

*Viewpoints*  
*No. 57*

# Lebanon without a President: Can Lebanon Weather the Neighborhood Storm?

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The Lebanese Parliament failed to elect a president for the sixth time since the term of President Michel Sleiman expired on May 25, 2014. Due to the lack of Christian consensus, Lebanese sectarian divisions, and regional discord, an early resolution to the vacant presidency is difficult. Despite the void in the presidency, several internal and regional factors, unique to Lebanon, are likely to ensure stability.

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The Lebanese Parliament failed to elect a president for the sixth time since the term of President Michel Sleiman expired on May 25, 2014. The void in the presidency was expected because none of the presidential contenders could muster a majority in the first round. And in the following five rounds, there was no quorum for voting to take place. Historically, when no prior agreement was feasible, a void in the presidency would follow. This occurred twice in 1988 and in 2007. In both situations, regional agreements trumped Lebanese divisions. In 2008, President Sleiman was elected as a consensus candidate following Hezbollah's takeover of Beirut and a meeting in Doha involving Lebanese and regional players.

The presidency, although its power has diminished after the Taif Accords in 1989 that ended Lebanon's civil war, remains vital for the continuity of governance. The Christian presidency reflects an important aspect of shared governance with Muslims. While the Sunni prime minister and the ministerial cabinet have taken over the responsibilities of the presidency, the void has already caused legislative paralysis with most Christian parties refusing to legislate in the absence of an elected president. The gridlock has also affected the cabinet.

A bill for readjusting wages in the public sector remains unaddressed in parliament, and decrees pertaining to gas and oil exploration still await governmental approval. In addition, a \$3 billion donation from Saudi Arabia to support the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) may be temporarily held awaiting a new president.

Agreement on the presidency requires convergence of local and regional interests. The Maronite Patriarch has failed to produce a consensus candidate and thus far there are two declared candidates: Samir Geagea, representing the anti-Iranian/Syrian March 14 alliance; Henry Helou, a Member of Parliament, nominated by Walid Jumblatt as a consensus candidate; and General Michel Aoun, the undeclared candidate of the pro-Iranian March 8 alliance. Of late, General Aoun received endorsement from President Bashar al-Assad.

Despite discussions between the Future Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement, the Future Movement, a main component of the March 14 alliance, continues to support Samir Geagea for the presidency. Sectarian divisions also come into play – whereas Geagea is endorsed by the majority of Sunnis, General Aoun is supported by Hezbollah and the Shi'a Amal Movement.

While the presidency is important to avoid constitutional gridlock, the void in the presidency is the consequence of sectarian tensions. For instance, it is readily apparent that the gridlock in the presidency is tied to sectarian tensions and the ongoing conflict in Syria. Several other factors either mitigate or insulate Lebanon from the ongoing sectarian strife.

Regional agreement on the presidency is also lacking, namely a Saudi-Iranian understanding. In 2008, Saudi-Syrian rapprochement was necessary to elect General Sleiman. Regional dynamics have changed dramatically since 2008 and more so after the civil war in Syria spilled over into Lebanon. Syria, a major power in 2008, now plays second fiddle to Hezbollah and is dependent

upon Iran, which has assumed the status of a regional superpower. Qatar is no longer a player. Western support for the March 14 alliance has faded as the United States directly engages Iran in dialogue about the nuclear issue. The balance of power that produced a consensus candidate in 2008 no longer stands, and Iran's ascendancy remains unchallenged. Saudi Arabia, perhaps the only credible counterbalance, still wields a veto power, something that General Aoun discovered rather late in the game.

Due to the lack of Christian consensus, Lebanese sectarian divisions, and regional discord, an early resolution to the vacant presidency is unlikely.

Historically, Lebanon has shown resiliency in the face of protracted religious violence. Unlike Cyprus and Bosnia, Lebanon recovered following its civil war. The Taif Accords, which concluded the civil war in 1989, left no dominant sect and reinforced Lebanon's democratic tradition of power sharing and inclusiveness. Sunni radicalization and fundamentalism is much weaker than in the rest of the Levant, as evidenced by having only one Member of Parliament representing Al-Jamaa Islamiya. The dominant party amongst the Sunnis remains the Future Movement of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, which espouses a liberal and moderate agenda. It has the largest parliamentary block and includes parliamentarians from all religions and sects. Because of moderation on all sides, a string of terrorist attacks on both Sunni and Shi'a civilian targets failed to ignite widespread sectarian violence.

Unlike Syria or Iraq, the Christian community concentrated in Mount Lebanon also provides a political and physical buffer between the Sunnis in the north and the Shi'as in the south. Additionally, economic stability has dampened any unrest that could have been exacerbated by steep inflation or currency devaluation.

All factions are keen on minimizing security and sectarian tensions for Lebanon to remain attractive to foreign investment and to protect its banking sector.

The LAF is also a main source of stability. Although the LAF is composed of almost 50 percent Sunnis, it confronted radical Sunni elements without fracturing and retains considerable support from the Sunni community at large, including the Future Movement.

To the south, a de facto ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel has effectively neutralized a major source of internal dissent and confrontation.

The Palestinian camps have always been a hot bed of radicalization out of reach of Lebanese authorities. The threat of sectarian clashes with radical Palestinian factions markedly increased with the crackdown of the Syrian regime on the Yarmouk Palestinian camp in Damascus. Recent Iranian rapprochement with Hamas has mitigated these fears.

Most importantly, with the crumbling of the Maliki regime in Iraq and the increasing dependency of the Syrian regime on Hezbollah, Iran now has a vested interest in maintaining stability in Lebanon.

Despite the void in the presidency, several internal and regional factors, unique to Lebanon, are likely to ensure stability. In the meantime, electing a new president awaits Christian, national, and regional consensus.



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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