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Lebanon's Presidential Crisis: Causes and Likely Outcomes

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

Prominent Candidates	1
The Political Parties	2
International Responses to the Crisis	3
Likely Scenarios	4

On 17 July 2023, Doha hosted the second meeting of the Five nation group on Lebanon with representatives from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France and the US, seeking a solution to the current political paralysis.¹ The current caretaker government with no decision making powers has failed to fill the presidential vacancy in 12 sessions since President Michel Aoun's term ended in October. Meanwhile the ongoing banking crisis and the 2020 Beirut port explosion have left the economy in a state of disarray.²

Riad Salameh, who has been Governor of Lebanon's central bank, Banque du Liban, for thirty years, now faces major corruption charges, with his mandate set to end on 31 July, but while Najib Mikati's temporary government is running the country, the necessary reforms to address the financial crisis cannot yet be approved. The reforms require the formation of a government with full powers – impossible without electing a new President. Various parties are trying to persuade Hezbollah to abandon its support for the candidacy of former minister Suleiman Frangieh, opposed by the majority, and to find an alternative who is accepted by local, regional and international actors. However, most political parties in Lebanon prefer the continued presidential vacuum to Hezbollah imposing its own nominee by vetoing any other candidates.

Prominent Candidates

In the wake of the political gridlock, several personalities have emerged as potential presidential candidates, some of whom, such as Michel Moawad and Neemat Frem, have officially announced their nomination. Moawad, the son of former President René Moawad, who was assassinated on 22 November 1989, hails from the city of Zgharta in northern Lebanon. But both Moawad and Frem's chances of winning are slim. Others have remained implicit candidates. The first is Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, General Joseph Aoun, who was allied with (unrelated) Michel Aoun during his rise to army leadership in the 1980s and was appointed army commander during Michel Aoun's presidential term. He will retire in January 2024. Another is Ziad Baroud, Minister of Interior in Fouad Siniora's government (2008-2009). Currently, the presidential battle is limited to the two former ministers, Hezbollah's nominee Franjieh, the grandson of former President Suleiman Franjieh (1970-1976) who comes from a political family in Zgharta, and Jihad Azour, who was Minister of Finance in the Siniora government (2005-2008). As he held the position of director of the Middle East and Central Asia region at the International Monetary Fund, Azour did not announce his candidacy until he had temporarily resigned from his role and issued a lengthy statement explaining the nomination.³

1 The group was formed as part of a French initiative, holding its first meeting in Paris in February 2023.

2 "Five nation group on Lebanon in Doha: emphasis on presidential elections and economic reforms," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 17/7/2023, accessed on 19/7/2023, at: <http://bitly.ws/LLVr>

3 "48 hours before the election session... An important statement by Jihad Azour," *Lebanon 24*, 12/6/2023, accessed on 19/7/2023, at <https://bit.ly/44TD8H8>

The Political Parties

Hezbollah selected a Maronite candidate in Suleiman Franjeh without the approval of its Maronite ally, Gebran Bassil, causing a rift with Bassil's Free Patriotic Movement, with which had it been allied since the so-called "Mar Mikhael Agreement" in February 2006. The agreement had led to Hezbollah supporting Michel Aoun's presidency in 2016, in return for the Free Patriotic Movement providing political cover for Hezbollah's weapons, and preventing it from being isolated in Lebanon. Bassil's position has undermined Franjeh's chances of becoming president. Hezbollah insists on supporting Franjeh's candidacy because they believe him to be trustworthy and because they supported Michel Aoun in previous elections at the expense of old ally Franjeh. Therefore, this time Hezbollah wants to restore balance to their relationship with the latter, empowered by the Syrian regime's political rehabilitation and the weakness of Sunni representation in Parliament, the decline of Saudi interest in Lebanon, and France's acceptance of this nomination. So far, Hezbollah has not been able to bridge the views between Bassil and Franjeh, despite successfully shutting down any media battles between them.

In light of this stalemate, in early June, the interests of the Free Patriotic Movement and the opposition parties converged over the candidacy of Jihad Azour for the presidency. These parties include the Lebanese Forces Party, the Progressive Socialist Party, the Kataeb (Phalanges) Party, and some of the "Change" representatives who were elected after the 2019 uprising, in addition to some representatives who were part of the Future Movement led by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and defied his incomprehensible call to boycott the 2022 parliamentary elections. These forces had previously agreed to support Representative Michel Moawad, but the latter did not get enough votes. Hezbollah, Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement initially declined from voting in the absence of a consensus among them but on 6 March, Hassan Nasrallah officially announced his support for Franjeh's candidacy, when the opposition u-turned on Moawad's candidacy early on in the presidential vacuum.⁴ But the latter withdrew his candidacy on 4 June when the opposition came to a consensus with the Free Patriotic Movement over Azour's candidacy.

During the parliamentary session held on 14 June, Azour obtained 59 votes against Franjeh's 51,⁵ but the candidate needs 86 votes to pass the first round and 65 in the second, which didn't take place because Hezbollah members staged a walk out, breaking the quorum. The group supporting Azour are standing by him despite a split in the Free Patriotic Movement forcing Bassil to threaten to take measures against members who did not vote for their candidate. Furthermore, it seems that the "Change" representatives are themselves divided, with some voting for Ziad Baroud, who has not yet been nominated.

⁴ "Hezbollah announces its support for Suleiman Franjeh's presidential campaign in Lebanon," *France 24*, 6/3/2023, accessed on 19/7/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3q4kC01>

⁵ "The Lebanese parliament fails again to elect a president amid severe political division," *France 24*, 14/6/2023, accessed on 19/7/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/46VzGO6>

It is clear that the Movement's main goal in supporting Azour's nomination is preventing Franjieh reaching the presidency, or at the very least, to convince Hezbollah of an alternative. Hezbollah has not yet shown any willingness to abandon Franjieh's candidacy or accept a compromise. They have not proposed an alternative candidate that would be accepted by other parties, especially since Bassil opposes the candidacy of General Joseph Aoun, whose military position does not allow him to speak publicly about politics. While Hezbollah has had a positive relationship with the army commander over the past six years, it does not want to repeat the experience of former army commander Michel Suleiman, who abandoned the neutrality in foreign policy stipulated by the Doha agreement that brought him to power as soon as he was inaugurated.

International Responses to the Crisis

The Five Nation Group on Lebanon (France, the US, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar), which held its second meeting in Doha on 17 July 2023, is the main international framework monitoring the Lebanese situation. It seeks to reach a consensus to end the presidential vacuum and to form a government that will embark on the necessary reforms for Lebanon to obtain international support in recovering from its stifling economic crisis. France is leading the mediation efforts and in recent months proposed a settlement similar to that of 2016, which is to elect Franjieh as President of the Republic in exchange for assigning Nawaf Salam to form the government with an agreement on several appointments, including the governor of the Central Bank. However, the nomination of Jihad Azour and his attainment of 59 votes forced France to change its position. During his visit to Beirut on 21 June 2023, French special envoy to Lebanon, Jean-Yves Le Drian, tried to correct the impression that France supports Franjieh's candidacy.⁶ In recent weeks, press reports have emerged talking about a French initiative to gather the Lebanese political forces around the negotiating table to reach a settlement over the presidential elections.⁷ It seems that France has begun to lose the confidence of the opposition due to its acceptance of Franjieh, who is close to the Syrian regime, without gaining the confidence of its traditional opponents (i.e. Hezbollah). It seems that Iran, which France proposed to include in the Five-Year Committee, left to Hezbollah the responsibility of fighting for the presidency.

In the US, President Joe Biden's administration has not indicated any real interest in Lebanon, despite occasional hints that sanctions could be imposed on those responsible for obstructing the election of the President. Compared to the efforts made by Washington regarding the demarcation of the maritime borders between Lebanon and Israel in 2022, it shows little interest in the crisis outside of Five Nation Group meetings. There are suggestions that Egypt supports the candidacy of Joseph Aoun, while Qatar, which successfully resolved a similar presidential crisis in 2008, seeks

⁶ "Le Drian in Beirut listening: Balance in the beginning of the speech on June 14," *Nidaa Al-Watan*, 21/6/2023, accessed on 19/7/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3OlwUdH>

⁷ "Le Drian discusses a proposal to include Iran in the Five Nation Group: a French 'working draft' for a Lebanese-Lebanese dialogue," *Al-Akhbar* newspaper, 4/7/2023, accessed on 7/19/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Y20FUr>

to prevent the collapse of the political and economic situation before an agreement is reached.⁸ Lebanon is not a priority for Saudi Arabia either, despite its membership to the Five Nation Group. Its influence in the country has declined in recent years after the dissolution of the Future bloc and its refusal to support Hariri, who called for a boycott of the last elections. Riyadh had stipulated the reduction of Hezbollah's influence in order to resume its financial support to Lebanon. Saudi Arabia has hinted that it does not have a "veto" over the election of Suleiman Franjeh, but it is not enthusiastic about his election and the accompanying appointments within the French suggestion for compromise. Although Riyadh did not put forward alternative initiatives nor suggest serious names, its refusal, along with the other Five Nation members, to support the French initiative undermined the latter and encouraged Lebanese parties to drop it. There is no opposition to Qatari mediation in Lebanon; it enjoys good relations with all parties but is testing the waters regarding all possibilities of agreement between the Lebanese parties.

Likely Scenarios

In the event the opposition continues to put its weight behind Azour and a second session was held to elect a president, he would need an additional 6 votes to secure his victory. The parliamentary bloc that could secure his win is the "Independent Parliamentary Meeting", which is affiliated with Saad Hariri. This bloc did not vote for Azour in the first round, but the pressure is increasing on it to make up its mind to vote when the next electoral session is held. Hence, Azour's victory is mathematically possible, but the nature of sectarian balances in the Lebanese system will put the odds against him, especially since all the Shi'i seats in Parliament are distributed between Hezbollah and Amal. For his part, Franjeh needs the support of the Free Patriotic Movement or the Lebanese Forces as a major Christian parliamentary bloc behind him. Thus, no significant electoral shifts are expected in the near future without a significant change in loyalties.

Ziad Baroud and Joseph Aoun have not yet established an electoral support base, so their chances rely on consensus. In the case of Aoun, he must gain two-thirds of the votes in the House of Representatives to amend the third paragraph of Article 49 of the constitution, which prohibits the election of judges and grade one civil servants to the presidency of the republic if they are still in employment. Despite the existence of two precedents in which this article was amended after the Taif Agreement – the first when the army commander, General Émile Lahoud, was elected president in 1998 and the second when Michel Suleiman was elected in 2008 – the amendment requires the addition of a paragraph that allows for the exceptional election of judges or grade one civil servants as president.

⁸ Alan Sarkis, "Egypt and Qatar: The 'third' candidate is present!", *Nidaa Al Watan*, 22/6/2023, accessed on 19/7/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Y1p4Jz>



Accordingly, until a regional and international agreement is reached, Lebanese political parties remain in a continuous effort to improve their conditions and build their alliances. Meanwhile France seeks to convene negotiations that are accompanied by regional and international consultations, hoping also to benefit from the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, which has not yet been reflected in Lebanon. Although the Lebanese party calculations are traditionally linked to international and regional equations and the development of relations between external powers and their interests, the Lebanese crisis is in its essence domestic, at its heart the sectarian quota system that is somewhat responsible for all of Lebanon's political, economic and security problems.