Lebanon Will Get Worse Before it Gets Better

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 13.01.2025

There is a spurt of great optimism on both sides of the political spectrum in the United States, and even Israel, that the Lebanese government, now that it has installed Joseph Aoun as its president, will finally leverage Israel's devastating victory over Hizballah to assert Lebanon's sovereignty.

In this optimistic view, the Lebanese government will uphold the November ceasefire between Hizballah and Israel. It will do so by executing both U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, a 2006 measure under which Hizballah was to be removed from south of the Litani River, and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, a 2005 measure under which all armed factions are to be disarmed and the monopoly of power be returned to the Lebanese government. Moreover, for the first time in five decades, powerful regional forces seem held at bay; the PLO is weakened and Iran and Hizballah are laid waste. Lebanon is back in Lebanese hands. And indeed, the optimists assert, the speech Aoun gave upon assuming office contained language that lends substance to this promise: "The era of Hizballah is over; We will disarm all of them."

Mark me down as highly skeptical of that view. And not only because of the jadedness and curmudgeonly essence that can come with an analyst's age and experience, but because of the underlying reality. Lebanon likely is far from out of the woods, far from adequately executing its obligations under the ceasefire plan, and certainly far from emerging as a calm state at peace with Israel.

The problem is because Lebanon's instability arises not from the external array of forces, but from the foundations of the Lebanese state, which are then leveraged by external forces.

The quote that never was

Let's start, first, with the most obvious. President Aoun was reported to have said that line about how "The era of Hizballah is over; We will disarm all of them." He was even praised for it by President Trump's incoming national security adviser. The problem is he did not say that, not in the text of the speech or as it was

delivered in Arabic. He actually said:

“My mandate begins today, and I pledge to serve all Lebanese, wherever they are, as the first servant of the country, upholding the national pact and practicing the full powers of the presidency as an impartial mediator between institutions … Interference in the judiciary is forbidden, and there will be no immunity for criminals or corrupt individuals. There is no place for mafias, drug trafficking, or money laundering in Lebanon.”

He raised this in the context of the judiciary, not the military. Regarding the disbanding of the Hizballah militia as a military force, he was careful in his words and suggested it would be subsumed into the state rather than outright eliminated. Such an integration of Hizballah into the Lebanese Armed Forces is one of Israel’s greatest fears, because it could put Israel into a war not with a militia but with a sovereign country on its own border. Aoun said:

“The Lebanese state – I repeat the Lebanese state – will get rid of the Israeli occupation … My era will include the discussion of our defensive strategy to enable the Lebanese state to get rid of the Israeli occupation and to retaliate against its aggression.”

The structure that cannot reform

Words in the Middle East mean only so much. Some might therefore dismiss as inconsequential this episode of “the quote that never was.” Yet it reflects something significant and far deeper. The Lebanese state — the “National Pact” to which Aoun refers — cannot develop into what the optimists hope it will, because its structure is not aligned with the only form of Lebanon that potentially justifies its existence as an independent state, let alone one at peace with Israel.

Understanding why requires dipping into the history of Lebanon. There’s a popular misconception that Lebanon exists only as a result of a colonial gift to a Christian community by the French at the end of World War I. Actually, Lebanon has an older and more defined reason to exist than almost any other state in the region but Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt. The colonial definition of Lebanon established at the end of World War I unwittingly and out of the best intentions to the Lebanese Christians undermined that essence.

Lebanon embodies the result of a major event: the Battle of Ayn Dera in 1711,

where the powerful Chehab clan converted to Christianity from Sunni Islam, aligned with the powerful Khazen Maronite clan, and unified the remaining non-Greek Orthodox Christians into a powerful force, all aligned with half of the Druze under the Jumblatt, Talhuq, Imad and Abd al-Malik clans. This Maronite-Druze coalition won against their premier enemy — the Ottoman empire and its governors of Sidon and Damascus — and expelled the Ottoman proxies, the Arslan, Alam al-Din, and Sawaf Druze clans from Mount Lebanon to the east in what today is the area of Jebel Druze/Suweida in Syria. The key enemy around which the Lebanese state was formed in 1711 was the Ottoman threat from Damascus and the area of Sidon. Ousting the Turks was a Christian and Druze project. The Shiites were not even a factor, although they too held as their nemesis the Ottoman specter, of which the Sunni Arabs was a mere instrument.

Aoun's remarks are a reminder of the problem with the present Lebanese structure. The military and its government are fundamentally anchored to the National Pact. That National Pact is a concept of a multi-confessional equilibrium among four communities, rather than the idea of Lebanon as established as a result of the battle of Ayn Dara in 1711 around a Maronite-Druze core. This multi-confessional concept divorced Lebanon from its only reason for existence: to be a homeland for a Christian state aligned with the Druze ally. Lebanon as constructed embodies the multi-confessionalism, rather than the alliance of the 1711 Battle of Ayn Dera and its results.

At first, this was a moot point: the Maronites and the Druze were a strong majority, and thus dominated the state. But the Greek Orthodox were never fully on board with the idea, and over the 20th century, the Sunni populations grew, largely through immigration, as did the Shiite, to the point at which the Christians were no longer the majority. The multi-confessional equilibrium thus shifted from being a cover for Maronite dominance to being a genuinely rickety, artificial coalition of forces that could not manage to overpower each other. Any attempt by any faction to overpower the other resulted in a breakdown of the equilibrium, a collapse of civic order, and violent conflict.

The current structure of the Lebanese government and its premier manifestation, the armed forces, are manifestations of this equilibrium of forces. A more coherent, peaceful, and successful Lebanon would reject the National Pact and return to its original and only raison d'être as a regional Christian nation that

gathers the various nearby Christian communities into a homeland offering hope for regional survival.

Strategic forces at work

The looming threats from the outside push the fragile artificial institution of the Lebanese state and army to hedge yet further rather than move decisively to extirpate the remains of Hizballah. The inherent instability and misalignment with the 1711 purpose invite those external interventions.

Lebanon has a neighbor next door — Syria — that essentially has never recognized Lebanon's existence as a valid state. Syria was also established as an Arab state with large minorities — a multi-ethnic, confessional quilt, and as such is not easily distinguished from a multi-confessional Lebanon. The mix is different; Syria has a much larger Sunni Arab community, with large Alawite minorities. And the Christians in Syria were largely Greek Orthodox who had made their peace with Arab nationalism because it allowed them to transform the irreconcilable and potentially mortal Turkish nemesis into a digestible Arab one. If Lebanon remains a multi-confessional state rather than narrowly a Maronite state with a Druze entity, then its digestion by Syria is conceivable.

Most concerning for Lebanon is that what is emerging in Syria is not a multi-confessional nation with enough of its own problems to leave Lebanon alone, but rather a Sunni-Arab state under Turkish influence and possible suzerainty. Turks are flooding the new Syria as well. The Ottoman nemesis that was defeated in Ayn Dara in 1711 is on the move to reverse that verdict — this time without their Druze allies but with the natural affinity of the sizeable Sunni Arab populations of northern Lebanon.

At the moment, the Lebanese government is more worried about what will threaten them from Damascus. A Sunni Lebanese alliance with the Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham entity emerging in Damascus and led by Ahmad ash-Shara (Abu Muhammad al-Julani) could subvert Lebanese independence and subjugate it to the neo-Ottoman project led by Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan. Compared to that risk, Hizballah — which Israel has diminished — seems like a distant concern rather than an acute problem that needs immediate and urgent attention from the central Lebanese government and its multi-confessional military. Indeed, the Lebanese government may even entertain husbanding the remaining forces of Hizballah as an asset to mobilize against the Sunni threat emerging from Ankara

and Damascus.

Any current Lebanese government is likely to view an energetic push to confront what remains of Hizballah as a prescription for civil war and an invasion by the new Syrians and their Turkish overlords. This would be tantamount to willfully inviting the apocalypse.

As a result, it is unlikely that the Lebanese government —an artificial institution anchored to a false equilibrium—will risk its existence by trying to rearrange the power structures. It is far more worried about maintaining sufficient stability to prevent Syria from interfering and entering, effectively ending Lebanon as a country.

Lebanon's path to long-term survival lies not with this equilibrium, but through returning to the essence of what Lebanon was meant to be, the spirit of Ayn Dara and 1711. It could establish a protective strategic umbrella with other regional forces, such as Israel and the West. For Israel, an alliance with Lebanon may be the most effective way to secure its northern border. And for the West, Lebanon offers an opportunity to preserve the oldest churches in the cradle of Christianity.

But that would involve an upheaval that the Lebanese people now appear unwilling to entertain. After decades of civil war, even a bad equilibrium may appear better than intercommunal strife. It is in this conflict-averse context that President Aoun's call for integration of all militias — essentially a re-manifestation of the national pact and integration of Hizballah into it — needs to be understood. It is something other than a clean call to disarm and erase Hizballah as expected and demanded by the EU, U.S., and Israel.

As a result, peace with Israel and a strategic reorganization of the coastal Levant will have to wait until the Syrian cauldron again comes to visit, Lebanon's Sunnis align with it, and the neo-Ottoman empire threatens. That is likely to happen, and in a turbulent enough way that it would force Lebanon's leadership to resort, for survival, to rediscovering the approach of 1711. Only in that framework will there be a realignment of Lebanon and likely strategic cooperation and even peace with Israel. A new era is coming to Lebanon eventually, but things may get worse before they get better.

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