe Lebanon’s situation nowadays is just a semantic tolerance or, worse, a way to postpone or neglect addressing this odd situation.

According to Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV website, on April 20, 2017 "Hezbollah Media Relations Department organized [...] a tour for journalists from Lebanese, Arab and international media outlets to overlook the Israeli defensive measures along the Palestinian-Lebanese border which reflect the enemy's fear of the Islamic Resistance."



While the most reasonable interpretation of this tour, which followed several Israeli attacks on Iranian-Hezbollah-run facilities in Syria, was Hezbollah's will to demonstrate its capacity to fight on two fronts if needed (the Syrian front and the Lebanese front). It is extremely interesting to focus on the narrative of the UNIFIL regarding this tour: "Slightly before the media delegation arrived to the area [...], the Lebanese Army informed UNIFIL that there was a media tour along the Blue Line." This remark speaks volumes about the operational intimacy between the LAF and Hezbollah in south Lebanon and elsewhere...

<http://www.english.almanar.com.lb/244099>

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/Apr-21/402839-unifil-given-little-notice-of-hezbollahs-south-lebanon-media-tour-statement.ashx>

Regardless of any conclusion to the ongoing "crisis," such as deciding on a new electoral law, ongoing debates in Lebanon speak volumes about the societal and political chaos currently facing the country, and which is likely to get worse. Only during the height of Lebanon's 15-year civil war, a time of rampant and divisive sectarian orientation, did official records include overt sectarian references. Today, these have surfaced again to argue the validity of one approach to a revised electoral law over another. Correspondingly, it is difficult to find an equal degree of nonchalance about "taking the fight to the streets" or actually doing so (albeit in the small and manageable doses demonstrated recently) in historical Lebanese records. Further, as if words alone could not be trusted to incite the public sufficiently, recurrent clashes in Ain-Helwe, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, prove that it, and other such camps, represent yet more sources of worry. These conditions are particularly disconcerting, especially when they are reinforced by violent sectarian incidents, triggered by insignificant reasons, among

fellow Lebanese or between Lebanese and Syrian refugees.

Remarkably, however, the foregoing represents the true *order of things* in Lebanon. After all, in a country beset by an exceptionally weak and ineffective government, burdened by the ghosts of violent conflict and lacking any vision for the future, a slow but steady general relapse is the most likely outcome. Moreover, given today's regional landscape and emerging patterns, it is easier than ever to imagine such a relapse occurring in the shadow of a full collapse. Unfortunately, the worst alternative would be clinging to the status quo, which holds that for better or worse, Lebanon's political system, despite its limitless defects, corruption and poor functioning, will guarantee the country's survival! Of course, this panacea begs a question. If this diagnosis is accurate, then how long can this Lebanese system, one that is demonstrably unable to self-calibrate and self-correct, much less resist regional and domestic pressures and "depreciation," continue passing itself off as belonging to a stable country? In addition, once that depreciation reaches the predictable breaking point, what form will Lebanon's collapse take?⁴

Some observers of the Lebanese situation may consider these questions to be absolutely

baseless. *Au contraire.*

Those who advanced the notion of promoting stability in Lebanon over every other conceivable and deserving priority

deserve little more than

censure. To be precise, Lebanon has arrived at the point where the sine qua non-condition of

⁴ On April 1, on the eve of Brussels' "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" (4-5 April 2017), Saad Hariri, speaking to foreign media, warned that Lebanon is close to "breaking point" due to strains of hosting more than one million Syrian refugees, fearing that unrest could escalate due to tensions between refugees and local communities. In Nasrallah's abovementioned speech at the occasion of the Wounded Day, (footnote 2), he described Lebanon as standing on the brink of a precipice. These political warnings are coupled with serious economic warnings from the World Bank. One doesn't need to be an economic pundit to understand from the "Call for Action" released recently by the Lebanon Economic Monitor that things are not going in the right direction.

<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2017>

Lebanon has arrived at the point where the sine qua non condition of safeguarding the "state" demands indulging its alter ego, Hezbollah!

safeguarding the “state” demands indulging its alter ego, Hezbollah—not to mention its Iranian patrons—to act as the sole credible interlocutor for “Lebanon.” While that eventuality is understandable, particularly considering the situation (for instance) in south Lebanon, where estimates about the likelihood of peace or war depend on the Israeli and Iranian calculus, the same applies to the country’s internal affairs. Notwithstanding its regional military activities and financial problems, Hezbollah is indeed acting as that of sole arbitrator—despite being, at the same time, the major player!

Clearly, this situation may endure for quite some time. Hezbollah may see fit to use all of its soft and hard tools, including those in the state’s own toolbox, to slow down the depreciation affecting Lebanon at large and Lebanon’s political system, and forestall the kind of breakdown that would prevent it, or its Iranian patrons, from reinventing this small Mediterranean country.

An insightful observer of the Hezbollah phenomenon once opined that Lebanon’s social porosity and inherent governmental weakness, combined with the anticlimactic conclusion to its lengthy “civil” war, enabled Iran’s nascent Khomeini regime to successfully export its revolution to Lebanon. While it may

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seem superfluous to be reminded of this genealogical progression, the existential decay that is steadily consuming Lebanon should be reason enough to wonder if relying on

partisan-oriented (enforced) stability, which is Hezbollah’s stability, might actually be the most direct path to instability...or worse!