

Lebanon Still Faces Multiple Crises

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Jibran Bassil, who heads Lebanon's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), has been told by its ally Hizbollah the group will not support him for the presidency and will, instead, continue to back the candidacy of Suleiman Frangie. Kuwait daily Al Rai reported, Hizbollah "has sent Bassil unequivocal signals that it will not back his own nomination under any circumstances although it is keen on preserving the political alliance with him".

The alliance with the Maronite Christian FPM is important to both Shia Hizbollah and Amal, as it gives them a Christian ally and a total of 47 seats in the 128-member Lebanese parliament. However, the faction which lost most seats in the May 15th legislative election was the FPM, which shed 12 of the 29 seats it obtained in the 2009 election. This made the FPM the second largest party after the right-wing Lebanese Forces.

Al-Rai cited an informed source who said that, in Hizbollah's view, Bassil has an "unhidden desire to prepare the circumstances for his own presidential nomination [which involves] prolonging [the current] vacuum and eliminating those who have the best chances".

Hezbollah, Al Rai said, is also "open to consensus on any other name which might enjoy broad domestic, international and Arab support, seeing as it wants to create an atmosphere that would allow for international-Gulf involvement in Lebanon's revival process" once assurances are provided to the movement over retaining its weaponry. Frangie has given such a commitment, stating that Hizbollah's weapons "do not need my cover or protection". Presumably because there is no paramilitary force in Lebanon to challenge these weapons while the Lebanese army would not do so.

Former minister Wiam Wahhab has revealed that Hizbollah is also holding discussions with army chief Joseph Aoun whose name has been repeatedly mentioned as a successor to ex President Michel Aoun (who is not a relative of the general).

Parliament is set to hold a seventh session today with the aim of electing a president by majority vote. This will be the third since the former president left office at the end of

October. Parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri has been criticised for repeatedly convening the national assembly while deeply divided factions cannot agree on a consensus candidate. It could take months before this is achieved while the country suffers economic collapse and 80 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line.

Since Lebanon's parliament has in the past repeatedly failed to elect a president, this is not an unusual occurrence. Lebanon was without a president for 30 months before Aoun was chosen. However, the current situation leaves the country in a vacuum, facing multiple political, economic and social crises without a president, without a fully empowered government, and without a functioning legislature.

Caretaker prime minister Najib Mikati has declared support for Frangie, grandson of a former president, whose Marada movement has only two seats in parliament. According to Beirut daily Al Akbar France and Saudi Arabia have indicated they could accept Frangie while the US has rejected Bassil. He has been sanctioned for corruption and connections with Hizbollah, which Washington has accused of being a "terrorist" organisation because of its opposition to Israel.

Deadlock persists because Aoun appears to be supporting the strategy adopted by Bassil, his son-in-law, for securing the nomination by wearing down and wearing out parliament. Since May, when Mikati was compelled to become caretaker premier due to the parliamentary election, Aoun rebuffed every attempt he made, as premier designate, to form a government. A caretaker Cabinet cannot take major policy decisions and a caretaker prime minister cannot assume the presidency once the incumbent has stepped down and there is no replacement. Former Prime Minister Tammam Salam stepped into the role of acting president from May 2014 to October 2016 when Aoun was elected.

Meanwhile, there is some good news from Lebanon. Its vaccination campaign against cholera has inoculated 190,000 people, most between five and 14 years of age, reported caretaker Health Minister Firass Abiad. This is far above expectations in the drive to prevent cholera's spread throughout the country. Some 600,000 doses of vaccine have been received by Lebanon where at least 18 people have died among 3,369 cases registered by the ministry since early October. The disease crossed the border from war and sanction devastated Syria where the UN's children's agency has reported 35,569 cases.

Following the US-brokered deal defining the maritime border between Lebanon and Israel, France's Total and its partner Italy's Eni announced they will soon begin exploration for natural gas in Lebanon's Qana field. High yields could eventually help Lebanon overcome its financial crisis and encourage potential donors and investors to provide funding.

The American University of Beirut (AUB) founded by US missionaries in 1866, has been ranked top university in sustainable education in the region and 140th of 700 on the world scene, tying with prestigious Princeton in the US. The AUB has had a huge impact on the Arab world by educating generations of young people and providing independence leaders, presidents, prime ministers, doctors, scientists, literary figures, entrepreneurs and environmentalists.

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