

The Political Shift in Lebanon—Challenges for Israel

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The election of Joseph Aoun as president of Lebanon and the appointment of Nawaf Salam as prime minister signal the beginning of a new era in Lebanon and another painful blow to Hezbollah, following its defeat in the war against Israel and the collapse of Assad's regime in Syria. Hezbollah's weakened position enabled the opposition forces—backed by the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia—to secure a required majority, even compelling Hezbollah to reluctantly support Aoun, while Salam was elected without Hezbollah's endorsement. This new leadership in Lebanon presents a potential opportunity for Israel, as both Aoun and Salam share an interest in reducing Iran's and Hezbollah's influence and in disarming the organization. However, their immediate priority is to rehabilitate the collapsing Lebanon and not a direct military confrontation with Hezbollah, which is focused on maintaining its standing and preserving its military power. In the near future, Israel should focus on military and diplomatic efforts to counter Hezbollah while refraining from interference in Lebanon's internal political affairs.

During a special session of Parliament on January 9, Joseph Aoun, the commander of the Lebanese Army, was elected Lebanon's president, ending a governmental vacuum that had lasted for more than two years since the end of Michel Aoun's term in October 2022. Aoun, a Maronite Christian, as required by the Lebanese constitution, is a veteran of the Lebanese Army, having served since 1983 and as its commander since 2017. He received widespread support as the most suitable candidate from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and France, which actively backed his election, as well as from the growing domestic opposition to both Hezbollah and the corrupt leadership across all the sects—an opposition that has gained momentum since the war with Israel. Many Lebanese see his election as a turning point for the failed state, believing that, as an honest and respected patriot, Aoun can lead Lebanon onto a new path and promote its economic, military, and political rehabilitation.

Aoun was elected only in the second round of voting with a significant majority of 99 out of 128 members of Parliament, after failing to obtain the required two-thirds majority in the first round. His decisive victory was made possible by a shift in the stance of the "Shiite duo" (Amal and Hezbollah), which was forced to support him after losing its parliamentary veto power in the May 2022 elections. Hezbollah's weakening position prevented it from imposing its preferred candidate, Suleiman Frangieh, whom it had insisted on for the past two years—blocking 12 previous attempts to elect a president during 2022–2023.

On January 10, Hezbollah's Al-Manar channel reported that before the second round of voting, Hezbollah and Amal representatives met with Aoun and reached agreements in

exchange for Hezbollah's support. These reportedly included refraining from disarming Hezbollah across Lebanon, ensuring a central role for Shiite representatives in the next government (including control of the finance ministry), securing involvement in the appointment of senior officials, and obtaining state assistance for rebuilding Shiite communities affected by the war. In addition, the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon stated in an interview with Al-Akhbar on October 12 that Hezbollah ultimately voted for Aoun after agreements that served the organization's interests.

The newly elected President Aoun swiftly initiated consultations with representatives from all parties to select a prime minister. On January 13, he announced he was granting the mandate to form a government to Nawaf Salam, who received the support of 84 party representatives, compared to the caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who had only nine votes. Salam, a jurist and diplomat, previously served as Lebanon's representative to the UN for a decade. Since 2017, he has been a judge at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and, over the past year, its president. He had twice been a candidate for the position of prime minister but was blocked by Hezbollah. The organization reportedly was taken aback by Salam's appointment, given his staunch opposition to Hezbollah. According to Lebanese media reports, Hezbollah had preferred the continuation of Mikati's tenure. However, the head of Hezbollah's parliamentary movement, Mohammad Raad, stated that the organization did not formally propose a candidate but rather hoped for an election based on consensus. He remarked that "Hezbollah extended its hand, but it was cut off" (Radio Al-Nour, January 13).

The announcement of Salam's government composition—which he envisions as an efficient technocratic administration free from political influence—has been delayed due to pressure, mainly from the two Shiite parties. Both Hezbollah and Amal are demanding broad representation based on a sectarian quota, including control of the finance ministry. These demands face resistance from Hezbollah's political rivals, who fear that Salam may yield to the pressure, allowing Hezbollah to retain its influence over decision-making. Once announced, the final composition of the new government will reveal whether—and to what extent—Aoun and Salam are willing to challenge Hezbollah to advance the necessary changes in Lebanon.

The Agenda of the President and the New Government

Since their election, Aoun and Salam have emphasized national unity, the need for change, and Lebanon's reconstruction. In his inaugural address in Parliament, President Aoun declared the beginning of a new chapter in Lebanese history and outlined his vision for his six-year term. His priorities include rebuilding Lebanon while upholding the law and constitution; ensuring the state's monopoly on weapons; strengthening the Lebanese Army and its control over the country and its borders; honoring the ceasefire with Israel; and asserting state sovereignty over all Lebanese territory—particularly the Palestinian refugee camps—while maintaining their refugee status and the "right of return" within a two-state solution. In addition, Aoun aims to engage in dialogue with Syria's new regime to resolve outstanding issues, including border demarcation and the status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Once the government is officially formed, President Aoun and Prime Minister Salam will face a series of urgent and highly contested decisions, primarily regarding Hezbollah, which will vigorously resist attempts to change its status, as well as from factions seeking to maintain the status quo. How they handle the following key issues will determine whether Lebanon is truly moving in a new direction:

- **Strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF):** The LAF is expected to deploy south of the Litani River, seizing Hezbollah's weapons and preventing its military activity in the region. However, Aoun appears reluctant to confront Hezbollah directly, even as he aggressively demands that the IDF fully withdraw from Lebanese territory and reposition along the Blue Line. Just 60 days after the ceasefire, before the LAF was able to meet the schedule set for its deployment, thousands of Shiites, encouraged by Hezbollah, attempted to return to their villages in southern Lebanon in defiance of LAF and IDF directives. This was an early test of Aoun's leadership, in which he did not do so well. On January 26, the LAF failed to prevent confrontations involving the crowd, which included many Hezbollah members, with the IDF forces. Therefore, it remains unclear whether the LAF will be able to fulfill its mission when it is required to confront Hezbollah directly after the IDF's withdrawal.
- **Dismantling Hezbollah's independent weapons arsenal:** It is already evident that Aoun's ability to disarm Hezbollah is limited without resorting to military confrontations with it, as Hezbollah is determined to preserve its autonomy and weaponry. In response to Aoun's inaugural speech, in which he addressed this issue, Hezbollah's parliamentary movement leader, Mohammad Raad, asserted that Hezbollah is "the true protector of the Lebanese people."
- **Rebuilding war-torn areas:** A major priority for the new government is the reconstruction of war-damaged regions, particularly Shiite-dominated areas such as Beirut's Dahiyeh district, the Bekaa Valley, and southern Lebanon. The destruction includes tens of thousands of damaged buildings and critical infrastructure. However, Lebanon's collapsing economy means that reconstruction depends on external aid, the sources of which remain uncertain. Hezbollah claims to have already distributed approximately \$400 million to around 140,000 people as an advance for reconstruction (*Al-Akhbar*, January 23). Nonetheless, given its own financial distress—along with that of its patron Iran—Hezbollah appears to be pressuring the Lebanese state to take on the massive reconstruction costs, estimated in the billions.
- **Advancing reforms to secure Western aid and restore governance:** Another critical priority is implementing reforms to unlock Western aid and restore the functionality of Lebanon's state institutions while tackling corruption and ensuring judicial independence. Encouragingly, following Aoun's election, two major investigations were revived. One is the investigation into the August 2020 Beirut port explosion, which had been stalled due to threats against the investigating judge and the refusal of suspects to appear for questioning. The other is the investigation into the former governor of Lebanon's central bank, accused of embezzling public funds.

Furthermore, key government appointments are crucial, including a new army commander to replace Aoun and new heads for Lebanon's security agencies, the central bank, and other senior positions.

- **Rebuilding Lebanon's economy:** Addressing Lebanon's economic crisis requires curbing inflation, reducing unemployment, and meeting the conditions set by international financial aid organizations. In addition, the government will also need to allocate resources to rehabilitate the struggling education and healthcare systems and repair the country's deteriorating infrastructure, including electricity and water. Notably, the Lebanese currency has slightly strengthened, and the country's foreign exchange reserves have increased due to a renewed sense of change.

Hezbollah's Changing Status

The election of Aoun and Salam, despite Hezbollah's opposition, reflects a shift in the organization's internal standing. Severely weakened by its defeat in the war with Israel, Hezbollah has lost much of its leadership, military command, and a significant portion of its fighting forces. According to IDF assessments, the organization has lost an estimated 80% of its military capabilities, leaving it in a precarious position. Its weakness is further compounded by the loss of Hassan Nasrallah. His successor, Naim Qassem, lacks Nasrallah's capabilities, stature, and charisma. In addition, the collapse of Assad's regime in Syria has also contributed to Hezbollah's weakened stature, depriving it of a key ally, as well as the strategic depth and logistical corridor used for weapons transfers from Iran. The new regime in Syria is determined to reshape border dynamics, prevent smuggling, and expel all Hezbollah operatives from Syrian territory. Meanwhile, Iran—struggling in the wake of the war and the collapse of its “proxy strategy”—is now less capable of providing financial and military support to Hezbollah.

Despite its weakened state, Hezbollah is working to accelerate its recovery and preserve its assets within Lebanon's internal system. It continues to leverage several key assets: its remaining military arsenal, which still grants it significant power; the fear within the Lebanese establishment of another civil war, which Hezbollah exploits to its advantage; the reluctance of Aoun's new government to alienate the Shiite population, Lebanon's largest sect; continued support from the majority of the Shiite community, despite frustration over the war with Israel, which severely affected them; and political alliances, particularly with the Shiite Amal movement and some factions from other sects. However, support from these groups is waning, especially within the Christian Free Patriotic Movement.

Alongside its efforts to rebuild both its organization and the Shiite communities that support it, Hezbollah's primary goal under Aoun's presidency will likely be to block any attempt to disarm it or undermine its independent standing as the leader of “the resistance.” Hezbollah remains committed to its slogan “Army, People, Resistance,” emphasizing its unique role in Lebanon, while its opponents push for a shift to “Army, People, State,” advocating for full state authority over military affairs. Hezbollah's leadership, particularly Secretary-General Naim Qassem, insists that any agreement with Israel regarding its disarmament applies only to the area south of the Litani River, not to the entire country. Determined to maintain its

military presence near the Israeli border, Hezbollah will resist efforts by the Lebanese Army to implement the ceasefire agreement with Israel. One of Hezbollah's key tactics will likely be mobilizing the Shiite population in its favor, just as it did when encouraging residents to return to their homes after the war.

Challenges for Israel and Recommendations

From Israel's perspective, the change in Lebanese leadership following Hezbollah's defeat in the war represents a positive development, primarily due to the shift in the balance of influence on Lebanon. Iran's hold over Lebanon is weakening, while the involvement of the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia is increasing, as evidenced by the Saudi foreign minister's visit to Lebanon after 15 years. These developments create potential opportunities for a future long-term transformation in Israeli–Lebanese relations. However, in the near term, Israel still faces several key challenges, particularly:

- **Preserving military gains:** Hezbollah is unlikely to relinquish its military capabilities and will actively work to restore them. Israel's immediate challenge is to ensure that its military achievements from the war remain intact and to prevent Hezbollah from reestablishing a military presence in southern Lebanon after the Israeli withdrawal.
- **Implementation of the ceasefire agreement:** Disagreements are expected between Israel and the new Lebanese leadership regarding the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, based on the assessment that the Lebanese Army will struggle to push Hezbollah out of southern Lebanon. Aoun is likely to prioritize Lebanon's stability over engaging in a violent confrontation with Hezbollah in response to Israeli demands under the agreement.
- **Potential for renewed conflict:** In the near future, Hezbollah is expected to avoid direct military confrontations with the IDF, opting instead to challenge Israel through other means. However, even after the withdrawal is completed, Israel may struggle to maintain the ceasefire due to the shift in its operational doctrine. A key lesson from Hezbollah's military buildup in southern Lebanon after 2006 was the need for immediate action against any violation and, if necessary, to take independent action—an approach it believes is justified under the agreement. While this is crucial for Israel's security, it may lead to increased tensions along the border.
- **US mediation:** Given the central role of the United States in enforcing the agreement, disagreements on this issue may also arise with the Trump administration. However, at present, the American side on the five-nation committee responsible for overseeing the agreement's implementation appears to be understanding of Israeli concerns.

Given these challenges, Israel should focus its efforts on neutralizing threats from Hezbollah through both military and diplomatic means. Militarily, Israel should adopt a new strategic approach to counter any existing or emerging threats from Hezbollah, as permitted by the ceasefire agreement, even at the risk of jeopardizing short-term security stability. Diplomatically, Israel should work to weaken Hezbollah through political initiatives while

avoiding direct interference in Lebanon's internal politics. Instead, Israel should seek to establish indirect communication channels with the Lebanese leadership. Additionally, given the increasing American involvement in Lebanon and its key role in enforcing the ceasefire, Israel should strengthen its dialogue with the new US administration. This includes securing continued support for the agreement's implementation, advancing political and economic measures to further weaken Hezbollah, and reinforcing the new Lebanese leadership.

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