

**THE NEW LEBANESE EQUATION:
THE CHRISTIANS' CENTRAL ROLE**

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THE NEW LEBANESE EQUATION: THE CHRISTIANS' CENTRAL ROLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After decades during which they saw their influence consistently decline, Lebanon's Christians are in a position to once again play a decisive political role. The May 2008 Doha agreement, coming in the wake of Hizbollah's takeover of West Beirut, provides the Christian community with the opportunity to regain an important place on the political map and to advance demands that have long been ignored. Already, Christians have obtained key positions in the new government, which was formed on 12 July. But the Doha agreement goes well beyond.

The Doha accords have ushered in three significant changes. First, they led to the election as president of Michel Suleiman, the former army commander. As a result, the Christians recovered the institution to which they are constitutionally entitled but whose effective powers had considerably diminished since the crisis began in 2004. The new president is likely to be courted by political actors of all stripes, each seeking to shape decisions he will face at his term's outset. These include initiation of a dialogue on a national defence strategy (which, ultimately, will have to include the question of Hizbollah's weapons), preparation of the 2009 parliamentary elections and the definition of new relations between Syria and Lebanon founded on mutual respect for sovereignty.

Secondly, the Doha agreement paves the way for a more Christian-friendly electoral law. Up until now, the electoral map was such that the vast majority of Christian candidates had to enter into alliances with the main Muslim parties. Most Christian politicians, it follows, were elected thanks to Muslim votes. Not any more. Post-Doha, Christian parliamentarians for the most part will be elected in predominantly Christian districts. That means they will have real leverage and be able to adjudicate between the two principal Muslim poles, the one dominated by the Sunni Future Movement, the other by the Shiite Hizbollah. Because Lebanon's political system broadly allocates ministerial seats in accordance with various parties' parliamentary weight, the Christian vote will be decisive in the establishment of a novel balance of power – unless, of

course, violence or massive irregularities prevent the holding of elections or undermine their credibility.

Thirdly and lastly, Christians will be in a position to revitalise old demands which the rest of the political class generally has disregarded. President Suleiman mentioned these in his inaugural address and Michel Aoun, the community's self-proclaimed leader, also made them the focus of his effort to build a large Christian coalition. Among these demands are long overdue and ever deferred administrative reforms (eg, decentralisation), empowering the presidency, ensuring better Christian representation in senior civil service positions, rejecting the naturalisation of Palestinian refugees and facilitating the return of displaced and exiled co-religionists. Never before have these claims – which have long obsessed members of the Christian community – been as central a part of the political debate as they are today. Because powerful Muslim actors will need to ensure the loyalty of Christian politicians, and because such politicians' leverage thereby will be strengthened, some of these longstanding demands could well be realised in the end.

For Lebanon's Christians, these represent potentially momentous changes. The formula devised in 1989 to end the fifteen-year civil war shifted the balance of power in a way that clearly disfavoured them: the president was stripped of several prerogatives while the number of parliamentary seats allocated to Christians was brought down from 60 to 50 per cent. The ensuing period was characterised by Syria's military occupation and the systematic repression of pro-independence Christian movements. Already weakened by a substantial wartime exodus, the Christian community was both leaderless and adrift, contributing to a sense of dispossession that, to this day, shapes its outlook in profound ways.

Syria's 2005 withdrawal enabled the return and release of key Christian leaders together with the reassertion of core demands. But the Christian political scene split into two camps. On one side, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces and Amine Gemayel's Phalanges

banked on the end of all residual Syrian influence, joined forces with former pro-Syrian actors (a majority of Sunnis and Druze) and called upon the international community to help restore a sovereign Lebanese state. This latter goal would be achieved, in particular, by setting up an international tribunal charged with investigating former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's murder, imputed to Damascus, and by pressing for Hizbollah's disarmament. On the other side, General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement challenged the political system as a whole, breaking its isolation by forging a controversial understanding with Hizbollah, Syria's main Lebanese ally.

The first camp defined the priority as genuine sovereignty through which would emerge a strong state capable of carrying out Christian demands. Aoun's camp, by contrast, argued that its ties to a powerful actor, flexible on all issues other than its armed status, was the optimal way to address the community's immediate and vital concerns. It also claimed that the

emergence of an unchallenged Christian leader (read: Aoun as president) would allow a complete overhaul of the political system.

The tug of war between the two principal Christian camps is hardly over. Much will depend on the 2009 parliamentary elections which will be a test of their respective power and determine the country's next government. In that sense, the Christian electorate – whose political preferences are by far the least predictable of all – will play a decisive role. Assuming it can play its role deftly, it will be in a position to promote policies it has long advocated. More importantly, it will be in a position to ensure that the country's political conflicts are resolved within and not in spite of its institutions – through ballots rather than bullets. After one full-blown civil war and another near-miss, that would be no small achievement.

Beirut/Brussels, 15 July 2008

THE NEW LEBANESE EQUATION: THE CHRISTIANS' CENTRAL ROLE

I. DOHA: VICTORY FOR THE CHRISTIANS AND THEIR MOMENT OF TRUTH

The Doha Agreement¹, signed on 21 May 2008 by all Lebanese parties, was, broadly speaking, a triumph for the Christian community. It re-established the presidency of the Republic, its institution by right according to the Lebanese system of distributing posts on a religious basis. It had been vacant since 23 November 2007 because of a failure by the political class to reach agreement on a consensus candidate. The Christians also obtained ratification in principle of a reform of the electoral law which considerably improves their ability to directly elect the quota of MPs accorded to them in the Taef Agreement.²

In contrast to earlier versions, the law under discussion is based on narrow constituencies allowing most Christian candidates to be elected without having to form alliances with Muslim partners. This will improve the autonomy of future MPs and their ability to express strictly Christian concerns. During the next parliamentary elections, planned for May 2009, about forty MPs will therefore be freed from the constraints of alliances connected to mixed electoral lists. Only about twenty of them benefited from this status under the previous law.

As long as legitimate elections do indeed take place, this development will have profound consequences. Against a background of significant polarisation between Sunnis and Shiites, community-based voting ensures that the Muslim electorate is decided in advance (the Sunni community generally follows the Future Movement party led by Saad al-Hariri; most Shiites support Hizbollah).³ The relative ensuing bal-

ance of these parties gives the Christian vote unaccustomed weight, tipping the balance of power in favour of one or other of the groupings which dominate the coalitions in Lebanese politics. The game of forming alliances played by Christian politicians, a new element of uncertainty on the political chessboard, will, in principle, allow them to be more than simple auxiliaries to the large Muslim parties. Doha also represents the return of some arbitration power for Christian politics.

The stakes are considerable. The power struggle governing Lebanese politics, turned upside down by the crisis created by the extension of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud's mandate in 2004, the simultaneous ratification of Resolution 1559 by the UN Security Council to disarm Hizbollah and the assassination a few months later of the former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri,⁴ will take shape during the 2009 elections. The 2005 parliamentary elections were marked by reactions based on passion as much as circumstance (rejection of Syrian influence, refusal of American/French interference in Resolution 1559, and Christian fears in the face of a vast Muslim electoral alliance).⁵ There is little chance of the electoral tidal wave enjoyed by the Christian leader, Michel Aoun, and the son of Rafiq al-Hariri, Saad, being repeated after three years of disillusionment.

For both camps 2009 will be about demonstrating their popularity, establishing their pretensions to impose a particular vision on Lebanon, and finding the concrete means to achieve it through the power gained in Parliament. In the Lebanese political system the power struggles within the legislative branch also determine the composition of the executive. The nature of the government, with all its imaginable consequences on the various dimensions of the conflict,

¹ See Appendix B.

² See Appendix C. The agreement, concluded in 1989 in the Saudi Arabian city of Taef, ended fifteen years of civil war. It introduced a new political balance whereby 50 per cent of seats in Parliament were allocated to the Christians.

³ On the support for Hizbollah by almost the entire Shiite community, owing to the tension created by the crisis, see

Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007.

⁴ On the origins of the conflict, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°39, *Syria after Lebanon, Lebanon after Syria*, 12 April 2005.

⁵ On these issues, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005.

will stem directly from the elections.⁶ In sum, since 2005 doubts over the *Pax Syriana* established following the civil war have re-arranged the cards and renegotiated the rules of the game – a fluid transition that should be considerably clarified by the next elections. In these circumstances, the Christians and their arbitration role will be crucial.

II. DIFFICULT TIMES FOLLOWING THE CIVIL WAR

To understand the issues affecting Christian politics (restoring community interests, relations with Syria, choice of strategic allies) two key moments in the transition should be considered: the end of the civil war when the Christians felt they were the biggest losers, and the end of the Syrian era which created an opportunity to be seized but revealed the disorganised and disunited state of Christian leadership.

A. DECAPITATION AND STAGNATION OF THE MAIN CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS

The end of the civil war established the failure of the main Christian players in their self-proclaimed mission to protect their community, particularly in the face of a Syrian neighbour which was perceived to be particularly threatening. The Taef Agreement, which considerably reduced the powers of the president and served to justify the sustainability of the Syrian military system,⁷ was only one aspect of the trauma suffered by the Christians. More generally, Christians talk of *ihbat* (frustration) to qualify their intense feeling of a community destroyed due to the loss of political influence after the civil war and despite ongoing cultural and economic influence. Christian *ihbat* stems simultaneously from a feeling of dispossession created by the Taef Agreement, existential fears related to the erosion of the community's demographic power and an assessment of the various governments presided over by Rafiq al-Hariri in the post-war period.

The latter is particularly criticised for his 1994 Naturalisation Decree which allowed a number of mostly Sunni Palestinians and Syrians to obtain Lebanese nationality, his handling of the issue of Christians displaced during the civil war,⁸ and the electoral laws

⁶A leading figure from the March 14 alliance thus makes a connection with the issue of Lebanese-Syrian relations. "Over the last three years Syria has realised that the only way to really control Lebanon is through a parliamentary majority. The Syrians lost Lebanon when they lost this majority". Crisis Group interview, Ghattas Houry, adviser to Saad al-Hariri, Beirut, 4 July 2008.

⁷The Taef Agreement provided for the presence of Syrian troops across Lebanon for two years only, enough time to ratify political reforms, form an entente government and elect a President of the Republic. Once these conditions had been fulfilled, the Syrian troops were supposed to be redeployed in the Bekaa region but most of the Taef clauses were never applied.

⁸During the civil war a number of Christians were forced to leave their villages, particularly in the Chouf region. Despite the introduction of a Ministry for the Displaced, many of them were unable to return to their homes, officially because of the absence of a reconciliation process to facilitate their reintegration at local level. More prosaically, the financial

adopted between 1992 to 2000 which were disadvantageous for Christians.⁹ Moreover, since the end of the 1980s Syrian domination had considerably weakened the Christian leadership which emerged after the civil war, while also preventing the creation of a new Christian elite. The leaders disappeared into exile or prison, while their support base was suppressed and adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

The first to be decapitated was the Aounist movement. Between October 1989 and October 1990 Michel Aoun, then head of the Lebanese army, rejected the Taef Agreement and successively sent in his troops against the Lebanese Forces (LF) and the Syrian army. He took on the image of a statesman, opposing both militia rule and the occupying forces. Nevertheless, he was defeated and forced into exile. His supporters then entered a semi-clandestine period. Subjected to repression by the Lebanese and Syrian security apparatus, the Aounist movement was restricted to student activism, protesting on campuses against Syrian occupation.¹⁰ The movement renounced any institutionalisation to avoid leaving itself wide open to repression.¹¹ Unwilling to delegate any of his authority through fear that rival leaders would emerge on the ground and act independently, the exiled General did nothing to encourage more organised action, putting the party's structure on the backburner until he returned.¹²

The Lebanese Forces, formed in 1976 in reaction to the armed Palestinian presence in Lebanon, were strengthened by the fighting in the 1980s but quickly became disillusioned after the conflict. By supporting the Taef Agreement, they ostensibly gambled on "the state and peace".¹³ They turned themselves into a political party and put down their weapons in exchange for a role within the new government. Benefiting initially from an amnesty, Samir Geagea, a former warlord, took up the reins of the new political party. The period from 1992 to 1994 was used to train a new generation of political leaders. During that time more

than 600 young people were groomed to head up a strictly civilian movement, re-establish an image tarnished by the civil war, revitalise its societal base and convince people that the militia chapter had been closed.¹⁴

But Geagea could not close the door on his past and was accused of sponsoring an attack on a church in Jounieh (further accusations over the assassination of political figures, including Rashid Karamah in 1987 and Dany Chamoun in 1990, were made subsequently). He was eventually sentenced to life imprisonment and incarcerated in 1994. The Lebanese Forces then followed the same path as the Aounist movement: they lost their figurehead, slid underground and adopted the return of the leader as their main cause.

The other inescapable Christian movement during the civil war, the Phalangist Party, also had to deal with the absence of its historical leader. Their crisis was older and stemmed from the death of their charismatic leader, Pierre Gemayel (father of Amin Gemayel, the current leader of the party) in 1984. In the last years of the civil war the leadership fell prey to bitter disputes. It was also weakened by competition in the Christian camp from the Lebanese Forces which appropriated a number of the Phalangists' senior figures.¹⁵

At the start of the 1990s, in contrast to the Lebanese Forces which very quickly collided with Damascus, the Phalangists accommodated the *Pax Syriana*. Some of their leading figures (such as Karim Paqraddouni) even formed a close relationship with the Syrian regime. However, such political survival came at a price: the rise of a movement which was increasingly pledged to Syria. This party therefore negotiated its survival under Syrian occupation better than others but paid the price of increasing subservience. Gemayel retrospectively described it as a "cynical and diabolical plan by the party to self-destruct", something he attributed to Ghazi Kanaan, head of Syrian intelligence services in Lebanon.¹⁶

Thus deprived of their historical leaders, Christian political movements were unable to rebuild, and still less replace their leadership, under Syrian occupation. The end of the *Pax Syriana* in 2005 saw, rather than a rejuvenated Christian scene, the resurgence of the

compensation supposed to accompany their return was not paid in many cases. The issue of the displaced is still one of the central demands of all the Christian political parties.

⁹ See below, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ The FPM states that 16,000 arrests were made between 1990 and 2005. Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Moukheiber, MP from the Michel Aoun bloc, Beirut, 8 December 2007.

¹² Crisis Group interview, source close to General Aoun, Rabieh, December 2007.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Elie Baraghid, chief of staff for Samir Geagea, Miarab, December 2007.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Elie Khoury, adviser to Samir Geagea, Beirut, 11 December 2007.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Amin Gemayel, Beirut, 28 February 2008.

¹⁶ Ibid.

same protagonists who had been at the helm at the end of the civil war, leaders of barely institutionalised movements dominated by a tendency to personalise power. Today, the multiple crises which have affected Lebanon have prevented, or continually delayed, the formalisation of the political apparatus – impeding any real professional development of the leading figures.

B. THE LEADERS RETURN WITHOUT REFORM OF PARTISAN INSTITUTIONS

Gemayel was the first of the three historical leaders to return to the political stage. He returned from exile in 2000 and found a party prey to strong disagreement about its relationship with Syria. After a period of internal division between a pro-Syrian wing and those loyal to Gemayel, Syria's withdrawal in 2005 allowed him to return to the head of the movement during the extraordinary congress in December 2007. Efforts to revive the party, entrusted to Pierre, Amin's son, were complicated by his assassination on 21 November 2006. When Pierre died his brother, Sami, was charged with revitalising the party, assisted by his father. The Phalangists managed to recruit 9,000 new members between 2005 and 2007 but the task was difficult as Gemayel himself admits. He recognises that "in terms of restructuring, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the Lebanese Forces were a long way ahead of us".¹⁷

The Free Patriotic Movement, led by General Aoun who returned from exile on 7 May 2005, faced other challenges and in particular ensuring that the initial popularity of the leader was backed up by structures which were still embryonic at that stage. When he returned the General was welcomed and feted by tens of thousands of people. The following month his electoral bloc obtained 21 of the 128 seats in Parliament. In a few months the party received 44,000 membership requests.¹⁸ The General then positioned himself as a populist and anti-establishment figure. He denounced corruption, criticised the political class which, in his eyes, represented "the symbiosis of the power of money, sectarianism and militia rule", and called for extensive reform.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ A fifth of membership requests were allegedly made by non-Christians. Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

¹⁹ "Three forces in Lebanon oppose the reform project: political feudalism represented by traditional dignitaries, sectar-

But the FPM "was not ready to absorb the vast support it received in 2005".²⁰ Instead of building a real party, the General still presents himself as a charismatic leader surrounded by a trusted network of his relatives and friends.²¹ Two of his three daughters are married to leading figures in the movement. The increased power of one of his son-in-laws in particular, Jibrán Bassil, has given rise to much criticism internally.²²

More generally, three years after his triumphant return his failure to substitute party structures for a discretionary style of leadership has apparently led to increased tension. The General's diplomatic adviser recognises that, in terms of organisation, the FPM is still amateurish.²³ Some senior figures are calling for the formalisation of nomination procedures for the Central Committee, the executive body of the Movement (at least theoretically).²⁴ Others question the management of the FPM's financial resources; the involvement of some members in contracts to rebuild the southern suburbs has led to accusations of corruption.²⁵ But the problems go much further:

All the party's money, including recent donations received during the elections, and the financial support offered by expatriate Lebanese, was paid into the personal accounts of Aoun and members of his family, or into institutions such as OTV (the Aounist television channel) managed by one of his sons-in-law, Roy al-Hashem. This situation has raised many questions within the party.²⁶

ian warlords who have moved across into politics and the political/business class (...) Lebanon has been taken hostage by the elite who are a real cause of inertia and paralyse the political system. Today, these forces are grouped in the so-called governmental majority camp. This camp is actually a symbiosis of the power of money, sectarianism and militia rule". Michel Aoun cited in Frédéric Domont, *Général Aoun. Une certaine vision du Liban* (Paris, 2007), pp. 49-50.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Alain Aoun, member of the Central Committee of the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 4 March 2008.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, analyst close to the March 14 Alliance, Beirut, 9 January 2008.

²² Crisis Group interviews, senior Aounists and people close to the General, Beirut, Rabieh, December 2007 – May 2008.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Aounist, Beirut, June 2008.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, businessman close to the Aounist movement, Beirut, February 2008.

²⁶ A senior Aounist cited by the online magazine Now Lebanon, aligned with the positions of the March 14 Alliance "A

Notably, the festering conflict between the General's inner circle and a wing demanding more democracy and transparency within the movement has resulted in the elections to replace the FPM's Central Committee, planned for 4 May 2008, being delayed until 26 October.²⁷

Despite everything, a restructuring effort does not really seem to be on the agenda. In the face of the 2009 parliamentary elections, "the General seems to care more about working on his image as a man who has returned their rights to Christians than building a party".²⁸ As a paragon of reform and anti-corruption, the Free Patriotic Movement is therefore striving to introduce internally the institutionalising reforms that it is demanding from the State. Beyond the slogans, the movement has still not proved its ability to make a decisive contribution to a thorough institutional reform process, even though combating corruption and reforming the institutions are the General's main hobby horses.²⁹ Instead, as someone close to the General admits, the Aounist movement runs the risk of becoming "an eminently contentious power structure which is increasingly closing around the inner circle of those close to the family and ardent supporters".³⁰

The Lebanese Forces also reclaimed their leader when the Syrians left. Samir Geagea, the only warlord imprisoned after the civil war, was released on 26 July 2005 following an amnesty law passed by a large majority in Parliament (which also affected the release of about thirty radical Islamists from the north).³¹ In contrast to the Aounist movement, the Lebanese Forces initially concentrated on re-establishing the party's activist apparatus. Drawing on their experience from the time when they operated legitimately (1992 – 1994), training sessions for senior figures quickly resumed.

At the same time, the LF were forced to strengthen their financial foundation. They worked hard to recover the party's property which had been confiscated in 1994 by the intelligence services. They also ce-

mented their presence among the diaspora: they opened offices and representations in Africa, the Gulf, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and strengthened their presence in Venezuela, Brazil and Europe.³² In terms of their societal base, the Lebanese Forces wanted to expand beyond their traditional areas of influence (the Bcharre region in the North and the poor Christian districts in the large cities), and worked hard to win over the urban middle classes, particularly in professional unions and universities. The party was therefore pulled in two directions by a support base still marked by the militia experience and a new generation still in the process of being established.

Following the withdrawal of Syria (long their *cause célèbre*), the three large Christian groups were badly placed to confront the resulting challenges, be it reform of the political system or defending the community's rights. More than ever, the Christians were the most fragile religious bloc. In contrast to the Sunnis, Shiites and Druzes, the Christians do not live under the almost unique authority of one leader (or *zaim*). They do not enjoy external sponsorship ready to provide massive support (as with Iran and Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Hizbollah and the Future Movement respectively). The Christian community is regionally isolated and internally divided.

In response to this situation, more than the other community groups, the Christians have looked to the edification of a functional state, able to preserve their interests and defuse religious power struggles. This is demanded by all Christian actors involved but concrete results are uniformly absent. For this to be implemented the political apparatus first needs to be modernised and the elite replaced. But in the post-2005 upheaval more pressing concerns have systematically taken precedence.

crumbling empire: the real reasons behind the postponement of FPM elections", 9 April 2008.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, a senior Aounist, Beirut, June 2008.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, source close to the General, Beirut, June 2008.

²⁹ "The [presidential] office is not important. It is the role that counts. And mine is to criticise and combat corruption, to contribute to reform". Interview with General Aoun in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 17 March 2008.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, source close to General Aoun, Beirut, 24 January 2008.

³¹ *Le Monde*, 18 July 2005.

³² Crisis Group interview, Elie Baraghid, chief of staff for Samir Geagea, Miarab, December 2007.

III. CHRISTIAN STRATEGIES FOLLOWING SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL

A. THE CHALLENGES AND AMBIGUITIES OF THE FREE PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT

1. Aoun's isolation upon his return to Lebanon

When Aoun returned from exile in Paris he made no secret of his presidential ambitions. To this end he counted on the parliamentary elections in May/June 2005 to re-establish himself on the political stage. As a seasoned opponent of the Damascus regime,³³ he saw his return as part of the climate of "liberation" from Syrian guardianship. Nonetheless, he received a suspicious welcome from the main supporters of Syrian military withdrawal, grouped into a coalition known as March 14.³⁴ Despite the massive participation of the Aounist movement in the demonstrations calling for the departure of the Syrians, only his supporters expected his arrival on 7 May 2005 (the very day when a new electoral law was adopted by Parliament in anticipation of the elections).³⁵

There are a number of possible explanations for the apparently hostile attitude towards by the General. Firstly, the Christian component of the March 14 alliance, mainly the Lebanese Forces and the Phalangists, probably viewed the return of a rival who had made his intentions so clear negatively. The Christian union of Qurnet Shehwan (bringing into the March 14 alliance a number of intellectuals and political figures close to the Maronite patriarchy³⁶) could only view with suspicion this deeply anti-clerical leader whose supporters had sacked the headquarters of the patriarchy in Bkerke in 1989.³⁷ The General then immedi-

ately opted for an offensive stance. After spending nearly 15 years in exile, it was easy for him to emphasise the corruption and compromise which characterised most of the political class under Syrian guardianship, and to construct his own legitimacy in opposition to certain figures from the March 14 alliance who had thus far been allies of Damascus.³⁸ He therefore attacked the very foundations of the "sovereignty" rhetoric found within the March 14 alliance.

Finally, over and beyond symbols his political strategy concretely opposed the established order. Aoun very quickly demanded a delay to the parliamentary elections which should have begun at the end of May so as to have time to introduce a new electoral law which would be contrary to the interests of those who had inherited the pro-Syrian order.³⁹ He desired a division of territory based on smaller constituencies, more balanced from the Christian point of view – and less favourable for the Sunnis, Shiites and Druzes.⁴⁰ After failed negotiations to form a common parliamentary coalition between the Aounist movement and the March 14 alliance, the latter joined forces with local pillars of Syrian influence (the Shiite parties Amal and Hizbollah) to ensure a crushing victory at the elections.⁴¹ The four main Muslim community leaders (Walid Jumblatt for the Druze community, Saad al-Hariri for the Sunnis, and Nabih Berri and Hassan Nasrallah for the Shiites), united within the framework of a so-called "quadripartite" alliance,⁴² agreed

³³ Aoun testified before the American Senate in 2003 in support of commercial sanctions against Syria.

³⁴ The March 14 alliance, so called in reference to the demonstrations on 14 March 2005 in response to the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, brings together Sunnis (mainly Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement), Druzes (led by Walid Jumblatt) and Christians (the Lebanese Forces, the Christian Phalangists and the union of Qurnet Shehwan).

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim Kanaan, Aounist MP, Ra-
bieh, 28 December 2007.

³⁶ Founded in April 2001, Qurnet Shehwan created a union of Christian figures working alongside the Church to end the Syrian occupation. It includes in particular Ministers Boutros Harb and Nayla Mouawad, as well as MPs Samir Franjeh and Jibrán Tuéni.

³⁷ The General condemned these excesses while playing down the affair (television archives from the time).

³⁸ The General described the March 14 Alliance as "neo-oppositionists" who had only joined the fight against Syrian occupation late in the day, i.e. opportunistically. Cited by Frédéric Domont, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

³⁹ On the 2005 elections and the issue of the electoral law, cf. Crisis Group Report, *Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ On this point he agrees with the position of the Maronite Church. The Patriarch, Mar Nasrallah Sfeir, is deeply opposed to the old law which, according to the Church, would only allow 14 of the 64 Christian MPs provided for by the Constitution to be elected by their own community, while the others are elected in the framework of alliances reducing their political independence. Crisis Group interview, adviser to Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir, Beirut, January 2008.

⁴¹ Aoun was offered eight MPs in exchange for forming an alliance with Saad al-Hariri and the Christians of Qurnet Shehwan, insufficient according to the Free Patriotic Movement. Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

⁴² The quadripartite alliance brought together representatives from the four large communities (the Shiite movements Amal and Hizbollah, the Progressive Socialist Party led by the Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, the Future Movement, the Phalangists and the Lebanese Forces). This alliance was seen by the Aounists as a Muslim front which aimed to marginalise Christians as, in its opinion, the Christians in the March

on the need to keep the old, fundamentally conservative law based on large constituencies and a majority system.

The marginalised Aounist movement also became ensnared in Lebanese realpolitik: against his own pro-sovereignty positions, the General allied himself with some of Damascus's most notorious allies such as Suleiman Franjeh and Michel al-Murr, thereby avoiding an electoral defeat for influential Syrian players in Lebanon.⁴³

The General's coalition, the change and reform bloc, obtained 21 seats in total. The Free Patriotic Movement itself created a surprise by taking 14 seats, almost all the seats allocated to Mount Lebanon, a Maronite Christian fiefdom. Its score should be partly put down to sectarian impulses. As Crisis Group noted in its report at the end of 2005, "upon his return he rapidly adjusted to the sectarian dynamics, emerging as protector of the Maronites, indeed, their last line of defence".⁴⁴ But other factors played a role, particularly his populist anti-corruption line which resonated in a Christian community which felt pushed aside from power and therefore receptive to anti-establishment ideas.

After his spectacular return, followed by the impressive performance of his parliamentary coalition, the General considered that he had "taken on the status of leader of the Christian community",⁴⁵ which only served to strengthen his presidential ambitions. With 14 MPs he carried as much weight within Parliament as Hizbollah - and three times more than his main Christian rival, the Lebanese Forces (only five MPs). However, even this significant electoral result was not enough to break his isolation. During negotiations at the end of June 2005 over the formation of a new government, Aoun again failed to reach agreement with the March 14 alliance parliamentary majority, disagreeing over the number of ministers to be attributed to the FPM. In the end he obtained no government posts.

14 alliance were only an appendix to the Future Movement. Crisis Group interviews, senior figures and parliamentarians from the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, December 2007-January 2008.

⁴³ The General justified the alliance in these terms: "everyone had to be won over, the Christians had to be reconciled before starting to reconcile with others", Frédéric Domont, op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group report, *Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Alain Aoun, member of the Central Committee of the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 25 January 2008.

2. The paradoxical alliance with Hizbollah

The Aounist movement therefore found itself without representation within the new cabinet and in need of strong allies. The General was asking for three things (demands that he would reiterate until the signature of the Doha Agreement): a government of national unity, the preparation by this government of a new electoral law "guaranteeing representation for all" (in other words better representation for Christians), and early elections.⁴⁶ The General constituted a source of vocal opposition to the quadripartite alliance, but one largely without the means for concrete action.

But the political order changed when, in December 2005, cooperation between the March 14 alliance and the Shiite parties broke down. The rift was caused by controversy surrounding the treaty to establish an international court charged with examining the Rafiq al-Hariri affair (and whose competencies were extended, upon request by the March 14 alliance, to attempted and successful political assassinations since October 2004). The Shiite ministers in the Government refused to ratify this treaty and began an empty chair policy which ran from 12 December 2005 to 2 February 2006.

The end of the quadripartite alliance benefited Aoun. He began talks with Hizbollah within the framework of an entente concluded on 6 February 2006.⁴⁷ This document was a charter of common positions on the big Lebanese issues and a road map to resolve contested affairs. The text recalls the consensus rule which presides over the exercise of democracy in Lebanon, an allusion to the inter-community pact to "live together" which requires all important decisions to be taken with the agreement of all or at least a qualified majority. Above all, it called for modernisation of the electoral law through the introduction of proportional representation, reform of the institutions and combating corruption. It also insisted on the return of Lebanese citizens living in Israel, conservation of the international court and clarification of the situation of Lebanese citizens who disappeared in Syrian prisons during the occupation. Under these conditions it proposed normalisation of relations with Syria. Finally, it invited the Lebanese political class to deal with the issue of Hizbollah's weapons through a national dialogue aiming to define a defence strategy for the country.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See Frédéric Domont, op. cit., p. 94.

⁴⁷ See Appendix D.

⁴⁸ In fact, the introduction of a national dialogue conference ensured that the crisis was appeased for a time. Bringing to

A priori, the entente appeared problematic and unnatural because the political positions of the two signatories diverged profoundly at many levels. The Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbollah were polar opposites as regards the UN's Resolution 1559 on disarming the Lebanese militias. The General had strongly supported it while Hizbollah held it up to public obloquy. The General also had ambitions to preside over a strong state which was incompatible with the military autonomy enjoyed by Hizbollah. They therefore disagreed over their assessment of the legitimacy of the resistance. While in private influential senior figures in the Free Patriotic Movement willingly conceived of the liberation of the Shebaa farms (territory under Israeli occupation) and Lebanese prisoners detained in Israel as a necessary and sufficient condition for Hizbollah to disarm,⁴⁹ the latter delayed demilitarisation until the end of the Israeli threat – a threat it considered intrinsic and long-lasting.⁵⁰

They also differed in their relations with Syria. The Aounist movement saw itself as “pro-sovereignty” while Hizbollah was quick to officially welcome the Syrian occupation.⁵¹ Finally, they had different attitudes towards religion. The Free Patriotic Movement claimed to be secular while Hizbollah, the “party of God”, claimed to be an “Islamist resistance”. Further, at the time of ratification of this charter, senior Aounists continually underlined that the document as

gether 14 political and religious leaders, it aimed to resolve all the big contentious issues one by one. Starting in spring 2006 the initiative was interrupted by the Israeli war against Hizbollah and was not resumed at the end of the fighting.

⁴⁹ Hizbollah has always distinguished between direct threats (occupation of the Shebaa farms, presence of Lebanese prisoners in Israel and violation of the sovereignty of Lebanese airspace) and indirect threats, including Israel's “expansionist character”. Crisis Group interview, Mustafa al-Hakk Ali, member of the Hizbollah Political Council, Beirut, 23 July 2007. The Aounist movement only took into consideration the direct threats (Shebaa farms and prisoners). Michel De Chadarevian went so far as to say that “in the event of a resolution of the issues of prisoners in Israel and the Shebaa farms, if Hizbollah persists in keeping weapons we will move over to the March 14 Alliance against Hizbollah”. Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

⁵⁰ Mustafa al-Hajj Ali, member of the Hizbollah Political Council, cited in Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit.

⁵¹ Hizbollah and pro-Syrian political parties organised a massive demonstration in Beirut on 8 March 2005 in support of Syria. Placards expressed thanks to Damascus (video archives from Hizbollah).

it stood was an understanding and not an alliance.⁵² However, there are four ways to understand the entente woven by the FPM with Hizbollah.

The first, official, way presents the agreement as a “national pact”, a common political platform opening “a serious space for dialogue to define a particular vision of Lebanon”.⁵³ More specifically, from the FPM's point of view it was a question of “halting religious tension by including Hizbollah to show that political conflict cannot be reduced to Shiite opposition to a government dominated by the Sunnis”.⁵⁴ In fact, for Hizbollah itself the alliance with the Free Patriotic Movement was vital to ending its religious isolation. Except for minor political players, it had lost all support among Sunnis – thus running the risk of being assimilated into a Shiite militia rather than an Islamist and national resistance movement.⁵⁵ Aoun therefore repeated that disarming Hizbollah would occur through its full integration into political life, rather than through confrontation which could only leave it on the defensive and strengthen its ties with Syria and Iran.⁵⁶

The second explanation lies in the political calculations of the two signatories of the entente. Isolated, the Free Patriotic Movement was putting itself in a good position in terms of influence within an opposition coalition numbering 56 MPs⁵⁷ and several ministers. A senior Aounist commented, “for Hizbollah and us this was a win-win situation. And we didn't have an alternative: the others wanted our heads”.⁵⁸ Aoun also acquired the ability to take concrete action with regards to the political system. Faced with the March 14 alliance Christians who tried to marginalise him by denying him any political relevance, he asserted him-

⁵² One MP notes that the two currents often voted separately in Parliament. Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim Kanaan, Aounist MP, Rabieh, 28 December 2007.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Moukheiber, MP from the Aounist block, Beirut, 10 August 2007.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ On Hizbollah's loss of the Sunni community, see: Crisis Group report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit. The taking of west Beirut by Hizbollah combatants only accentuated the process of community polarisation. See on this subject Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior Aounists, Beirut, December 2007 – January 2008.

⁵⁷ The 2005 election gave the opposition 56 MPs: the Aounist block (21 MPs), Amal and Hizbollah (29 MPs) and a variety of pro-Syrian figures and groupings (6 MPs).

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

self as someone impossible to ignore. Aoun imagined that, through this entente, he could finally increase his chances of becoming president. His calculation was two-fold: first prevent access to power by a candidate from or close to the March 14 alliance, something a large parliamentary coalition would allow him to do;⁵⁹ then, hope to put himself forward as a compromise candidate by maintaining a political line swinging between a sovereignty agenda in the face of the role of Syria⁶⁰ and a relatively tolerant position vis-à-vis the resistance.⁶¹

The third reason involves the ideological convergence of the two movements around anti-corruption rhetoric and the rejection of American foreign policy in the region – although the respective foundations for their positions on this subject were radically different.

For the General opposition to the United States was built around a nationalist/sectarian argument: according to one of his friends, he was convinced that the Americans had handed Lebanon over to Saudi Arabian influence through the Hariri family who were very close to Riyadh.⁶² Indirectly, they had laid the foundations for the country's Islamisation.⁶³ He viewed the Taef Agreement from that perspective. In his eyes this agreement was at the heart of the marginalisation of the Christians. The absolute support of the United States allegedly also translated into a desire to facilitate the naturalisation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, again increasing the demographic

weight of the Sunnis.⁶⁴ More generally, Aoun re-proached Washington for choosing Sunni players as favoured allies in the Arab world to the detriment of a supposedly more natural relationship with the Christians of the Orient who had been harshly affected by American policy in Lebanon and elsewhere.⁶⁵ In sum, for Aoun hostility towards American policy and sectarian stance went hand in hand.

However, for Hizbollah anti-Americanism was defined with regard to the Palestinian issue and in terms of rejecting what it perceived to be imperialist and hegemonic ambition.⁶⁶

The fourth and last explanation concerns the sectarian calculations of the two movements, beyond the need described above for a "national pact". The Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbollah were connected because they shared the same fear vis-à-vis the predominance of the Sunnis at regional level. It was therefore a question of an "alliance of minorities". Toni Daniel, regional leader of the FPM for Akkar, considers that:

within the framework of the great *fitna* between Shiites and Sunnis, it was necessary to choose between Sunni hegemony in the region and gambling on Shiite revival. As the Christian party, we therefore naturally give our preference to those who know what it is like to be in a minority, i.e. the Shiites.⁶⁷

Further, someone close to General Aoun has confirmed that "the General believes in the Persian em-

⁵⁹The March 14 alliance held a majority in Parliament, the institution which decided the election of the President of the Republic. However, without Hizbollah they did not have the qualified two-thirds majority. From the opposition's point of view, such a majority is needed to ensure that a presidential election be constitutional. Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Moukheiber, Beirut, October 2007.

⁶⁰On this issue, Michel Aoun's MPs and advisers continually repeat that they would never have followed Hizbollah in an attempt to make the international court fail. Crisis Group interviews, Farid al-Khazen and Ghasan Moukheiber, MPs from the Anounist block, Beirut, December 2007.

⁶¹It should be noted that this middle-of-the-road position had aroused the interest of some advisers from the Future Movement who saw Michel Aoun as a potential lever to influence the opposition forces' agenda. Crisis Group interview, an adviser from the Future Movement, Beirut, July 2007.

⁶²Crisis Group interview, source close to General Aoun, Beirut, 28 December 2007.

⁶³This is also the thesis of the book by Lyna Elias, *Les Chrétiens du Liban menacés de disparition ou le plan d'islamisation du Liban est en marche* (Beirut, 2007). The author is close to the FPM and her work broadly reflects the vision of the FPM on the issue of the Islamisation of Lebanon.

⁶⁴"American policy in Lebanon does not serve the Christians. American policy has two aims: above all, the security of Israel and that requires the rejection of the right of Palestinians to return - and therefore their establishment in Lebanon. That will disrupt the country and change the demographic balance of Lebanon, even more so as Christians had been forced to leave because of the war, then the economic situation and then the political situation". Interview with General Aoun for OTV, taken from the website of the Free Patriotic Movement, www.tayyar.org/tayyar/articles.php?article_id=411330&type=GMA.

⁶⁵The lot of the Christian community in Iraq is also used as an example of the harmful effects of American intervention in the region. Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

⁶⁶See Crisis Group report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit.

⁶⁷Cited in Beltram Dumontier, "L'entente entre le C.P.L. et le Hezbollah: pacte national ou zawaj mut'a?" [The entente between the FPM and Hizbollah: national pact or 'zawaj mut'a'?), political science masters thesis, Paris, 2007, p. 47.

pire. He thinks that they might win and, if we can put ourselves in a good position, we can win with them".⁶⁸ In the meantime, allying with the Shiites against the Sunnis is about protecting Christian regions from both the former and the latter.⁶⁹ Hizbollah also considers the Christians to be the religious group most opposed culturally speaking to the notion of resistance and the quickest to move closer to Israel. From this point of view, the alliance with General Aoun is seen as a way of "neutralising the Christian tendency to block the resistance".⁷⁰ It is therefore about a reciprocal desire for neutralisation.

3. From an entente on general principles to a real alliance

In view of the above arguments, it seems clear that the partnership between the Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbollah was always more than a simple electoral tactic. Progressively the entente, setting out a platform of general, shared ideas, was deepened into a real, remarkably solid alliance. This relationship was strengthened after the war in July/August 2006 thanks to the frank support offered to the Islamic resistance by the Aounist movement – both at the bottom and at the top.⁷¹ In the very tense post-war context, the relationship was consolidated to an even greater degree following the further resignation of Shiite ministers in November 2006, this time over an attempt by the

March 14 alliance to force through the statute of the international court.⁷² According to Alain Aoun, "at that time a new type of relationship was being introduced. A real alliance was being created because we found ourselves together in opposition".⁷³

In fact, very tight coordination was initiated between the two allies who organised joint demonstrations, jointly caused a general strike on 23 January 2007 and, more generally, reached agreement over the line to take. Moreover, Hizbollah's main demand (the formation of a government of national unity with ability for the opposition to block) supported the Aounist position. During the by-election on 5 August 2007 in the Metn region to determine the replacement of Minister and MP Pierre Gemayel (assassinated in November 2006), the Shiite voters in the constituency voted overwhelmingly for the FPM candidate, upon the instructions of Hizbollah.

The two parties therefore entered into a relationship of reciprocal dependency which explains the resilience of the alliance despite fundamental tensions. For Hizbollah the notion of a blocking third (indispensable to protect the status of its weapons) only made sense if the cohesion of the opposition was maintained. Having helped Hizbollah, the General expected sacrifices in return, firstly on the issue of the presidency. Although hesitant before someone judged to be unpredictable and a notorious anti-Syrian whose strategic positioning contradicted the interests of the resistance, the Shiite party nevertheless remained politically loyal and supported his candidacy. No doubt it was ironically counting on the damming hostility of the March 14 alliance, enabling it to support the General's unrealistic ambition even more forcefully.

As a gap was being created between the majority and the opposition, Aoun clearly understood that he had no hope of becoming president without the support of his powerful ally. Paradoxically, the political price of this relationship, which forced the General to systematically align himself with Hizbollah's positions which were sometimes unpopular among the Christian community, made him increasingly dependent on his main partner.

The General's response following the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh (one of Hizbollah's main military leaders) in Damascus on 13 February 2008 illustrates

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, source close to General Aoun, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Emad Chamoun, political analyst, Baabda, December 2007. In the eyes of senior figures in the FPM, Hizbollah's taking of Sunni districts in West Beirut in May 2008 is an illustration of this. Crisis Group interview with source close to the General, Beirut, June 2008.

⁷⁰ "It is about neutralising opposing visions to the resistance within the Maronite community. Because we know very well that the Christians, more than the Sunnis, are culturally predisposed towards an alliance with Israel. As for the General, he is convinced that the United States has given the reins of power in Lebanon to the Sunnis. In this context Aoun is in a new position - to place himself under the protection of Hizbollah's weapons because he knows that the Shiites do not threaten him". Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah leader, Beirut, November 2007.

⁷¹ See Crisis Group Report N°57, *Israel/Palestine/Lebanon: Climbing out of the Abyss*, 25 July 2006, p. 15. "Reflecting previous political alignments, Maronites are divided between the Lebanese Forces led by Samir Geagea, which sees in Hizbollah a mortal enemy and in the current confrontation perhaps the best chance to eliminate its military potential, and its civil-war rival, Michel Aoun.... In contrast, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement has stuck to its seemingly unnatural alliance with Nasrallah, describing the conflict as a war against Lebanon as a whole". Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁷² See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°20, *Lebanon at a Tripwire*, 21 December 2006.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Alain Aoun, member of the Central Committee of the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 4 March 2008.

his position. Following a speech by Hassan Nasrallah (Secretary General of Hizbollah) promising to avenge this action blamed on Israel and declaring "open war", on several occasions Aoun invoked a legitimate right of defence after the assassination of what he called a mujahid, a jihad fighter. The FPM's activist base saw him more as a straightforward terrorist.⁷⁴

Swept along with his alliance, in under two years he supported the Shiite resistance movement during the controversial war in July 2006, supported the announcement of "open war" which could plunge the country into torment again, and endorsed the taking of West Beirut by Hizbollah and other pro-Syrian militia in May 2008.⁷⁵ In fact, the crisis led to a tightening of the ties within the opposition in general, which included political formations which were particularly close to Damascus, an ambiguous situation which, even within the FPM, received far from unanimous support.

In effect, the nature of this coalition contradicted the expectations of the movement's societal base and displeased the Christian community in general. The constant reinforcement of his relationship with Hizbollah, indispensable to prevent the March 14 alliance from imposing any other candidacy apart from his own, also made him lose any credibility as the compromise candidate. In sum, this alliance only left the General an ability to block. As one of his friends has observed, his strategy was always based on an impossible equation:

With the progression of the alliance with Hizbollah, the General always had more difficulty in convincing people of his ability to incarnate a middle-of-the-road politician. The General wanted a solid base to thwart the other camp. He knew that with the Shiites on his side the majority could

not elect a president without his agreement. But he was increasingly swept along by the alliance he needed to secure the Shiite vote, while resolutely losing any chance of appearing to be a man of the centre.⁷⁶

In the face of this costly impasse, Aoun strove to compensate by taking an increasingly traditional line of defending the community.

4. Falling back on the community or the trivialisation of the Aounist movement

Promoting the interests of the Christian community, a subject which had been relegated to the background during the Syrian occupation when the movement's main cause was the "liberation" of the country, returned to centre stage as soon as the General returned.⁷⁷ The religious calculations which surreptitiously presided over the entente between the FPM and Hizbollah are an illustration of this. The trend continued and was reinforced until it reached its climax in November 2007 when the March 14 alliance put forward General Michel Suleiman, then commander of the Lebanese army, as a consensus candidate.

Unlike earlier candidacies, it was difficult for Aoun to reject Suleiman. The apolitical and stabilising role of the army and its victory against Nahr al-Bared's jihad combatants⁷⁸ made Suleiman a particularly popular man among and beyond the Christian community. His profile was also similar to that of the General and a number of officers close to Aoun were also loyal to Suleiman. To openly obstruct him and consequently be responsible for a presidential vacuum which worried Christians would have been very costly for Aoun.

Aoun is the product of two spheres of influence: the Free Patriotic Movement and the officers who supported him at the top of the military hierarchy. Aoun could say no to anyone and everyone except one of his men from the military apparatus because of the *esprit de corps*. Refusing Suleiman's candidacy would have meant turning all his offi-

⁷⁴He declared in particular, "Whatever the tone used by Sayyed Nasrallah, I believe that he has the right to defend himself. Some have seen the crime but want to tie the hands of Sayyed Nasrallah and prevent him from defending himself and dissuading his enemies. They want him to feel guilty because he calls for open war. But that serves the enemy which seems to have forgotten that it was Israel who changed the rules of the game", *Al-Akhbar*, 22 February 2008, translated by mideastwire.com. The General maintained his position in an interview in March: "I cannot refuse Hizbollah's right to defend itself, particularly after the assassination of Imad Moghniyé", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 17 March 2008.

⁷⁵The Shiite party, Amal, and the Syrian National Social party put up photos of Bashar al-Asad and the outgoing President, Emile Lahoud, a symbolic figure for the Syrian occupation, in several places at the end of the fighting.

⁷⁶Crisis Group interview, Alain Aoun, member of the Central Committee of the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 4 March 2008.

⁷⁷Crisis Group Report, *Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁷⁸During the summer of 2006 a small jihadi group operating under the name of Fatah al-Islam emerged in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared. It came into confrontation with the Lebanese security apparatus in May 2007. The army needed three months to eliminate it at the cost of hundreds of lives and injuries, the heaviest toll since the end of the civil war.

cers against him, particularly in the post-Nahr al-Bared context which had created very favourable circumstances for Michel Suleiman.⁷⁹

Hence on 22 November 2007 he declared that he was abandoning hopes of the presidency and making do with his pretensions to incarnate the Christian leadership. This was a key moment in the General's career and, consequently, that of the FPM as a whole. This development has been summed up thus by a senior member of the FPM:

We have been through three strategic phases. Before the entente with Hizbollah we were handicapped by our isolation. Thanks to the entente, we entered a new phase which allowed us to counter the hegemony of the group in power and to prevent it from electing a president from its ranks. But we were not able to go further and impose the candidacy of the General [Aoun]. Now we can only place ourselves in a position of compromise to resolve the crisis and ensure that our demands are taken into account.⁸⁰

In practice, in a proposal made public on 22 November 2007 the General made the election of Suleiman subject to an arrangement which would make him a hero for Christians. Aoun allegedly formally nominated a president of his choosing, while Saad al-Hariri did the same for the prime minister, before a government of national unity was formed. Very explicit guidelines were given to the government in question: the return of those displaced by the civil war (mostly Christians), respect for equality between Christians and Muslims at the top of the civil service (as provided for in the Taef Agreement),⁸¹ ratification of an electoral law which would ensure better Christian representation (based on a smaller constituency, the *caza*), implementation of the international court and, more generally, respect for the clauses of the entente document signed by Hizbollah and the FPM. Moreover, the president's mandate would be limited to two years and not six as provided for in the Constitution,

giving Aoun, aged 73, a last chance to fulfil his ambition.⁸²

He also invited people to his home in Rabieh where Christian dignitaries and politicians met on 26, 27, and 28 November 2007 before issuing a list of "Christian proposals"⁸³ setting out a defence policy for Christians in Lebanon. First and foremost, the text expressed a new desire to establish a single leader within the Christian community held by a mainstream political player,⁸⁴ and to confine the religious institutions (whose opinion had been solicited, particularly by France, within the framework of negotiations around the presidency) to a moral role. Sectarianism and anti-clericalism now went hand in hand as the religious leader became a rival to the political leader. The General actually declared on this occasion that "they must understand that I am the political leader. The Patriarch is not a political leader. He is our spiritual leader. The other political parties must understand that they have to speak to me".⁸⁵

Aoun therefore established himself as the "political patriarch of the Christian community",⁸⁶ i.e. the community's only representative, emulating Lebanon's other constitutive communities. According to one of the movement's student leaders:

Reality must be accepted: Hariri has won over the Sunnis, Hizbollah the Shiites and Jumblatt the Druzes. You cannot speak in the name of a religion if you are not mainstream. Christians must therefore be represented by the strongest Christian.⁸⁷

According to Alain Aoun, member of the Central Committee of the Free Patriotic Movement and nephew of the General, his uncle's reasoning depends on the observation of the existence of "religious federalism". The political system not only gives each re-

⁷⁹ Interview with Karim Paqraddouni, former president of the Phalangists, Beirut, 29 February 2008.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Alain Aoun, member of the Central Committee of the FPM, Beirut, 25 January 2008. Alain Aoun was referring to the quadripartite alliance which briefly united the principal Muslim political players, Shiites, Sunnis and Druzes, during the 2005 election.

⁸¹ The Free Patriotic Movement regularly accused the Future Movement of not respecting this equality clause. Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

⁸² Initiative by General Michel Aoun, press office of MP Michel Aoun, Rabieh, 22 November 2007.

⁸³ Available on: www.tayyar.org/files/documents/propochretiennes.pdf.

⁸⁴ The document considered that "the Lebanese political system, based on the recognition of the rights of each community, includes respect for democratic competition [for access to leadership] within each homogenous religious community, and a consensual democracy within a wider and religiously diverse community [the Lebanese nation]". Lebanese Christian Proposal Document, Rabieh, 4 December 2007.

⁸⁵ Interview with the General on New TV, 25 November 2007.

⁸⁶ Interview on New TV, cited in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 26 November 2007.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, student leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 21 December 2007.

ligion a corresponding share of posts and institutions, but theoretically allows them to nominate their own leader at the head of the three main State bodies: “the Shiites, whether or not they hold a majority, elect the president of the Chamber, and the Sunnis elect the president of the Government [i.e. the Prime Minister]; but the Christians do not elect the president”.⁸⁸ Aoun was therefore calling for a president nominated by his community – or more specifically by the Christian leader, i.e. himself.

In accordance with this vision, the General then took the place of Nabih Berri, head of the pro-Syrian Shiite party Amal, as the official opposition negotiator, thereby giving himself a central role on the issue of the presidency and strengthening his status as the Christian leader. The idea was to restore the president's real power by attaching it to his community, in contrast to the pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, a marginalised henchman of Syria. As Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, says, “another Lahoud, paralysed by his government, dispossessed by his ministers and depriving Christians of their role in the Lebanese political system” must be avoided at all costs.⁸⁹

In an irony of sorts, the General's new position moved him closer to the historical position of the Lebanese Forces which, for a long time, had dreamt of a Christian society united behind a single leader. This shift may have enabled him to rally the community around him but it did create tension among supporters in academic circles who had become politically active during the fight for sovereignty when the General was in exile in France. This generation, lacking a purely community-based vision, could have constituted the core of senior figures from which a more modernist movement could have been formed.

5. Aoun's failed presidential ambitions

The Doha Agreement, signed in May 2008, which led to the election of Suleiman within the framework of a package deal meeting the opposition's main de-

mands,⁹⁰ profoundly affected Aoun's stance. Until that point uncertainty over a repeat of the crisis partly played in his favour. While the presidential office was still vacant, his ambitions could cling on to the hope of an improbable *coup de theatre*. It had also still been possible to imagine a scenario whereby Suleiman would only be elected for a transitional two years.

Aoun could therefore have gambled on a return in 2009 during the parliamentary elections which would not necessarily be unfavourable for him. A new electoral law could not have been more unfavourable to him than the 2000 law,⁹¹ and his alliance with Hizbollah had also allowed him to make progress in some mixed constituencies (particularly in Baabda Aley where the Free Patriotic Movement failed in 2005 because of the Shiite vote). Finally, the deepening political conflict and its increased ramifications had tended to highlight Christian issues such as reform of the electoral law, rebuilding the weakened presidential institution and review of the Taef Agreement.

However, the Doha Agreement meant the definitive end of the General's presidential ambitions. Suleiman has been elected not as an interim president but for a six-year mandate as provided for in the Constitution. General Aoun now has to completely review his strategy insofar as his two main demands have either been dismissed (the presidency) or accepted (the electoral law). Naturally, his ambitions have been put off until the next parliamentary elections. According to someone close to the General, he would like to become a majority partner in a coalition with Hizbollah to have decisive weight following the 2009 vote on the formation of the government.⁹² However, the General faces several significant problems.

Firstly, he is still imprisoned by his complicated, costly and indispensable relationship with Hizbollah. Although the collapse of Aoun's popularity, repeated *ad infinitum* by the March 14 alliance, is far from

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Alain Aoun, member of the Central Committee of the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 25 January 2008. “This country is a sort of federation of religious communities, and it is unique in the world”, Frédéric Domont, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Michel de Chadarevian, in charge of diplomatic relations for the Free Patriotic Movement, Beirut, 12 December 2007.

⁹⁰ Since the war in July/August 2006, the opposition had first and foremost demanded a government of national unity where it would have a ‘blocking third’, as well as a new electoral law which was more advantageous for the Christians. These two demands were granted in Doha.

⁹¹ All the draft laws discussed by politicians (the 1960 law, the Boutros Commission project, small constituencies) before the Doha Agreement, which decided in favour of a special formula, increased the percentage of Christian MPs elected by a Christian electorate.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, source close to the General, Beirut, June 2008.

proven,⁹³ there is no doubt that he no longer enjoys the popular momentum of 2005.⁹⁴ The Shiite vote in mixed Shiite/Christian constituencies (Jezzine, Zahle, Jbeil, Baabda) can only become more decisive, despite the new electoral law. While still handling Hizbollah with care, the General could win if he wants to mobilise a "Christian centre", which belongs to neither the FPM or the March 14 alliance, to convince Christian public opinion that he *is* able to move forward, even just slightly, the issue of the Shiite party's weapons. Hizbollah's taking of West Beirut makes this exercise necessary not vis-à-vis the Aounist support base but among floating voters who would perhaps not be convinced by the General's main arguments (restoration of Christian rights, combating corruption and the alliance with Hizbollah as a source of protection) alone.⁹⁵

He will then have to take a position with regard to a new major issue: the existence of a potentially strong and perhaps ambitious president. Suleiman could become the spearhead for a kind of Christian third way, distinguishing himself from both the Lebanese Forces and the Free Patriotic Movement, actively supported by the Church and federating a number of unaligned Christian political figures. The challenge for Aoun is to contain Suleiman's surge without alienating him. He has to rally the Christian community and impose

himself as its effective leader with whom the president would have to then compromise. In other words, the General has to try to create an Aoun/Suleiman duo where he would be in a strong position – essentially subordination of the head of state.

According to a Christian observer, in concrete terms Aoun's strategy "is less about developing a partisan apparatus and more about working on his image as a leader/defender who can give Christians back the rights they lost following Taef".⁹⁶ His ability to block may exacerbate his detractors' hostility but it also positions him as the inevitable Christian interlocutor, something he strove to demonstrate both before Doha (by negotiating in the name of the opposition) and since (by demonstrating his inflexibility on the formation of a government so as to obtain better ministers for the Christians than the March 14 alliance).⁹⁷ In fact, the Government formed on 12 July 2008 contains four ministers from the Aoun block who manage all the portfolios considered to be crucial in terms of winning votes: Jibril Bassil (Telecommunications), Alain Tabourian (Energy), Elie Skaff (Agriculture) and Mario Aoun (Social Affairs).

The four Christian Ministers from the March 14 alliance on the other hand hold what are considered to be secondary posts. The General's call to reduce the powers of the Prime Minister⁹⁸ and the assembly of Christian figures at the General's home on 4 July 2008 to define a common platform to defend community interests are further illustrations of this strategy. As a Christian figure from the opposition explains:

The gathering on 4 July should serve to bring together the Christian opposition and prepare for the 2009 elections. It also indicates a great opening up

⁹³ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁹⁴ One of his fundamental strengths was actually a community-based reaction in the face of the quadripartite alliance that brought together all the leading Muslim groups and was perceived as wanting to marginalise the Christians. But the FPM's alliance with Shiite Hizbollah and the integration of the Aounist movement into the next government snapped the foundations of this community-based reaction. The Aounist block perfectly understood this development. "The tidal wave of 2005 was an exceptional phenomenon: winning 70 per cent of the Christian vote was abnormal in itself. The tidal wave will not be repeated, any more than will the one Hariri benefited from in reaction to the death of his father and Syrian withdrawal". Crisis Group interview, a Christian figure from the opposition, Beirut, 4 July 2008.

⁹⁵ Christian opinion was divided over the taking of Beirut. For some it represented a strong strike against Sunnis suspected of wanting to Islamise Lebanon, while sparing the Christian regions. But when militia rule was installed in West Beirut fears began to emerge that Christian districts themselves could be exposed to Hizbollah combatants. Crisis Group interviews, local traders from the Achrafieh district, Beirut, May 2008. "The problem is not selling this strategic alliance to the Aounists themselves. The ones who had to buy it did so long ago; they had already accepted the war in 2006. The taking of Beirut only created trouble among a small fringe within the FPM". Crisis Group interview, Christian figure from the opposition, Beirut, 4 July 2008.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Christian observer close to the Patriarch, Jounieh, June 2008.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews with representatives from the majority and opposition, Beirut, 3–4 July 2008. "The March 14 Alliance Christians will only get crumbs from this government formation process. They will only obtain one or two third-rate ministries and will be the losers before the Christian masses. In contrast, all Aoun's ideas on the importance of a strong Christian grouping with trustworthy allies will be strengthened. The Church itself has lost a lot because it supported the camp which obtained nothing for the Christians. All this plays in favour of the General". Crisis Group interview, Michel Samaha, former Information Minister with good relations with Damascus and General Aoun, Beirut, July 2008.

⁹⁸ The General would like the Prime Minister to no longer control state bodies such as the Public Finance Court, the Legal Inspectorate and the Discipline Council. *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 19 June 2008.

to the Christian centre since 100 to 150 independents have been invited to participate. Between the majority and the opposition there is a grey area which is particularly pertinent among Christians [because of the extreme polarisation of the Muslim scene]. Therefore, the challenge is to create a platform which is sufficiently broad to form a vast coalition which will be consolidated by the integration of independents onto FPM lists.

In terms of the platform, it is a question of concentrating on specific demands which are unanimously accepted by Christians: strengthening the presidential powers, fair distribution of posts between Christians and Muslims at the top of the civil service, better representation of Christians generally, assistance for the return of Christians displaced during the civil war, the naturalisation of Christians from the diaspora who have lost their Lebanese nationality, and guarantees against the settlement of Palestinians living in Lebanon.⁹⁹

The FPM thus hopes to co-opt a number of independent Christian figures and is counting (possibly exaggeratedly) on the return to power of those marginalised at the time of the Syrian withdrawal, particularly the leader of Zghorta, Suleiman Franjeh.¹⁰⁰

Finally, by joining the Government formed on 12 July 2008 the General must prove that he is up to the task with regard to his reformist positions and anti-corruption slogans. Many in his entourage (not to mention his detractors) have their doubts. A senior figure from the Aounist movement recognises that FPM management is in crisis, that the movement is

suffering from a lack of transparency and that there is a real risk of secessions at the top. The institutionalisation of the Movement and training for senior figures are still lacking. For him the FPM "is on a downward spiral and needs a reprieve more than ever".¹⁰¹ Ironically, the portfolios obtained by the Aounist block in the Government, which are all "service" ministries susceptible to vote-catching initiatives and corruption, are more liable to sully the reputation of the Free Patriotic Movement than facilitate a reform project.

With regard to the 2009 parliamentary elections therefore, Aoun faces serious challenges. Luckily for him, his adversaries face just as many.

B. THE PRECARIOUS GAME OF ALLIANCES PLAYED BY THE MARCH 14 CHRISTIANS

If the alliance with Hizbollah was problematic for the FPM, the alliance with the Future Movement was also an uneasy one for the Christians in the March 14 alliance. Forged in February/March 2005 on the basis of a shared "sovereignty" platform (breaking with the era of Syrian influence), it did not really fit into a religious agenda (i.e. the re-establishment of the political role of the Christians on the Lebanese political chessboard). Indeed, the Future Movement was widely seen by Christians as being behind the community's political dispossession at the end of the 1980s.

The community found it impossible to separate Rafiq al-Hariri in particular from the notion of *ihbat* described above. After his death the Future Movement, under the leadership of Saad al-Hariri, was accused of prolonging this heritage by monopolising decision-making within, and in the name of, the March 14 alliance. In a particularly striking example, since it concerns a Christian prerogative *par excellence*, the Christians of the March 14 alliance reacted badly when Saad al-Hariri unilaterally took the initiative to propose the candidacy of Michel Suleiman as the consensus candidate in November 2007.¹⁰² More generally, and despite great unity in the face of common adversaries such as Hizbollah, the FPM and Syria, the March 14 alliance is tormented by a hidden religious rivalry. One of the Christian leaders of the March 14 alliance sums it up thus:

With the Sunnis we face a difficult battle for power. Over the last few years they have played

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, a Christian figure from the opposition, Beirut, 4 July 2008.

¹⁰⁰ "Suleiman Franjeh is in harmony with Aoun who he lets represent the Christian opposition in its entirety. Suleiman offers him complementary qualities: he is young, he is surrounded by young executives and is very active on the ground. He also enjoys the profile of a man of the people which allows him to rally support within the Christian masses, which should not be confused with the bourgeois elite. He has never changed his positions. At the same time, he takes a conciliatory line. That is why he manages to reach out beyond his fiefdom in Zghorta and in Kura and Batroun. Some even see him as a potential successor to Aoun". Crisis Group interview, Michel Samaha, Beirut, July 2008. Another of Aoun's Christian allies considers that Franjeh now represented more than 10 per cent of the Christian vote. Crisis Group interview, an opposition Christian figure, Beirut, 4 July 2008. That said, an independent analyst underlined his drop in popularity following "repeated attacks against the Patriarch which were more offensive than rational". Email communication, 12 July 2008.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Aounist, Beirut, June 2008.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, political advisers to the Lebanese Forces, Mirab, January 2008.

hard, promoting their religious interests wherever they could. But the Sunnis are not ideological, they are liberalised. We share the same challenge, the Shiite challenge, and Hizbollah represents an existential problem which goes to the very heart of everything.¹⁰³

The widespread perception that there is a certain amount of submissiveness among Christians in the March 14 alliance towards their Sunni partners has cost them in terms of popularity in the Christian community. That particularly explains why the Aounist movement, contrary to the repeated forecasts of its detractors, did not collapse after its entente with Hizbollah as the Christian alternative was also ambiguous.¹⁰⁴

Ironically, one of the arguments used by the March 14 alliance Christians to justify their alliance with the Future Movement is in symmetry with the Aounist vision of the entente between the FPM and Hizbollah. In sum, it was a question of neutralising the Sunnis' regional vision (historically supporters of a Lebanon merged with Syria and in tune with the idea of the Arab nation) and turning their attention to a Lebanese project. Thus, according to a close adviser of Geagea the alliance with the Future Movement was also about a desire "as a Christian to end the dream of an Arab union with Syria and others".¹⁰⁵ The alliance with the Future Movement would therefore consecrate the "fruit of a progressive evolution of Lebanese Sunni

Islam towards our sovereign positions".¹⁰⁶ Geagea's chief of staff, Elie Baraghid, has a lucid view of this costly but necessary relationship:

The assessment of the alliance is not great but it is the price to be paid to maintain the claim for independence. I do not want to associate myself with a project which indirectly brings back Syrian influence. We have lost a lot because of the Sunnis and they are not going to give back the influence that they have taken from us. It is up to us to get it back by strengthening our presence within the institutions.¹⁰⁷

During the presidential vacuum, which began after the departure of Lahoud on 23 November 2007 and lasted until the election of Suleiman on 25 May 2008, the Christians from the March 14 alliance were in a particularly uncomfortable position. In accordance with the Constitution, the prerogatives of the presidency belonged to the Sunni Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, aggravating the perception of an unequal partnership. The Lebanese Forces then clearly demonstrated that they were in favour of electing a president by simple majority, preferring the March 14 alliance to force it through rather than endless secret negotiations about a consensus president. According to Samir Geagea:

We cannot hold on for long with the president's prerogatives in the hands of a Sunni. With a status quo like that Aoun will rally support over confiscation of the presidency by the Sunnis. In contrast, by imposing a president we will be able to show that the Sunnis are not running the show.¹⁰⁸

However, the election of a simple majority president posed two problems. On the one hand, it created the potential for a violent reaction from the opposition which saw this issue as a red line. On the other hand, it ran up against the refusal of the Patriarch. He considered such a formula a dangerous precedent which would make it possible in the future to elect a president without the agreement of the Christian community. The Muslims held half the seats in Parliament, by constitutional provision, and they would need just

¹⁰³This leader thus confided that he spent his time trying to counter measures taken by the Future Movement and furthering the marginalisation of the Christians. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, December – January 2008.

¹⁰⁴During the by-election of August 2007 held to replace the assassinated MPs Pierre Gemayel and Walid Eido, the alliance grouped around the FPM candidate managed to take back, the seat of the son of Amin Gemayel despite the latter's candidacy. Surveys available give contradictory results from which it is impossible to draw conclusions. A survey by Sofres from February 2008 announced that only 29 per cent of Christians considered Michel Aoun to be their political leader, compared to 35 per cent for Samir Geagea and 9 per cent for Amin Gemayel. The Sofres survey was published by the nowlebanon.com website, close to the positions of the March 14 Alliance and vehemently against the Aoun/Hizbollah duo. However, the surveys to which the opposition refer indicate that 40 per cent of votes favour Aoun, less than 20 per cent for Geagea, 11 per cent for Suleiman Franjeh and 10 per cent for Gemayel (the rest are divided between local leaders). Crisis Group interview, Karim Paqraddouni, Beirut, 4 July 2008.

¹⁰⁵Crisis Group interview, Elie Khoury, adviser to Samir Geagea, Beirut, 11 December 2007.

¹⁰⁶Crisis Group interview, Amin Gemayel, 28 February 2008. "Prime Minister Fouad Siniora (from the Future Movement) has adopted all the positions we wanted to defend. He fought for the same ideas the Christians have supported for years". Crisis Group interview, Nassib Lahoud, Beirut, 3 July 2008.

¹⁰⁷Crisis Group interview, Elie Baraghid, chief of staff to Samir Geagea, Mirab, December 2007.

¹⁰⁸Crisis Group interview, Samir Geagea, Mirab, 12 December 2007.

one Christian vote to elect a president in their own image.¹⁰⁹

That said, despite the threats made by the opposition,¹¹⁰ the Christians from the March alliance displayed an increasing preference for this solution as the presidential crisis deepened. They particularly counted on the following calculation: beyond rhetorical intimidation, Hizbollah would not use its military power out of fear of getting bogged down into *fitna* or religious anarchy.¹¹¹

Geagea also wanted to end the presidential crisis quickly because he himself felt that he was on a "slippery slope" where every concession from the majority would be a prelude to further renunciations before an opposition whose ultimate aim was victory at all levels.¹¹² For the Lebanese Forces Hizbollah must first be confronted politically not militarily. The election by simple majority of a president from the March 14 alliance followed this logic.¹¹³

Although the Phalangists were dominated by a general desire to stand out from the Lebanese Forces ("a party born from war which was trying to find an identity for itself in times of peace"¹¹⁴) and to position themselves as a moderating element,¹¹⁵ support for the need to confront Hizbollah politically was making

progress. The option of forcing their will through was being imposed little by little.¹¹⁶ In the ranks of the Phalangists, as among the Lebanese Forces, the opposition's threats were seen as a bluff: "in the past the opposition had been forced to retreat when it tried to appeal to the street. And Pierre Gemayel has been assassinated, as have army officers and Intelligence Services staff. What more can they do?"¹¹⁷

At the time another advisor from Geagea's inner circle considered "the chances that the opposition's reaction could degenerate into a civil war to be less than 25 per cent".¹¹⁸ Gemayel himself thought that "the limitations of power struggles should also be taken into account. Hizbollah is sinking ever further into its religion and if it uses its weapons internally it will be the beginning of the end".¹¹⁹

Increasingly united on this issue, the Christians of the March 14 alliance nevertheless struggled to impose their point of view before Hariri and Jumblatt who were more worried about Hizbollah's possible reaction for the good reason that they were more exposed. While Geagea benefited from a proper Christian *hinterland* (around Bcharre in Mount Lebanon), both the Future Movement (whose fiefdoms of Beirut and Saida touched Shiite bastions) and Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (widely encircled by the Chouf mountains) lacked this strategic advantage.¹²⁰ The Future Movement in particular recognised that it had to make the best of an extended status quo. At the beginning of May an adviser to Siniora also allegedly confirmed that the status quo was in the interests of everyone. The presidential vacuum did not affect Hizbollah at all, while Aoun could still count on the hypothetical scenario of an interim presidency. The government itself could benefit from it: "in spite of everything, we are governing with improved rates of growth and a social fabric which, as a whole, is holding".¹²¹

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, an adviser to the Patriarch, Jounieh, January 2008.

¹¹⁰ For example, a senior figure from Hizbollah confirmed in December that Hizbollah was ready to "destroy the country" if an election was held which did not respect the quorum. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2008.

¹¹¹ This reading of the situation depended particularly on the concrete experience of the general strike of 23 January 2007 where activists from the Lebanese Forces attacked the Aounists in various places, allowing routes blocked by the opposition to be re-opened and forcing Hizbollah to abandon extension of the strike. Hizbollah feared religious degeneration. The general strike sounded the end of the opposition's use of the street as a political strategy for change. For more details see Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Samir Geagea, Marab, 12 December 2007.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Samir Geagea, Washington DC, March 2008. Another option evoked by Geagea was, rather than electing a president unilaterally, to re-shape the Government by granting a greater place to the Christians, so as to counter-balance the loss of the presidency. Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Amin Gemayel, Secretary General of the Christian Phalangists, Beirut, 26 February 2008.

¹¹⁵ That resulted notably in the preservation of a line of communication between Gemayel and the opposition parties, from Hassan Nasrallah to Michel Aoun and including the pro-Syrian leader Suleiman Franjeh. The Phalangists' positions and statements on Syria are also relatively nuanced.

¹¹⁶ "The more time passes, the more the election of a president by simple majority becomes a priority option". Crisis Group interview, Amin Gemayel, secretary-general of the Phalangists, Beirut, 26 February 2008.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, a leading Phalangist, Beirut, February 2008.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Elie Yazbeck, political adviser to the Gemayel family, Beirut, 26 February 2008.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Amin Gemayel, Secretary General of the Phalangists, Beirut, 26 February 2008.

¹²⁰ Moreover, Geagea has said that he perfectly understands his allies' constraints and hesitations. Crisis Group interview, Samir Geagea, Washington DC, March 2008.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, an adviser to Siniora, Beirut, 4 May 2008.

Although the option of a president nominated unilaterally by the March 14 alliance never saw the light of day, the desire to take back the initiative led the majority to confront the opposition in other areas. On 6 May the Council of Ministers decided to dismiss the head of airport security (a figure close to Hizbollah) and to declare the Islamist movement's network of secured telephone lines illegal. Initially resisted by the March 14 Sunnis, these decisions (which led to a blitz military response from Hizbollah)¹²² were allegedly taken after Jumblatt rallied support for the alternative to "political confrontation".¹²³

The resulting crisis led to a resolution of the presidency issue (through the Doha Agreement) in a way which did not necessarily serve the interests of the Lebanese Forces, Christian heavyweights in the March 14 alliance. They had hoped to nominate a president from amongst their own but instead they have to build a relationship with a figure close to Syria and the army (against which they had long fought). Further, the President will very likely have to establish his legitimacy by putting a certain amount of distance between himself and the Sunnis of the Future Movement – and therefore his Christian allies.

Furthermore, although Doha returned the presidency to the Christians, the Lebanese Forces could hardly take the credit as their alliance had not been a determining factor in this agreement. Aoun, rightly or wrongly, had been quick to make known his own choice of political partners by launching a poster campaign in Christian areas on the theme "we have given back rights to their owners". In other words, his entente with Hizbollah has allegedly paid off. The Christians from the March 14 alliance now have to find a convincing platform in preparation for the future parliamentary elections against a background where the sovereignty agenda is losing momentum. A Christian MP from the March 14 alliance who is very critical of the Future Movement expressed it thus:

The causes are becoming fewer. To be cynical, Hariri's blood is growing cold. Without another assassination the momentum for sovereignty is not a sufficient cause. If a meeting between the Leba-

nese and Syrian presidents takes place, it is the end of the sovereignty struggle. For me, who fought for the departure of the Syrians, sovereignty is no longer a slogan – the real cause is a government which works. A working government without the Shiites is not possible.¹²⁴

For now Aoun has pre-empted the Christian parties in the March 14 alliance with regard to promoting community interests. The latter's controversial alliance with the Future Movement also complicated any steps in this direction. In all likelihood, their strategy will consist of discussing the threat of Hizbollah's weapons as a means both to renew the support of their societal base and undermine the legitimacy of the FPM by attacking its choice of strategic alliances.

C. THE CHURCH IN POLITICS: A PRESIDENTIAL STRATEGY

The Maronite Church, and more particularly the Patriarch,¹²⁵ is in a delicate position. It is strongly committed to sovereignty, particularly after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000,¹²⁶ and is de facto in the March 14 camp – at the very least it is seen as such by the pro-Syrian camp. At the same time, it intends to play a role in bringing together the Christian community, something which is becoming increasingly difficult. It has come under fire from Christian opposition leaders for its affinity with the views of the March 14 alliance.¹²⁷ In particular, it has a tense relationship with

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 6 July 2008.

¹²⁵ The emphasis here is on Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir who, from the headquarters of the Maronite Patriarchy in Bkerke, plays the biggest role. But the Maronite hierarchy (particularly the bishops) is relatively independent of the Patriarch. The Church enjoys relative independence at local level where it tries to develop a certain amount of proximity with local political leaders to avoid polarising populations and maintain its own influence.

¹²⁶ Shortly after the Israeli withdrawal the "Bkerke manifesto" called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops. *L'Hebdo Magazine*, 25 January 2008.

¹²⁷ It is mainly Michel Aoun and Suleiman Franjeh, a pro-Syrian political leader from the Zghorta region, who are launching assaults on the Patriarchate. Franjeh was particularly virulent in January 2008, notably calling the patriarchate the "home of thieves and criminals" and accusing the Patriarch of following orders from foreign forces. *The Daily Star*, 8 February 2008. Franjeh's criticisms are also part of an old tradition of sometimes violent criticism of the patriarchal authority by Christian political leaders. In 1958 Patriarch Méouchi was shouted down because of his closeness to Gamal Abdel-Nasser. In 1989 a group of Michel Aoun supporters occupied and vandalised the headquarters of the Patriarchate.

¹²² For more details on these decisions and the crisis which followed, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit.

¹²³ Sources from both the March 14 alliance and Hizbollah confirm that it was indeed Walid Jumblatt's Ministers and the Ministry of Tourism (Lebanese Forces) which pushed the Council of Ministers to endorse the two decisions which precipitated the reaction from Hizbollah. Crisis Group telephone interviews, leading figures in Hizbollah and the Future Movement, Beirut, May 2008.

Aoun because of both his anti-clericalism and his pretensions to incarnate uncontested community leadership. The interventionist stance of the Patriarch, who does not hesitate to go beyond recalling the general principles of the Church to take a position in political life, only exacerbates General Aoun's anti-clerical feeling.

Moreover, the involvement of the Patriarch in politics has led to tension within the Church itself:

By taking a position every day, by responding daily to questions, the Patriarch is increasingly seen as a player and therefore a rival to other political figures. It would be more judicious if the Patriarch's voice was limited to some permanent truths and served as a referential line.¹²⁸

For the Church the election of Suleiman represents a potential windfall as it enables it to get out of an uncomfortable situation in more than one respect. In Christian circles, more polarised now than they have been since 2005, the Church has been constantly commanded to intervene, which undermined its ability to unite. Silence allegedly meant increased marginalisation. Taking a position automatically meant choosing a camp and, consequently, supporting the controversial alliances contracted by the camp in question. The emergence of Suleiman was also an opportunity to rebuild a presidential institution whose last tenant came to incarnate precisely what the Church would like to avoid at all costs: a president dependent on his allies, discredited, inactive and finally absent. For one analyst "the Church is pinning everything on Michel Suleiman and wants as far as is possible to avoid the establishment of a Christian president/political leader duo, fearing the return of a weak presidential system".¹²⁹

In contrast, the Patriarchate aims to strengthen the political weight of the Christians by giving them arbitration and mediation power. That supposes a strategy to strengthen the presidential office through opposition to the support given to a particular political leader. In effect, the Christian political leaders, as popular as they are, are still, from the Church's point of view, prisoners of the battle lines drawn between the dominant Muslim parties. Against a background of extreme polarisation between Sunnis and Shiites, the Christians tend to be divided by forming alliances where they find themselves to be in a minority, while

a president could rise above this division by giving himself an arbitration role.

The Church is therefore counting on a third way stance which would consist of developing a new Christian role around the presidency as an alternative to the two large Christian forces present (the LF and the FPM), and able to give the president a real mediation role. It would do this in various ways, firstly through forming a strong presidential block within Parliament, then through the formation of alliances with political parties which believe in strengthening the institutions, and finally through a strategy of influencing the president's entourage, aiming to avoid him being drawn into the traditional networks (family, region, the army). The Patriarchate's aim is to encourage Suleiman to recruit using criteria based on competence, to form specialised working groups and to introduce consultation mechanisms for decision-making - in a word, to make the presidency a functioning institution rather than the seat of a single personified power.¹³⁰

In contrast to other state institutions undermined by nepotism, vote-winning initiatives and corruption, the probity and professionalism of the president could re-establish the credibility and influence of the presidential office and, consequently, strengthen the position of Christians in politics.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, source close to the Patriarch, Jounieh, 28 January 2008.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, analyst close to the military hierarchy, Beirut, June 2008.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, source close to the Patriarch, Bkerké, May 2008.

IV. THE PRESIDENT: THIRD WAY, COUNTERWEIGHT OR FIGUREHEAD?

Michel Suleiman was long an improbable candidate for the presidency. A career army officer and commander in the Lebanese army, his candidacy immediately posed a constitutional problem as Article 1 stipulates that “top level civil servants” (general directors and above) cannot be elected either during their mandate or in the two years following their resignation or retirement. His position in the armed forces, like his predecessor, was awkward in itself as his election risked establishing a kind of military tradition at the head of the State. This scenario worried the Patriarchate particularly.¹³¹ Above all, the March 14 alliance saw him as a pure product of Syrian domination.

Indeed, Suleiman did climb up the ranks during Syrian occupation and has excellent relations with Damascus. He was allegedly nominated as the head of the 7th Brigade by Ghazi Kanaan, head of the Syrian intelligence services in Lebanon from 1982 to 2002, and as the head of the army on the orders of Rostom Ghazaleh, Kanaan’s successor.¹³² One observer of the Lebanese political scene (close to the March 14 alliance) confirms that, during one of his two visits to Lebanon, Bashar al-Assad went to Amchit, Suleiman’s home village, for a dinner that the latter had organised.¹³³

He was not the opposition’s dream candidate either. Aoun saw him as a direct competitor, able to remove the support he enjoys among the officer corps in the army and in some Christian areas such as the region of Jbeil, of which Amchit is part. Further, the absolute confidence Hizbollah gives him stems largely from a myth. Although he never tried to take on the weapons of the resistance (he did not have the means in any case), his actions have not always been to Shiite tastes. Indeed, Suleiman allegedly ordered the repression of demonstrations in the southern suburbs of Bei-

rut, Hizbollah’s fiefdom, in 2004.¹³⁴ In 2007 he launched an assault against the Nahr al-Bared camp when access to the Palestinian camps by the army was considered to be a red line for the Shiite movement. Moreover, the American military support he ostensibly received inflames suspicions among his sympathisers.¹³⁵

Overall, and in contrast to the caricatures which were widespread at the time, Suleiman has a negotiated relationship with Hizbollah which is part of complex balancing act. When the March 14 alliance finally put his candidacy on the table in November 2007 Hizbollah reacted typically by demanding a political set-up which guaranteed its interests (particularly through a blocking third within government) – instead of putting itself in the hands of the supposedly sympathetic personality of the future president.

The emergence of Suleiman as the March 14 candidate stemmed from two issues. Firstly, despite accusations of complicity with the opposition and Damascus, the head of the army had been able not only to maintain but also strengthen his reputation for neutrality and efficiency throughout the conflict.¹³⁶ In 2005 he notably refused to subdue the anti-Syrian demonstrations in the heart of the capital – despite the control which Damascus was supposed to have over the military apparatus. In the aftermath of the war in 2006 he deployed his troops in the south of the country with remarkable rapidity. His balanced position during the consecutive political crisis was appreciated, including within the March 14 alliance.¹³⁷ During confrontations between supporters of the majority and the opposition his troops tried to minimise the risk that the situation would spill over through being present instead of the Interior Security Forces, which were undermined by sectarianism. Finally, he victoriously led the battle of Nahr al-Bared, breaking a taboo dear to Hizbollah on the inviolability of the Palestinian camps.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, source close to the Patriarch, Jounieh, February 2008.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Jean Aziz, head of the news section of the Free Patriotic Movement channel, Beirut, 5 January 2008. President Emile Lahoud would allegedly have preferred General Asaad Ghanem but Michel Suleiman was reportedly imposed by Ghazaleh. Crisis Group interview, Christian figure close to Syria, Beirut, 4 July 2008.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 4 March 2008.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Jean Aziz, head of the news section of the Free Patriotic Movement channel, Beirut, 21 December 2007, and a political analyst close to Hizbollah, Beirut, May 2008.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, intellectuals close to Hizbollah, Beirut, 28 February 2008.

¹³⁶ He tactfully managed the very tense security situation which has characterised the country since the end of 2004. Political assassinations, general strikes, large-scale demonstrations, religious riots and confrontations came one after the other without harming the unity of the army which had to intervene on all fronts.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, MPs and senior figures from the Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces, July - December 2007.

Secondly, the endless negotiations in mid-2007 over the successor to President Lahoud eliminated all the other possible candidates one by one and led to a seemingly insurmountable impasse. Hariri then envisaged Suleiman's candidacy as a political coup to resolve the crisis to the advantage of the March 14 alliance. It was a question of making the opposition "a proposal they could not refuse"¹³⁸ by suggesting a candidate who was supposedly in their camp, weakening Aoun by definitively distancing him from the presidency and promoting a serious rival,¹³⁹ and beginning a *rapprochement* with the armed forces in general and Suleiman in particular. Despite strong initial reluctance, the Lebanese Forces very quickly supported this option, seeing it notably as a way of improving their historically contentious relationship with the army.¹⁴⁰

The opposition's reaction surprised the March 14 alliance. As has been said earlier, Aoun made the election of a president subject to the realisation of certain Christian demands so as to block his accession to power without taking responsibility for the presidential vacuum. Hizbollah insisted more than ever on a global formula which would provide institutional guarantees. According to one of its senior figures, the party did not see the Suleiman option (endorsed by the United States, France and Saudi Arabia) as "a concession by the March 14 alliance" but rather the

fruit of a suspicious calculation.¹⁴¹ Hizbollah was also immediately suspicious of the president's political views,¹⁴² believing him capable of forging new alliances and assuming a role which was completely different to that of a military commander. According to intellectuals close to the party, such defiance from Hizbollah was further amplified by the behaviour of the army during fighting with Shiite demonstrators in February 2008 in which seven people died.¹⁴³

The army's passivity in the face of the action of Hizbollah combatants during the taking of Beirut in May 2008 may have led to the president's image being re-appraised by the party of God's leaders (while making it suspect in the eyes of the March 14 alliance),¹⁴⁴ but it was nonetheless the fact that their demands for constitutional guarantees were satisfied which opened the way for his election.

Against a background of acceptance, marked by reservations on both sides of the political spectrum, Suleiman now has to find his place in the Christian camp and politics in general. He faces a number of expectations and contradictions.

Ideally, Aoun would like Suleiman to stay in the background by accepting the creation of a president/*zaim* duo where the former would be the instrument of the latter. In contrast, the Christian leaders of the March 14 alliance would prefer to see Suleiman act as a counterweight to the General, by eating away at his support from the army and the Christian regions of Jbeil, Kesraouan and Metn – something which would automatically place the two men on a collision course.¹⁴⁵ The Church, encouraged by certain independent Christian figures,¹⁴⁶ would like a presidency which embodies a pillar of competence, modernity and reform, from where Suleiman could constitute the Christian "third way" described above, emphasising

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, a journalist close to the positions of the March 14 Alliance, Beirut, 2 March 2008.

¹³⁹ From the point of view of the March 14 Alliance, his candidacy was perceived (even among those who received it with little enthusiasm) as the best way to strike a definitive blow against Aoun. If Suleiman achieved power, so they thought, he would have influence over inter-Christian power struggles and would deprive Aoun of a voice and important support. At parliamentary level some of Aoun's allies allegedly could very possibly desert him, particularly delegates from the Armenian party Tashnaq and the group of Zahle MP Elias Skaff, among other MPs from the Aounist parliamentary block. A political analyst remarked that "if Michel Aoun does not become president, he risks losing a lot. All those who joined him through ambition, expecting to bask in the afterglow of his accession to the presidency, will leave him". Crisis Group interview, Emad Chamoun, university professor and political analyst, Beirut, December 2007.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Elie Khoury, adviser to Samir Geagea, January 2008. According to a journalist close to the General, "for some Christian intellectuals from the March 14 Alliance the calculation was based on reuniting the army and church to bring down Michel Aoun". Crisis Group interview, Jean Aziz, head of the news section of the Free Patriotic Movement channel, Beirut, 5 January 2008.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Naim Qassem, Beirut, 13 December 2007.

¹⁴² According to a senior figure from Hizbollah, Suleiman allegedly demanded seven ministers to be attached to the presidency within the framework of the cabinet to be established following his election. This figure visibly concerned Hizbollah. Crisis Group interview, southern suburb, Beirut, December 2007.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, two intellectuals close to Hizbollah, Beirut, May 2008.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, strategic analyst close to Hizbollah, Beirut, June 2008.

¹⁴⁵ A Christian leader from the March 14 Alliance asserted that Suleiman is Aoun's obsessive fear. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 3 July 2008.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, MP and intellectual Samir Franjeh, Beirut, December 2007.

an arbitration role and strengthening of the State, going beyond the divisions between the FPM and the LF.¹⁴⁷

The president will also be torn in his management of the big issues at the start of his mandate. According to the terms of the Doha Agreement, he must quickly implement a national dialogue on the issue of Hizbollah's weapons (at the heart of Lebanon's crisis since 2004). As the so-called "consensus" president, if he is to remain credible he must find a delicate balance as regards Syrian-Lebanese relations (unless he loses his arbitration power), while obtaining some concessions from Damascus.¹⁴⁸ Finally, he will bear important responsibilities as regards the organisation of the 2009 elections, the Minister for the Interior being one of the three portfolios where he can nominate people close to him. Here too he will have to arbitrate between repression of the usual practices of corruption and vote-winning initiatives (which would lead to the ire of the entire political class) and complacency for which large swathes of Lebanese society would reproach him.

Thus far his precise intentions are still largely a mystery. In his inauguration speech he set out some general objectives. His overall tone was that of a reformist and supporter of State control and the sovereignty agenda. His concrete proposals can be summed up as follows:

- Strengthen the institutions, particularly the presidency, the legal system and the armed forces (which cannot fulfil their role without a minimum of political consensus) and bring back elections as the way to resolve conflicts.
- Revive development through reform of the education system, increased training of young people, implementation of a climate favouring investment and mobilising the resources of the diaspora.
- Satisfy some specifically Christian expectations, particularly widespread administrative decentralisation, assisting the return of the displaced and those exiled to Israel, and an absolute rejection of the naturalisation of Palestinians.
- Normalisation in the proper sense of the word of relations with Syria, without hostility or domination, which includes accepting the international court charged with judging those responsible for the assassination of Hariri, clarification of the fate of those who disappeared during the civil war, delimitation of borders and initiation of normal diplomatic relations.
- Formal recognition of the legitimacy of the resistance (i.e. Hizbollah's weapons) in view of the Israeli threat and the deterioration of the state, accompanied by a call for its integration into a national defence strategy to be defined during the dialogue bringing together all Lebanese parties.

However, it is not clear how the President intends to give himself the means to realise his programme, be it through the formation of a parliamentary bloc, the development of the presidency as a "pillar of competence", the formation of a duo with Aoun, etc. He has made no public statements in this regard and his interlocutors admit that they have heard no more in private.¹⁴⁹ Questioned by Crisis Group on the strategy that he intends to follow to implement the main ideas of his inaugural speech, Suleiman replied that "it was still too early to tackle these issues".¹⁵⁰ With the exception of a political adviser, Nazem Khoury, he has made no official nominations which would indicate, through the nature of his entourage, his own method.¹⁵¹ And yet, as the only serious candidate for the presidency for six months, he has had adequate time to prepare himself for exercising his functions.

¹⁴⁷ On the Church's position, see above, pp. 18–20. "Some advise Suleiman to play an active part in the 2009 elections. But how would surrounding himself with a few MPs strengthen him or help him keep his credibility? Since Taef, the president no longer has an executive power but assumes the role of an arbitrator and conciliator. Participating in the elections would damage this role. Becoming a pillar of reform, rather than a new Christian pillar, projecting an image of modernity and state control, is the best way for him to be credible". Crisis Group interview, Nassib Lahoud, president of the Democratic Renewal Movement (close to the March 14 alliance), Beirut, 4 July 2008.

¹⁴⁸ "Historically, the president is bound by a contradictory relationship with the Christians on one side and Syria on the other. Suleiman, as the consensus President, must have a calm relationship with Syria. If he had a partisan attitude it would be a very bad start. There can be no national reconciliation or even political agreement without normalised relations with Damascus". Crisis Group interview, Christian opposition figure, Beirut, 4 July 2008. The formal announcement of an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries, made in Paris on 13 July 2008, is a first victory in this area, indicating that the President is able to encourage the effective normalisation of relations between Beirut and Damascus.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, 3–4 July 2008.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Baabda, 4 July 2008.

¹⁵¹ Speculation is obviously gaining momentum. Various sources have issued contradictory information which is impossible to confirm about the advisers he has allegedly already chosen. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, June/July 2008.

This ambiguity has several possible explanations. His priorities could be elsewhere: in the formation of the Government which finally saw the light of day on 12 July 2008, implementation of the national dialogue for which he is responsible according to the terms of the Doha Agreement, and the technical preparation of the 2009 elections. Perhaps he is waiting until these elections have been held before taking a position in a clearer political landscape where the lines of power will not only be more visible but also durable. The current phase is probably an observation phase where he intends to avoid mistakes to conserve his credibility rather than taking hasty decisions which would expose him to early attacks. Moreover, it could be that, currently at least, he quite simply does not have the means to choose any option as each of the variants described above automatically creates enemies in the Christian camp.

Suleiman is still a new politician, lacking a partisan apparatus of his own, called upon to nominate only three ministers and not currently enjoying the support of a parliamentary bloc, making his position even more precarious. In sum, for now the President is entirely focused on building an arbitration role for himself, to unite rather than alienate.

In fact, there is a strong risk that his position on these issues will be determined principally by the constraints on him rather than by the voluntary programme he has sketched out. In other words, the concrete means he has will possibly come less from his choices than the context in which he is operating. Firstly, the nature of the government resulting from the Doha Agreement, as well as the place the President occupies therein, will limit his margin for manoeuvre. This is a transition government operating against the background of an electoral campaign and it envisages no significant reforms which Suleiman could initiate. Moreover, the portfolios where he can nominate ministers (Defence, Interior and a Ministry of State) confine him to security tasks and overseeing elections.

Further, the traditional grouping of some independent Christian figures under the presidential leadership will be complicated by Aoun's strategy to include them in a vast Christian coalition. There are already doubts over support for Suleiman from the Armenians of Tashnaq and Elias Skaff, two players with a key electoral role in some Christian regions.¹⁵² Finally, the no-

torious animosity between him and Aoun does not necessarily mean that the other camp is more attractive, given the passivity within the Lebanese Forces¹⁵³ and the foil the Future Movement constitutes in the eyes of part of the Christian community.¹⁵⁴ In this context, it appears probable that the President is looking for a subtle balance instead of creating a group to rival the large Christian movements.

rogatives; it is therefore less useful to be allied to him. Tashnaq's relationship with the Future Movement is bad because Hariri only granted one seat to the Armenians out of 128 MPs in 2005. Relations are also difficult with the Phalangists. And in Beirut where the community is concentrated, Armenians and Shiites find themselves in the same constituency, thus the importance of an alliance with Hizbollah, with its connections to Aoun. However, that does not mean that they will cut themselves off from Suleiman. Tashnaq could rightly act as a go-between and mediator between the *zaim*, Aoun, and the President". Crisis Group interview, a Christian MP from the March 14 alliance (critic of the Future Movement), Beirut, 6 July 2008. Keeping Elias Skaff, the Christian leader from Zahle, in the Aounist block also appears to be assured. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, 3-4 July 2008. The new electoral division, which has been approved in principle by Doha, also deprives the Future Movement of its former ability to "do favours for Christian candidates". Crisis Group interview, Ali Hamdan, adviser to Nabih Berri, Beirut, 3 July 2008.

¹⁵³"Everyone is courting Suleiman but who really has a chance of getting close to him? Certainly not the Lebanese Forces Suleiman fought with determination when he was an officer under Aoun's orders. Suleiman's wife was even threatened by the LF during the war". Crisis Group interview, Abdallah Hanna, Christian MP close to the March 14 alliance, Beirut, July 2008.

¹⁵⁴"If he had to choose between Sunni Siniora and Christian Aoun, Suleiman would still prefer Aoun, despite the state of their relations". Crisis Group interview, Karim Paqradouni, Beirut, 4 July 2008.

¹⁵²"It is a mistake to think that Tashnaq, which usually tends to support the president, is going to leave Aoun to join Suleiman. This vision, widely accepted by the March 14 alliance, is likely to be unfounded. The President has few pre-

V. CONCLUSION

The Doha Agreement and Suleiman's presidency are an important opportunity for the Christian community to re-establish the sectarian balance, realise old claims and act as an arbitrator and mediator against a background of strong Sunni/Shiite polarisation.

The 2009 parliamentary elections represent the next important stage in shaping the new political landscape. Although fears of a deterioration in the security situation and massive fraud remain (something which could call into question the legitimacy of the elections and even whether they should be held at all), the precedent of the 2005 elections presents a parallel which is both ambiguous and encouraging. They still took place even though they were marked by significant irregularities and a climate of extreme tension. It remains to be seen this time whether they will be held in calmer conditions, a difficult task which will be incumbent upon the president first and foremost.

In any case, the Christians will undoubtedly play a key role. In all likelihood the two camps which dominate politics today will keep their cohesion. Hizbollah, today as much as in the future, needs to protect its weapons by controlling political decision-making

through a blocking third which it can only achieve with Aoun. The latter is still dependent on his Shiite ally in many respects, as explained above. Despite some internal friction, the March 14 alliance has no other choice but to close ranks in the face of the unity of its adversaries. Uncertainty surrounds the fate of the "Christian centre" whose choices will in large part be determined by the ability of the FPM and the Christians from the March 14 alliance to meet their community's needs – and therefore obtain concessions from their Muslim allies.

By highlighting their new role of arbitrator and their weight within opposing coalitions, the Christians are potentially able to change the balance in favour of one side or another. Furthermore, they could ensure progress in areas which have long been dear to them (building the state, the role of the institutions and particular the presidency, the fate of those who disappeared in Syria and the exiles in Israel, and administrative decentralisation). Investing so much hope in democratic consultation is in itself excellent news for a country whose conflict has essentially been played out beyond, and to the detriment of, its institutions.

Beirut/Brussels, 15 July 2008

APPENDIX A

MAP OF LEBANON



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APPENDIX B

TEXT OF THE DOHA AGREEMENT (25 MAY 2008)

The following agreement was reached:

1 – The parties have agreed on having the Lebanese parliament speaker, based on the rules in effect, invite the parliament to convene within 24 hours to elect consensus candidate General Michel Suleiman, knowing that this is the best constitutional method to elect the president under these exceptional circumstances.

2 – forming a national unity government composed of 30 ministers distributed among the majority (16 ministers), the opposition (11 ministers) and the president (3 ministers), and by virtue of this agreement, all parties commit not to resign or obstruct the government's actions.

3 – adopting the *caza* as an electoral constituency in conformity with the 1960 law, whereby the *cazas* of Marjayoun-Hasbaya, Baalbek-Hermel and West Bekaa-Rachaya remain as a single electoral constituency each.

As for Beirut, it was divided in the following manner:

The first district: Achrafieh – Rmeil – Saifi

The second district: Bachoura – Medawar – the Port

The third district: Minet al-Hosn – Ain al-Mreisseh – Mousseitbeh – Ras Beirut – Zoqaq al-Blat

Agreeing on referring the reform clauses mentioned in the draft law prepared by the National Commission on Electoral Law Reform, which was headed by Minister Fouad Boutros, to the parliament in order to examine and discuss them in accordance with the rules in effect.

Pursuant to the abovementioned Beirut Agreement, especially Paragraphs 4 and 5, which stated the following:

4 – The parties commit to abstain from having recourse or resuming the use of weapons and violence in order to record political gains.

5 – Initiate a dialogue on promoting the Lebanese state's authority over all Lebanese territory and their relationship

with the various groups on the Lebanese stage in order to ensure the state's and the citizens' security.

Hence, the dialogue was initiated in Doha on promoting the state's authority according to Paragraph 5 of the Beirut Agreement, and an agreement was reached on the following:

1 – Prohibiting the use of weapons or violence or taking refuge in them in any dispute whatsoever and under any circumstances, in order to ensure respect for the national partnership contract, based on the Lebanese people's commitment to live with one another within the framework of the Lebanese system, and to restrict the security and military authority over Lebanese nationals and residents to the state alone so as to ensure the continuity of the coexistence formula and civil peace among all the Lebanese; and the parties pledge to all of the above.

2 – Implementing the law and upholding the sovereignty of the state throughout Lebanon so as not to have regions that serve as safe havens for outlaws, out of respect for the supremacy of the law, and referring all those who commit crimes and contraventions to the Lebanese judiciary.

3 – This dialogue is to be resumed under the aegis of the president as soon as he is elected and a national unity government is formed, and with the participation of the Arab League in such a way as to boost confidence among the Lebanese.

4 – Reasserting the commitment of the Lebanese political leaders to immediately abstain from resorting to the rhetoric of treason or political or sectarian instigation.

The Arab Ministerial Committee undertakes to register this agreement before the Arab League General Secretariat as soon as it is signed.

This agreement was signed in Doha on May 21, 2008 by the Lebanese political leaders participating in the Conference and in the presence of the president and members of the Arab Ministerial Committee.”

APPENDIX C

TEXT OF THE TAEF AGREEMENT (5 NOVEMBER 1989)

I – GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND REFORMS

1 – General principles:

A – Lebanon is a sovereign, free, and independent country and a final homeland for all its citizens.

B – Lebanon is Arab in belonging and identity. It is an active and founding member of the Arab League and is committed to the league's charter. It is an active and founding member of the United Nations Organization and is committed to its charters. Lebanon is a member of the nonaligned movement. The state of Lebanon shall embody these principles in all areas and spheres, without exception.

C – Lebanon is a democratic parliamentary republic founded on respect for public liberties, especially the freedom of expression and belief, on social justice, and on equality in rights and duties among all citizens, without discrimination or preference.

D – The people are the source of authority. They are sovereign and they shall exercise their sovereignty through the constitutional institutions.

E – The political system is founded on the principles of the separation of powers, their balance and their collaboration.*

F – The economic system is a free system that guarantees individual initiative and private ownership.

G – Culturally, socially, and economically-balanced development is a mainstay of the state's unity and of the system's stability.

H – Efforts (will be made) to achieve comprehensive social justice through fiscal, economic, and social reform.

I – Lebanon's soil is united and it belongs to all the Lebanese. Every Lebanese is entitled to live in and enjoy any part of the country under the supremacy of the law. The people may not be categorized on the basis of any affiliation whatsoever and there shall be no fragmentation, no partition, and no repatriation [of Palestinians in Lebanon].

J – No authority violating the common co-existence charter shall be legitimate

2 – Political reforms

A – Chamber of Deputies

The Chamber of Deputies is the legislative authority which exercises full control over government policy and activities.

1 – The Chamber spokesman and his deputy shall be elected for the duration of the chamber's term.

2 – In the first session, two years after it elects its speaker and deputy speaker, the chamber may vote only once to withdraw confidence from its speaker or deputy speaker with a 2/3 majority of its members and in accordance with a petition submitted by at least 10 deputies. In case confidence is withdrawn, the chamber shall convene immediately to fill the vacant post.

3 – No urgent bill presented to the Chamber of Deputies may be issued unless it is included in the agenda of a public session and read in such a session, and unless the grace period stipulated by the constitution passes without a resolution on such a bill with the approval of the cabinet.

4 – The electoral district shall be the governorate.

5 – Until the Chamber of Deputies passes an election law free of sectarian restriction, the parliamentary seats shall be divided according to the following bases:

- a) Equally between Christians and Muslims.
- b) Proportionately between the denominations of each sect.
- c) Proportionately between the districts.

6 – The number of members of the Chamber of Deputies shall be increased to 108, shared equally between Christians and Muslims. As for the districts created on the basis of this document and the districts whose seats became vacant prior to the proclamation of this document, their seats shall be filled only once on an emergency basis through appointment by the national accord government that is planned to be formed.

7 – With the election of the first Chamber of Deputies on a national, not sectarian, basis, a senate shall be formed and all the spiritual families shall be represented in it. The senate powers shall be confined to crucial issues.

B – President of Republic

The president of republic is the head of the state and a symbol of the country's unity. He shall contribute to enhancing the constitution and to preserving Lebanon's independence, unity, and territorial integrity in accordance with the provisions of the constitution. He is the supreme commander of the armed forces which are subject to the power of the cabinet. The president shall exercise the following powers:

1 – Head the cabinet [meeting] whenever he wishes, but without voting.

2 – Head the Supreme Defense Council.

3 – Issues decrees and demand their publication. He shall also be entitled to ask the cabinet to reconsider any resolution it makes within 15 days of the date of deposition of the resolution with the presidential office. Should the cabinet insist on the adopted resolution, or should the grace period pass without issuing and returning the decree, the decree of the resolution shall be valid and must be published.

4 – Promulgate laws in accordance with the grace period stipulated by the constitution and demand their publication upon ratification by the Chamber of Deputies. After notifying the cabinet, the president may also request reexamination of the laws within the grace periods provided by the constitution, and in accordance with the articles of the constitution. In case the laws are not issued or returned before the end of the grace periods, they shall be valid by law and they must be published.

5 – Refer the bills presented to him by the Chamber of Deputies.

6 – Name the prime minister-designate in consultation with the Chamber of Deputies speaker on the basis of binding parliamentary consultation, the outcome of which the president shall officially familiarize the speaker on.

7 – Issue the decree appointing the prime minister independently.

8 – On agreement with the prime minister, issue the decree form-

ing the cabinet.

9 – Issue decrees accepting the resignation of the cabinet or of cabinet ministers and decrees relieving them from their duties.

10 – Appoint ambassadors, accept the accreditation of ambassadors, and award state medals by decree.

11 – On agreement with the prime minister, negotiate on the conclusion and signing of international treaties which shall become valid only upon approval by the cabinet. The cabinet shall familiarize the Chamber of Deputies with such treaties when the country's interest and state safety make such familiarization possible. As for treaties involving conditions concerning state finances, trade treaties, and other treaties which may not be abrogated annually, they may not be concluded without Chamber of Deputies' approval.

12 – When the need arises, address messages to the Chamber of Deputies.

13 – On agreement with the prime minister, summon the Chamber of Deputies to hold special sessions by decree.

14 – The president of the republic is entitled to present to the cabinet any urgent issue beyond the agenda.

15 – On agreement with the prime minister, call the cabinet to hold a special session whenever he deems it necessary.

16 – Grant special pardon by decree.

17 – In the performance of his duty, the president shall not be liable unless he violates the constitution or commits high treason.

C – Prime Minister

The prime minister is the head of the government. He represents it and speaks in its name. He is responsible for implementing the general policy drafted by the cabinet. The prime minister shall exercise the following powers:

1 – Head the cabinet.

2 – Hold parliamentary consultations to form the cabinet and co-sign with the president the decree forming it. The cabinet shall submit its cabinet statement to the Chamber of Deputies for a vote of confidence within 30 days [of its formation]. The cabinet may not exercise its powers before gaining the confidence, after its resignation, or when it is considered retired, except within the narrow sense of disposing of affairs.

3 – Present the government's general policy to the Chamber of Deputies.

4 – Sign all decrees, except for decrees naming the prime minister and decrees accepting cabinet resignation or considering it retired.

5 – Sign the decree calling for a special session and decrees issuing laws and requesting the reexamination of laws.

6 – Summon the cabinet to meet, draft its agenda, familiarize the president of the republic in advance with the issues included in the agenda and with the urgent issues to be discussed, and sign the usual session minutes.

7 – Observe the activities of the public departments and institutions, coordinate between the ministers, and issue general instructions to ensure the smooth progress of work.

8 – Hold working sessions with the state agencies concerned in the presence of the minister concerned.

9 – By law, act as the Supreme Defense Council's deputy chairman.

D – Cabinet

The executive power shall be vested in the Cabinet. The following are among the powers exercised by it:

1 – Set the general policy of the State in all domains, draws up draft bills and decrees, and takes the necessary decisions for its implementation.

2 – Watch over the implementation of laws and regulations and supervise the activities of all the state agencies without exception, including the civilian, military, and security departments and institutions.

3 – The cabinet is the authority which controls the armed forces.

4 – Appoint, dismiss, and accept the resignation of state employees in accordance with the law.

5 – It has the right to dissolve the Chamber of Deputies at the request of the president of the republic if the chamber refuses to meet throughout an ordinary or a special session lasting no less than one month, even though it is summoned twice consecutively, or if the chamber sends back the budget in its entirety with the purpose of paralyzing the government. This right may not be exercised again for the same reasons which called for dissolving the chamber in the first instance.

6 – When the president of the republic is present, he heads cabinet sessions.

The cabinet shall meet periodically at special headquarters. The legal quorum for a cabinet meeting is 2/3 the cabinet members. The cabinet shall adopt its resolutions by consent. If impossible, then by vote. The resolutions shall be adopted by a majority of the members present. As for major issues, they require the approval of 2/3 the cabinet members. The following shall be considered major issues:

The state of emergency and its abolition, war and peace, general mobilization, international agreements and treaties, the state's general budget, comprehensive and long-term development plans, the appointment of top-level civil servants or their equivalent, reexamination of the administrative division, dissolving the Chamber of Deputies, the election law, the citizenship law, the personal status laws, and the dismissal of cabinet ministers.

E – Minister

The minister's powers shall be reinforced in a manner compatible with the government's general policy and with the principle of collective responsibility. A minister shall not be relieved from his position unless by cabinet decree or unless the Chamber of Deputies withdraws its confidence from him individually.

F – Cabinet Resignation, Considering Cabinet Retired, and Dismissal of Ministers

1 – The cabinet shall be considered retired in the following cases:

- a) If its chairman resigns.
- b) If it loses more than 1/3 of its members as determined by the decree forming it.
- c) If its chairman dies.
- d) At the beginning of a president's term.
- e) At the beginning of the Chamber of Deputies' term.
- f) When the Chamber of Deputies withdraws its confidence from it on an initiative by the chamber itself and on the basis of a vote of confidence.

2 – A minister shall be relieved by a decree signed by the president of the republic and the prime minister, with cabinet approval.

3 – When the cabinet resigns or is considered retired, the Chamber

of Deputies shall, by law, be considered to be convened in a special session until a new cabinet is formed. A vote-of-confidence session shall follow.

G – Abolition of Political Sectarianism

Abolishing political sectarianism is a fundamental national objective. To achieve it, it is required that efforts be made in accordance with a phased plan. The Chamber of Deputies elected on the basis of equal sharing by Christians and Muslims shall adopt the proper measures to achieve this objective and to form a national council which is headed by the president of the republic and which includes, in addition to the prime minister and the Chamber of Deputies speaker, political, intellectual, and social notables. The council's task will be to examine and propose the means capable of abolishing sectarianism, to present them to the Chamber of Deputies and the cabinet, and to observe implementation of the phased plan.

The following shall be done in the interim period:

1 – Abolish the sectarian representation base and rely on capability and specialization in public jobs, the judiciary, the military, security, public, and joint institutions, and in the independent agencies in accordance with the dictates of national accord, excluding the top-level jobs and equivalent jobs which shall be shared equally by Christians and Muslims without allocating any particular job to any sect.

2 – Abolish the mention of sect and denomination on the identity card.

3 – Other reforms

A – Administrative decentralism

1 – The State of Lebanon shall be a single and united state with a strong central authority.

2 – The powers of the governors and district administrative officers shall be expanded and all state administrations shall be represented in the administrative provinces at the highest level possible so as to facilitate serving the citizens and meeting their needs locally.

3 – The administrative division shall be recognized in a manner that emphasizes national fusion within the framework of preserving common coexistence and unity of the soil, people, and institutions.

4 – Expanded administrative decentralization shall be adopted at the level of the smaller administrative units [district and smaller units] through the election of a council, headed by the district officer, in every district, to ensure local participation.

5 – A comprehensive and unified development plan capable of developing the provinces economically and socially shall be adopted and the resources of the municipalities, unified municipalities, and municipal unions shall be reinforced with the necessary financial resources.

B – Courts

A) To guarantee that all officials and citizens are subject to the supremacy of the law and to insure harmony between the action of the legislative and executive authorities on the one hand, and the givens of common coexistence and the basic rights of the Lebanese as stipulated in the constitution on the other hand:

1 – The higher council which is stipulated by the constitution and whose task it is to try presidents and ministers shall be formed. A special law on the rules of trial before this council shall be promulgated.

2 – A constitutional council shall be created to interpret the constitution, to observe the constitutionality of the laws, and to settle disputes and contests emanating from presidential and parliamentary elections.

3 – The following authorities shall be entitled to revise the constitutional council in matters pertaining to interpreting the constitution and observing the constitutionality of the laws:

- a) The president of the republic.
- b) The Chamber of Deputies speaker.
- c) The prime minister.
- d) A certain percentage of members of the Chamber of Deputies.

B) To ensure the principle of harmony between religion and state, the heads of the Lebanese sects may revise the constitutional council in matters pertaining to:

- 1 – Personal status affairs.
- 2 – Freedom of religion and the practice of religious rites.
- 3 – Freedom of religious education.

C) To ensure the judiciary's independence, a certain number of the the Higher Judiciary Council shall be elected by the judiciary body.

C – Parliamentary election law

Parliamentary elections shall be held in accordance with a new law on the basis of provinces and in the light of rules that guarantee common coexistence between the Lebanese, and that ensure the sound and efficient political representation of all the people's factions and generations. This shall be done after reviewing the administrative division within the context of unity of the people, the land, and the institutions.

D – Creation of a socioeconomic council for development

A socioeconomic council shall be created to insure that representatives of the various sectors participate in drafting the state's socioeconomic policy and providing advice and proposals.

E – Education

1 – Education shall be provided to all and shall be made obligatory for the elementary stage at least.

2 – The freedom of education shall be emphasized in accordance with general laws and regulations.

3 – Private education shall be protected and state control over private schools and textbooks shall be strengthened.

4 – Official, vocational, and technological education shall be reformed, strengthened, and developed in a manner that meets the country's development and reconstruction needs. The conditions of the Lebanese University shall be reformed and aid shall be provided to the university, especially to its technical colleges.

5 – The curricula shall be reviewed and developed in a manner that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness, and that unifies textbooks on the subjects of history and national education.

F – Information

All the information media shall be reorganized under the canopy of the law and within the framework of responsible liberties that serve the cautious tendencies and the objective of ending the state of war.

II – SPREADING THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE STATE OF LEBANON OVER ALL LEBANESE TERRITORIES:

Considering that all Lebanese factions have agreed to the establishment of a strong state founded on the basis of national accord, the national accord government shall draft a detailed one-year plan whose objective is to spread the sovereignty of the State of Lebanon over all Lebanese territories gradually with the state's own forces. The broad lines of the plan shall be as follows:

1 – Disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias shall be announced. The militias' weapons shall be delivered to the State of Lebanon within a period of 6 months, beginning with the approval of the national accord charter. The president of the republic shall be elected. A national accord cabinet shall be formed, and the political reforms shall be approved constitutionally.

2 – The internal security forces shall be strengthened through:

a) Opening the door of voluntarism to all the Lebanese without exception, beginning the training of volunteers centrally, distributing the volunteers to the units in the governorates, and subjecting them to organized periodic training courses.

b) Strengthening the security agency to insure control over the entry and departure of individuals into and out of the country by land, air, and sea.

3 – Strengthening the armed forces:

a) The fundamental task of the armed forces is to defend the homeland, and if necessary, protect public order when the danger exceeds the capability of the internal security forces to deal with such a danger on their own.

b) The armed forces shall be used to support the internal security forces in preserving security under conditions determined by the cabinet.

c) The armed forces shall be unified, prepared, and trained in order that they may be able to shoulder their national responsibilities

in confronting Israeli aggression.

d) When the internal security forces become ready to assume their security tasks, the armed forces shall return to their barracks.

e) The armed forces intelligence shall be reorganized to serve military objectives exclusively.

4 – The problem of the Lebanese evacuees shall be solved fundamentally, and the right of every Lebanese evicted since 1975 to return to the place from which he was evicted shall be established. Legislation to guarantee this right and to insure the means of reconstruction shall be issued.

Considering that the objective of the State of Lebanon is to spread its authority over all the Lebanese territories through its own forces, represented primarily by the internal security forces, and in view of the fraternal relations binding Syria to Lebanon, the Syrian forces shall thankfully assist the forces of the legitimate Lebanese government to spread the authority of the State of Lebanon within a set period of no more than 2 years, beginning with ratification of the national accord charter, election of the president of the republic, formation of the national accord cabinet, and approval of the political reforms constitutionally.

At the end of this period, the two governments – the Syrian Government and the Lebanese National Accord Government – shall decide to redeploy the Syrian forces in Al-Biq'a area from Dahr al-Baydar to the Hammana-al-Mudayrij-'Ayn Darah line, and if necessary, at other points to be determined by a joint Lebanese-Syrian military committee. An agreement shall also be concluded by the two governments to determine the strength and duration of the presence of Syrian forces in the above-mentioned area and to define these forces' relationship with the Lebanese state authorities where the forces exist. The Arab Tripartite Committee is prepared to assist the two states, if they so wish, to develop this agreement.

III – LIBERATING LEBANON FROM THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION:

Regaining state authority over the territories extending to the internationally-recognized Lebanese borders requires the following:

1 – Efforts to implement resolution 425 and the other UN Security Council resolutions calling for fully eliminating the Israeli occupation.

2 – Adherence to the truce agreement concluded on 23 March 1949.

3 – Taking all the steps necessary to liberate all Lebanese territories from the Israeli occupation, to spread state sovereignty over all the territories, and to deploy the Lebanese army in the border area adjacent to Israel; and making efforts to reinforce the presence of the UN forces in South Lebanon to insure the Israeli withdrawal and to provide the opportunity for the return of security and stability to the border area.

IV – LEBANESE-SYRIAN RELATIONS:

Lebanon, with its Arab identity, is tied to all the Arab countries by true fraternal relations. Between Lebanon and Syria there is a special relationship that derives its strength from the roots of blood relationships, history, and joint fraternal interests. This is the concept on which the two countries' coordination and cooperation is founded, and which will be embodied by the agreements between the two countries in all areas, in a manner that accomplishes the two fraternal countries' interests within the framework of the sovereignty and independence of each of them. Therefore, and because strengthening the bases of security creates the climate

needed to develop these bonds, Lebanon should not be allowed to constitute a source of threat to Syria's security, and Syria should not be allowed to constitute a source of threat to Lebanon's security under any circumstances. Consequently, Lebanon should not allow itself to become a pathway or a base for any force, state, or organization seeking to undermine its security or Syria's security. Syria, which is eager for Lebanon's security, independence, and unity and for harmony among its citizens, should not permit any act that poses a threat to Lebanon's security, independence, and sovereignty.

Source: www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cahier/proche-orient/region-liban-taef-en

*This clause is missing from most English translations; it has been added back in by Crisis Group.

APPENDIX D

TEXT OF THE MEMORANDUM OF JOINT UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN HIZBOLLAH AND THE FREE PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT (6 FEBRUARY 2006)

1 – Dialogue

National dialogue, on the basis of firm principles that reflect an all-inclusive consensus, is the only way to find solutions for the crises that are overwhelming Lebanon. The following conditions are necessary to ensure its success:

A – The participation of all parties that have a political, popular, and national status in a round-table meeting.

B – Transparency, frankness, and the placing of national interests above all other interests, through Lebanon's independent will and free decisionmaking.

C – The inclusion of all issues that have a national character and require general consensus.

2 – Consensual democracy

Consensual democracy remains the fundamental basis for governance in Lebanon, embodying the spirit of its constitution and the essence of the pact of coexistence. Therefore, any approach to national issues on the basis of a majority/minority formula will remain contingent on the realization of historical and social conditions necessary for real democracy, in which the citizen becomes a value in and of himself.

3 – The electoral law

Reforming and organizing Lebanese political life require the adoption of a modern electoral law (of which proportional representation may be an effective form) that guarantees the accuracy and fairness of popular representation and contributes to the following:

1 – Activating the role of political parties, with the aim of bolstering civil society.

2 – Limiting the influence of money and sectarian extremism in politics.

3 – Providing equal access to the media.

4 – Ensuring that expatriate Lebanese can exercise their voting rights.

We call on the government and parliament to enact the required electoral law as soon as possible.

4 – Building the State

Building a modern state that enjoys the trust of its citizens and is able to meet their needs and aspirations, and provide them with the sense of security and safety as to their present and future, requires that the state be erected on strong and solid foundations that make it impervious to destabilization and periodic crises whenever it is threatened by difficult circumstances or changes. This requires adhering to the following:

A – Adopting the standards of justice, equality, parity, merit and integrity.

B – Recognizing that a fair and impartial judiciary is the essential condition for creating a state of rights, law, and institutions. This is based on.

1 – Fully independent judiciary and the selection of judges with recognized competence in order to activate the work of all courts.

2 – Respect for the functioning of constitutional institutions; sheltering them from political influences, ensuring the continuity of their work; and preventing their paralysis, as was the case with the Judicial Council and the Constitutional Council. What happened in the Constitutional Council is an example of such paralysis, particularly with respect to the parliamentary challenges submitted to it that have not yet been decided.

C – Address corruption at the roots, because temporary and pacifying treatments are no longer sufficient and have become an exercise in circumvention by the beneficiaries of corruption at all levels, who sap the resources of the state and the citizen. This requires:

1 – Activating the financial and administrative control and inspection institutions, and make them independent of the executive branch so as to guarantee that their work is not politicized.

2 – Conducting a comprehensive survey of the centers of corruption, in preparation for opening judicial investigations that ensure the prosecution of those responsible for corruption and the return of embezzled public funds.

3 – Enacting the necessary laws to combat corruption in all its forms and demanding the government sign the United Nations Anti-Corruption Convention.

4 – Working for comprehensive administrative reform ensuring that the right person is assigned to the right position, particularly those whose competence and integrity are recognized. This can be achieved by enabling the Civil Service Council to fully exercise its prerogatives.

5 – Setting deadlines to treat these problems, because the factor of time is critical. The matter requires just and rapid solutions that use the time factor to their advantage instead of the corrupt using it to theirs.

5 – The Missing During the War

Turning the page on the past and enacting comprehensive national reconciliation requires that all outstanding files of the war be closed. The file of those who disappeared during the war requires a responsible stand to end this abnormal situation and give closure to families who cannot be asked to forgive and forget without respect for their right to know the fate of their missing relatives. Therefore, we ask all the forces and parties that participated in the war to cooperate fully in uncovering the fate of the missing and the locations of mass graves.

6 – Lebanese Citizens in Israel

Based on our conviction that the presence of Lebanese citizens in their homeland is better than their presence in enemy territory, a resolution of the question of the Lebanese residing in Israel requires urgent action to enable their return to their country, taking into consideration all the political, security and living conditions surrounding this issue. On this basis, we appeal to them to return promptly to their homeland, guided by the call of His Eminence Al-Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah following the Israeli withdrawal

from south Lebanon and the speech delivered by Gen. Michel Aoun during the first session of parliament [last year].

7 – The Security Issue

First, political assassinations:

Political assassinations of any kind are condemned and rejected because they violate fundamental human rights, contravene the foundations of Lebanon represented by differences and diversity, and undermine the spirit and practice of democracy. We condemn the assassination of the martyr prime minister Rafiq Hariri and all other assassinations and assassination attempts that preceded and followed it, most recently the killing of MP Gibran Tuani, and we emphasize the importance of continuing the investigation in accordance with officially approved mechanisms to uncover the truth. This is an issue that cannot be subjected to any compromise because it is a prerequisite for achieving justice, punishing criminals, and ending the continuing cycle of murders and bombings. Therefore, it is important that these issues be insulated from attempts at political exploitation, which would undermine them and the essence of justice, which must remain above any political conflicts and disputes.

Second, security reforms: Reform of the security agencies is an integral part of the broader process of reforming basic state institutions and rebuilding them on sound and firm bases. In view of the sensitive role of the security agencies in maintaining stability and security in the country against any violations or threats, the process of building these agencies must be given special attention. Therefore, the government is urged to assume its full responsibilities as follows:

A – Draw up a comprehensive security plan based on centralized decisionmaking, clear distinctions between enemy and friend, and specification of security threats, such as terrorism and security loopholes that must be addressed.

B – Place the security agencies above all political considerations and patronage, so that their full loyalty is to the nation alone.

C – Assign responsibility for these agencies to people with recognized competence and integrity.

D – Ensure that security measures do not conflict with liberties guaranteed by the constitution, especially freedom of expression and political practice, provided they do not threaten security and public order.

E – Establish a joint parliamentary-security committee charged with monitoring and directing the process of reforming and building the security agencies.

8 – Lebanese-Syrian Relations

The establishment of sound and normal Lebanese-Syrian relations requires a review of past experience to learn necessary lessons and draw conclusions, so as to avoid the same mistakes, flaws, and loopholes. This will pave the way for improving relations on the basis of equality, full and mutual respect for the sovereignty and independence of both states, and the rejection of a return to any form of foreign tutelage. Therefore, the following must be done:

A – The government must take all necessary and legal measures with regard to affirming Lebanese ownership of the Shebaa Farms enclave and present these to the United Nations, now that the Syrian state has declared it to be fully Lebanese territory.

B – Delineate the borders between Lebanon and Syria, while easing tensions that might impede this process, which both Lebanon and Syria have a long-standing need to complete as part of an agreement by the two countries.

C – Press Syria to fully cooperate with the Lebanese authorities in uncovering the fate of the Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons, in an atmosphere devoid of provocation, tension and negativity that would hinder a positive resolution of this matter.

D – Establish diplomatic relations between the two countries and provide an appropriate climate for these relations, transforming them from relations between individuals and groups to relations between institutions, thus securing their continuity and firmness.

9 – Lebanese-Palestinian Relations

Addressing the Palestinian file requires a comprehensive approach, stressing the Palestinians' respect for the authority of the Lebanese state and compliance with its laws and, on the other hand, reaffirming of solidarity with their cause and the restoration of their rights, in accordance with the following rules:

A – The social condition of the Palestinians requires serious efforts to improve their standard of living and provide the basis for dignified human life, in accordance with the requirements of bilateral cooperation and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition, efforts must be made to facilitate their movement inside and outside of Lebanese territory.

B – The right of return of the Palestinians is a fundamental and fixed right. The Lebanese people unanimously reject settlement of the Palestinians in Lebanon, which cannot be conceded under any circumstances.

C – The relationship between the Lebanese state and the Palestinians must be defined within the framework of one Palestinian institution that is the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in Lebanon, ensuring good coordination and cooperation.

D – The issue of ending the carrying of weapons outside the camps and organizing the security situation inside the camps must be addressed within a framework of serious, responsible and urgent dialogue between the Lebanese government and the Palestinians, leading to the establishment of the state's authority and laws over all Lebanese territory.

10 – Protecting Lebanon and Preserving its Independence and Sovereignty

The protection of Lebanon and preservation of its independence and sovereignty are a national responsibility, guaranteed by international charters and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly in confronting any threats or dangers that could harm them, irrespective of where these dangers might come from. Therefore, carrying arms is not an objective in itself, but a noble and sacred means that is exercised by any group whose land is occupied, in a manner identical to the methods of political resistance.

In this context, Hezbollah's arms must be addressed as part of a comprehensive approach that falls within two parameters. The first parameter is reliance on justifications that reflect national consensus and constitute the sources of strength for Lebanon and the Lebanese in terms of preserving these arms. The second parameter is to objectively define conditions that would eliminate the reasons and justifications for keeping these weapons. Since Israel occupies the Shebaa Farms, imprisons Lebanese resistance fighters, and threatens Lebanon, the Lebanese people must assume their responsibilities and share the burden of protecting Lebanon, safeguarding its existence and security, and preserving its independence and sovereignty by:

1 – Liberating the Shebaa Farms from the Israeli occupation.

2 – Liberating Lebanese prisoners from Israeli jails.

3 – Protecting Lebanon from Israeli dangers through a national dialogue leading to the formulation of a national defense strategy,

which the Lebanese agree to and are involved in by assuming its burdens and benefiting from its outcomes.

Source: http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0602/0602_3.htm

APPENDIX E

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Patrick Benzie
Stanley Bergman & Edward Bergman

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John Chapman Chester
Chevron
Citigroup
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Credit Suisse
Neil & Sandy DeFeo
John Ehara
Frontier Strategy Group
Seth Ginns
Alan Griffiths

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Amed Khan
Shiv Vikram Khemka
Scott Lawlor
Jean Manas
McKinsey & Company
Najib Mikati
Harriet Mouchly-Weiss

Donald Pels
Michael Riordan
StatoilHydro ASA
Tilleke & Gibbins Vale
VIVATrust
Yasuyo Yamazaki
Yapı Merkezi Construction and Industry Inc.
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