



Lebanon: an officer and a president?

by Florence Gaub

Much like Egypt, where army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has just declared his intention to run for president, Lebanon, too, is gearing up for presidential elections with a military twist. With parliament having to elect the head of state by 25 May, former army commander Michel Aoun has at last declared the “serious possibility” that he will run. This surprises hardly anyone: Aoun’s presidential ambitions have been growing ever since he returned to Lebanon in 2005 after almost 15 years of exile in Paris. The leader of the parliamentary Change and Reform bloc and head of the Free Patriotic Movement is indeed in a good position to become the 12th president of the Lebanese Republic (who must be a Maronite Christian, in accordance with the 1943 National Pact). The Free Patriotic Movement is by far the largest Christian party, holding 19 of the 64 parliament seats reserved for Christians, and is the main ally of Hizbullah, Syria’s proxy in Lebanon. Although Aoun has stressed the “difference between an army officer who would impose a dictator-like power and one who can be democratic”, would his election follow an Egyptian script?

The al-Sisi scenario

At first glance, Lebanon resembles Egypt in that a considerable number of its presidents have hailed from the military: Fuad Chehab (1958-1964), Emile Lahoud (1998-2007) and Michel Sleimane (the incumbent) all served as commander-in-chief of the Lebanese Armed Forces before being elected by

parliament. On two occasions, the commander-in-chief even assumed power temporarily to fill a void in times of crisis: in 1952, Chehab held office for four days following an uprising against President Khoury; in 1988, while the civil war was still ongoing, Michel Aoun himself stepped in when the parliament could not agree on the successor of Amine Gemayel. In contrast to Chehab, however, Aoun was unwilling to step aside once a civilian president had been found: for two years, Lebanon had two presidents – one civilian and one military.

Aoun’s refusal to relinquish power blurred the lines between politics and the military, and involved the Lebanese army for the first time in the country’s civil war since its onset in 1975. The armed forces had, until then, followed political orders to abstain from the fighting so as to maintain their neutrality. Upon assuming power, Aoun then chose to break with this political consensus, first launching a violent campaign against the largest Christian militia (the *Lebanese Forces*), and then against the occupying Syrian military. It was this campaign which eventually led to a split in the armed forces and Aoun’s departure into exile in France.

Once Aoun had left, the Lebanese military served as a presidential launching pad for Emile Lahoud, his successor as army chief. Lahoud successfully pieced the shattered armed force back together, and even managed to integrate a number of former militia fighters into the re-emerging institution. Largely recognised as having achieved the post-conflict stabilisation of



Lebanon, he was subsequently rewarded by the people for his efforts with the presidency.

Similarly, his successor Michel Sleimane had led the Lebanese military in a successful campaign against a Jihadist group holed up in a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon, and emerged as a suitable consensual candidate when the country was yet again undergoing a severe crisis in 2008. Although criticised for not having sent the armed forces to intervene in clashes between Hizbullah supporters and opponents, he was also credited for having prevented another civil war (even Fuad Chehab, the first officer to become president back in 1958, is said to have been elected because he ensured that the Lebanese military abstained from intervening in civilian clashes). As in Egypt, electing an army officer has therefore become the default option for Lebanon when the country faces serious internal divisions.

The De Gaulle scenario

However, in contrast to Egypt, the election of a military individual in Lebanon does not imply the militarisation of politics; this is in part because the Lebanese military is not nearly as cohesive, capable or powerful as its Egyptian counterpart and has never managed to stage a *coup d'état*. Indeed, the multi-confessional and politically neutral image of the Lebanese military sits comfortably with the traditionally consensual figure of the president. In a country split along several political lines, the armed forces are perceived to transcend the divisions of the political landscape. The military came to represent the Lebanese state after 15 years of civil war and militia-rule: 71% of Lebanese declared in 2012 that they trust the Lebanese military (in contrast to 12% which trust parliament, and 5% which trust political parties). As the highest-ranking officer must also be a Maronite Christian (like the president), he almost automatically joins the pool of potential presidential candidates.

But Aoun differs from his three predecessors – or indeed from al-Sisi – in one important aspect: in contrast to them, he has had a long political career following his departure from the armed forces. If he is eventually elected, there will be 23 years between his command of the military and assuming political office – more closely resembling General Charles de Gaulle's experience than General al-Sisi's. During that time, Aoun conducted an anti-Syrian political campaign from Paris and, following Syria's withdrawal, founded the Free Patriotic Movement upon his return to Lebanon. The party has run in two national elections (each time winning the largest share of the Christian vote) and signed a key Memorandum of

Understanding with Hizbullah in 2006. The document includes provisions for Hizbullah's disarmament and lays out under what conditions this should occur, thereby symbolising Christian–Shiite cooperation in the pursuit of Lebanese stability. This memorandum is currently jeopardised by Hizbullah's active involvement in the Syrian civil war – something which Aoun strongly opposes. The alliance is therefore essentially a strategic one, based on expediency rather than ideological affinity. And Aoun's recent meeting with Sa'ad Hariri, the leader of the Future Movement (the main Sunni party and largest bloc in parliament) is an indication that he is looking into other options.

Aoun has distanced himself from the traditional Lebanese officer's image of being supra-confessional and transformed himself entirely into a Maronite Christian politician seeking votes primarily from his own confessional group. It is precisely this move which could count against him (as it did before, during the 2008 presidential elections), considering that the president is traditionally a candidate of consensus who is able to attract support from a large majority in parliament. Aoun's flip-flopping on Syria has also undermined his standing: from chief antagonist to political ally was a difficult volte-face to pull off without incurring some reputational damage.

Nevertheless, Aoun's military past might work to his advantage since it may allow him to subtly replace his strong pro-Hizbullah and pro-Syria rhetoric of recent years with a more state-centric narrative. In recent interviews, he has repeatedly claimed that a strong Lebanese army would eliminate the need for Hizbullah and called for the supply of military equipment from international donors – echoing a December 2013 decision by Saudi Arabia to donate over €2 billion to the Lebanese armed forces.

The George Washington scenario

Should Aoun prove unable to convince the majority of Lebanese parliamentarians that he is a suitable candidate, a number of other names have already been floated as alternatives. One is Jean Kahwagi, the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. In contrast to Aoun, he has clear support from all political factions thanks to his current post. If Kahwagi is chosen, a George Washington scenario may then play out in Lebanon, whereby military experience is converted into political credibility and the militarisation of government does not occur. In any case, an officer as a president is a highly likely outcome.

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