



LEBANON: THE CURRENT DOMESTIC POLITICS, THE EFFECTS OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS

William Harris



William Harris is a Professor in the Department of Politics at University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. He has also taught at Princeton University, Haigazian University College in Beirut, Middle East Technical University in Ankara, and the University of Exeter. Dr. Harris is the author of several books on Middle Eastern affairs, as well as a variety of book chapters and academic articles on both the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. His latest book is *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011* (Oxford University Press, 2012). His book, *The Levant: A Fractured Mosaic* (Markus Wiener, Princeton, 4th edition, 2015) won an Outstanding Academic Title award from Choice magazine in the US. His research and teaching interests include the politics and history of the Levant states and Turkey, Middle East comparative politics and the international affairs of the Middle East. The interview with Prof. Dr. William Harris was conducted by Dr. Murat Tinas on April 17, 2017 on the occasion of Harris' visit to ORSAM in Ankara.

ORSAM: Prof. Harris, first of all, welcome to Turkey and ORSAM. We are honored to host you at ORSAM and pleased to have an interview with you as one of the few names who can be listed as an expert on Lebanon. Although the politics in Lebanon is rarely stable, it is more dynamic in recent years in parallel to the current regional developments. Within such an environment, General Michel Aoun has been elected as the 13th President of Lebanon towards the end of 2016, and a new balance of power has been established in domestic politics. Let's start with Aoun's presidency. You personally know Aoun with whom you met during the civil war at the Baabda Palace. From your perspective, how is it to see him again in the Baabda, but this time with the legitimate vote of the Lebanese parliament?

William Harris: This has been his aspiration, I mean to be president. It has always been very clear. When I knew him, he felt he had something to offer as the president. Now, he has finally got his life-time aspiration, which is nice for him, I mean, the fulfillment of his dream.

Of course along the way, he shifted around quite a bit. I remember him when the Syrian regime was the opponent. He was quite strong and tough towards Hafez Al Assad at that stage, which was not appreciated in Damascus. Indeed, this led his exile in the end. In 2005, when the Hariri assassination happened, at the outset, Aoun's people joined the protesting crowd and there was a very big Maronite component. The crowd was obviously larger than the crowd that Hezbollah could put together. Within this framework, he hoped, and I think he expected, that he could get something out of that, I mean, presidency as a successor to Emile Lahoud. 14th March people were not prepared to back him for the presidency. They might have thought that he was too temperamental, that he would not be convenient once he got the office.

Shortly after he returned to Beirut, he shifted politically and reached a deal with Nasrallah. Therefore, he became more open to Bashar Al Assad and the Syrian regime, which was a huge turnaround even in Lebanese politics. I think that makes people including Hezbollah feel that they do not know what they are going to get ultimately when they get Aoun. At the end of the day, a Maronite president has

to have a Sunni prime minister, but he was very hostile toward the Future Movement and Saad Al Hariri. But, what we have now is Saad Al Hariri as prime minister under the presidency of Aoun. This is a turnaround for both of them.

Aoun's presidency has been built upon on a very delicate balance, which requires the cooperation of various Lebanese actors: Hezbollah under Iranian influence, Hariri under Saudi patronage, and Christian leaders with different political aspirations and alliances at both regional and international level. What can we expect from Aoun as the president in terms of his alliance with Hezbollah?

Hezbollah people, Nasrallah himself too, cannot be sure what Aoun they are going to get as time goes by and they know this. I do not think he is organically associated with Hezbollah. He also teams up with Hariri on the other side. It looks like a sort of triangle in which they get on with each other. They learned from the fifteen years of war that they must avoid going over the edge. However, I do not think that Aoun is necessarily going to be convenient for Hezbollah and it depends on what happens in Syria.

Certainly on the track record we can see; if Aoun feels that his dignity is offended by somebody, or if he feels that something he expects in the domestic politics does not happen, or if he feels he is overshadowed by Hezbollah, he is not necessarily going to react in a way that they would be happy with. I mean, he has got what he has always aspired to get, now he is not in need of Hezbollah to the same degree as before. Now, he is the president of Lebanon and others took a risk, I would say. It also depends on what happens to the Syrian regime and the power balance in the region including Russians and Iranians. These developments all feed into where Aoun wants to go, which one day might not be where Hezbollah wants to go.

Faced with a real challenge, Michel Aoun is a pragmatic political leader. He is a Lebanese nationalist with a Maronite flavor. If he feels that Hezbollah wants to do things with Iran that override Lebanon, he might not acquiesce. I do not know about his personal relations with the Iranians. I assume that relations are mediated through Hezbollah. The Iranians tend to be cautious when they come to Lebanon. They take care to visit the Maronite Patriarch. They know that the Shia community is not the

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majority in Lebanon, but for the moment the largest single community, around 30% of the population. They have some advantages, but these may not be forever. The other communities can militarize quite fast, especially the Maronites and the Druze. Druze have fought Hezbollah in May 2008 and they could protect their area. Jounblatt did not want to go too far because he knows that Druze are a very small community compare to Shias. Considering the power balance among Lebanese sectarian groups, it also depends on what regional forces are prepared to bring into the equation and we cannot forecast at this point. If we are looking into the future, any collision between Lebanese communities automatically involves external forces, which changes the balance.

How about the position of Saad Al Hariri. He

achieved to be prime minister again after a deal with Aoun and Hezbollah. What does this compromise mean for Hariri? And do you think that he is strong enough to make compromise in the name of Sunni community for sustainable alliances?

I do not think so. I think he is quite weakened. After the elections in 2009, he formed the national unity government and became prime minister. He had to go to Damascus and make up with people he regarded as responsible for his father's murder. That was a humiliation. Eventually, when they pushed too much later on, his government collapsed. They wanted him to destroy the Tribunal in which Hezbollah operatives were directly targeted as suspects. That is an interesting story that nobody talks about anymore, but it is still an active story. The Tribunal will issue judgments

in due course and the judgements are most likely not going to be nice judgements for Hezbollah. Anyway, Hezbollah people wanted to make the Tribunal ineffective by lack of Lebanese cooperation and this was, of course, too much for Hariri because it concerned his father. However, the zig-zags in the struggle compromised him. Neither Saad nor anyone else can extract more than pragmatic limited term acceptance by Sunnis of situations they regard as distasteful.

Is there any alternative to Saad Al Hariri in Sunni community?

There are figures in the Sunni community who have a national following. Ashraf Rifi has stood up for himself and taken some brave positions. I do not think Saad could make compromises on behalf of Sunni community when somebody like Rifi is against such a decision. And Rifi has quite a tough line. As for other personalities, we have Tammam Salam as former prime minister but he is out of the scene now. It is hard to see a new top Sunni figure.

As long as the bulk of Sunni Arab Syrians feel that they are targeted for demographic engineering, it is painful for Lebanese Sunnis to compromise with anyone aligned with Bashar Al Assad.

There are some scholars who argue the frustration of Sunni community during the Syrian civil war together with a lack of a strong traditional leadership in Lebanese Sunni community gave rise to the more extremists to fill the power vacuum and they focus on the rise of radical leaders challenging the mainstream Sunni leadership. However, it is also a known fact that historically Sunni community tends to have moderate leaders so this argument seems quiet contradictory to the legacy of the history. What do you think about this radicalization debate in Sunni community in Lebanon?

I am a bit skeptical. I think there are some Salafists obviously on the margins of the Sunni community like some people associated with the Jabhat Al Nusra, or Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham. There are some people who were religiously radicalized and went to Syria and fought with the rebels. However, I tend to have the view that these are the margins of the community. The bulk of the community has not really shifted in terms of that sort of radicalization. At the same time, the bulk of the community feels fundamentally hostile about Bashar Al Assad and the Syrian regime. The Syrian

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Sunni Arab population is the majority of Syrians and what has happened to them has deeply affected Lebanese Sunnis. Basically, Lebanese Sunnis are overwhelmingly with the opposition to the Syrian regime.

Therefore, they are not religiously radicalized in terms of Salafism, but they are hardened by what has happened in Syria. That is another thing. As you also noted, the Sunni community is not historically known for that sort of tendency in its modern history. Indeed, they are also not happy with the radicalization in Syria because a lot of these people are commercial people, business people or the middle class. They want a stabilized environment in Lebanon.

The problem for Lebanese Sunnis is Hezbollah, it is not the Shia community. They have to live with the Shia

community and they know that. They have to make whatever pragmatic arrangements are necessary to keep Lebanon functioning. That requires an understanding between leaders of the major communities like Sunni, Shia, Maronite and Druze. Maronite is here a sort of metaphor for Christians in general. Dealing with somebody like Nabih Berri is fine as far as Lebanese Sunnis are concerned, but Hezbollah with its 'in your face' intervention in Syria is highly problematic, to say the least.

As a neighboring country with organic links with Syria, Lebanese politics has always been highly interlinked with the politics in Damascus and in Syria. As you may also notice, we started with the domestic politics in Lebanon and



ended up with the effects of the Syrian crisis. Indeed, this is the second issue that I want to raise in this interview. The uprising in Syria began in March 2011 and it turned into a civil war having direct repercussions at regional level. Lebanon, of course, is the one which has mostly affected in terms of its economy, security and social affairs. How do you evaluate the Syrian crisis from the perspective of Lebanon?

I think, the first point that should be made is that Lebanon itself had experienced a civil war for fifteen years from 1975 to 1990. The legacy of that for the leadership in Lebanon who lived through this war that they all do not want to repeat it. They have exerted themselves quite commendably to avoid the breakdown. I think, that applies on the various sides like the Sunni leadership and Shia leadership including Hezbollah. They have not wanted Syria to spill into Lebanon, they have not wanted to repeat the war, and they have not wanted the collapse again. Of course, each side does not like the connections of the other. Hezbollah people obviously do not like the association of Lebanese Sunnis with the Syrian opposition. And the Lebanese Sunnis absolutely do not like Hezbol-

lah's physical role in Syria.

Despite the fact that there are strains in Lebanon related to Syria, and Lebanese are irritated by what is happening in Syria and Lebanon as well, they have taken a collective decision to avoid going over the edge or into the chasm because this would destroy Lebanon. Indeed, they are quite successful in their efforts. The critical factor is here the fifteen years of war that they went through. If they had not had that experience, Lebanon might have been swallowed into the Syrian arena. I think their experience makes them pause.

How about the role of regional and international actors in preserving Lebanon from direct spillover effect of the Syrian civil war? Or let's say the extension of direct conflicts into Lebanon geographically.

Yes, they have a role. I believe, in this sense, because of the cold calculations, Iranians do not want to have a collapse in Lebanon and do not want to add something to what they have to deal with in Syria. For any major foreign actor that is already heavily involved in the Syrian affair, to have a collapse in Lebanon simply makes life more complicated. I do not think it has any particular advantage for anyone. On the

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contrary, it has disadvantages for all the actors involved in Syria because it will be a big distraction. In addition to the complications of factions, to have Lebanon fully dissolved into the Syrian war, I do not think, is any foreign actor's interest. So, I think, they are all working in different ways to try to prevent things going over the edge. I think that applies to Iranians; that applies to Europeans and the Americans and the Russians. They all want to see Lebanon quiet.

Lebanon's advantage is actually that it is a sort of listening post. It is a place to observe the Syrian scene. Therefore, it is better to have Lebanon calm.

Despite the prevention of actual conflicts in Lebanon, it is not an isolated country from the effects of the Syrian civil war. In this respect, maybe one of the foremost effect of the civil war is the refugees around 1.1 million Syrians according to the official numbers. How do you evaluate the current debates on the Syrian refugees in Lebanon like sending them back to Syria, which Michel Aoun insistently calls for?

I do not think that they can be sent back because that would be inhuman, and there

would be a severe international reaction. It seems to me that the Syrian affair has a long way to go and we cannot see the end of it. Most of the refugees are hostile to the Syrian regime and fear it very much. If Sunni Arab refugees return to Syria, they will again be vulnerable to an unreconstructed dictatorship that wants them not to exist. I think Lebanon simply has to live with this burden. These people are there to stay for a while. The burden on the Lebanese state apparatus is partly economic because most of these refugees are poor.

The other consideration is the demographic consideration. Obviously, it is not just a matter of 1.1 million people. These people are overwhelmingly Sunni, therefore it causes questions for both Shia and Maronites. If a significant number of refugees are going to be permanently added to the Lebanese Sunni population, this would make the Sunnis the largest single community in Lebanon. At the moment, it is a nice edge between Sunni and Shia demographically. It is something like 30% Shia, 30% Sunni and 35% Christians. Therefore, it would be a dramatic change and that is a sensitive matter in Lebanese communal politics. Given that Shia plus Christians are two thirds of the Lebanese population and certainly reject the permanent integration of Sunni Syrians into Lebanon, it is

not an acceptable option. Also, I believe that virtually all the Syrian refugees would go back to a Syria minus Bashar Al Assad because they are not comfortable in Lebanon and they are not welcome also.

We may also touch upon the security concerns related with the civil war in Syria and the cross-border affairs through the Syrian – Lebanese border.

Apart from the refugee issue, we have cross-border incursions and infiltration in both directions. The border is mountainous and poorly defined, and the Syrian side is a theatre of hostilities between rebels and regime that impinges on Damascus. Hezbollah crosses to support the Syrian regime throughout western Syria, and it has its own local interests particularly in the Zabadani and al-Qusayr areas. Sunni jihadists have crossed in the other direction, especially in the vicinity of the Lebanese Sunni town of Aarsal. With Russian and Iranian backing the Syrian regime has the upper hand, but Syrian Sunni Arab fury means the outlook is not stable, here and elsewhere. So far reverberations have mainly kept to parts of the Beqa'a Valley region on the Lebanese side. There is a

difficult mix of Lebanese security forces, Hezbollah, and readiness to operate across the border by the Syrian regime, rebels, and jihadists.

Finally, do you have something to add about the effects of the Syrian civil war in Lebanon before moving onto the last issue of our interview? Indeed, I have one more question to make one issue sure about the ongoing Syrian civil war. We actually talked about this, but I wonder whether we can be sure that Lebanon will remain really out of the scope of the direct conflicts?

Well, what I can see in the foreseeable future of Syria is the continuation of the patchwork of the current sub-state entities. It does not necessarily have any further detrimental effect on Lebanon beyond what we have seen already. I want to raise another aspect of this crisis as a potential issue in Lebanon. We have not really talked of the potential spillover within communities. We have talked about possible conflicts between communities like Sunni and Shia etc. There is also the question of the load of casualties amongst Hezbollah at Iranian direction and the attitude

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of the Shia community to this. From time to time, it is possible to see the anger in the Shia community at being treated by Iran as simply a source of cannon fodder and mercenary forces in Syria.

Certainly, if we see more fighting with Hezbollah incurring significant further casualties, this will have an impact in the community. For now, we are talking about more than 1,500 deaths and probably several thousands wounded or disabled. This is not a small figure for the community and for Hezbollah itself. From time to time, we can hear about the discontent within Hezbollah too. I do not know the details about that. But, I do know, there is unhappiness in the community, which will continue as the war continues. Like Iraqi Shia, they are not necessarily favorable to being bossed around by the Iranians. After all, this is a community that is Arab and their language is Arabic.

It is different culturally from the Persians. Of course, they happen to be co-religionist, but that may not be enough to carry everything forever. So, we need to watch problems within communities, particularly unhappiness among the Shia.

Finally, moving onto the last point that I would like to raise in this interview, the upcoming elections. Indeed, the general elections were supposed to be held in 2014. However due to the failures in electing a president, the elections have been postponed to 2017. Now, the current debate is basically on adapting a new electoral law, to which certain significant sectarian leaders oppose toughly. What do you think about the current debates in Lebanon to have a new electoral law based on

whether the proportional system or the majority system?

The Lebanese have the pretense that they are one country, but they often tend to act as if they are three or four countries. Many of them want both these 'realities' reflected in the electoral system and representative arrangements, which gives us severe contradictions and a difficult logjam. 14 March – Sunnis, Druze, and part of the Christians – want the majoritarian system because they get a seat advantage out of the small constituencies, as in 2009. 8 March – Shia and Aoun's Christians – want proportional voting because they got an advantage in the 2009 popular vote. The proportional voting would presumably be on the basis of middle-sized governorate constituencies, not a single national constituency, and the existing sectarian allocation of seating would continue.

In particular, Aoun hopes to collect more Maronite seats – this is an important mat-

ter because Maronites have a bigger number of seats (34) than either Sunnis or Shia (27 each). Aoun especially looks to poorer and lower middle class Maronites. It is actually hard to see how Hezbollah would get more Shia or Shia influenced seats – it continues as the majority Shia popular force but its controversial involvement in Syria may have electoral implications. It would no doubt try to emphasize itself as guarantor of the security of Shia – it has long since ceased even pretending that it is not sectarian.

Dear Professor, I would like to thank you again for accepting this interview and sharing your comments on Lebanon which, I believe, will shed light on our readers who are interested in Lebanon and the Middle Eastern politics in general. Once again, we are honored to host you at ORSAM. Thank you.

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