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**LEBANON ON A TIGHTROPE ACT:
BALANCING THE INFLUENCE OF
COMPETING ALLIANCES**

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LEBANON ON A TIGHTROPE ACT: BALANCING THE INFLUENCE OF COMPETING ALLIANCES

For the past decade, Lebanon has been in the eye of a geopolitical storm hitting the region from the Gulf to the Levant, involving global powers such as the United States and Russia. Each country is trying to leverage its influence through shifting the power balance between internal actors. In light of the United States' withdrawal from the region since former President Barack Obama adopted the "leading from behind" policy, to President Trump embracing the "America First" slogan, and with a receding Saudi interest in the Lebanon, Iran succeeded in growingly attracting Lebanon towards its orbit -after allowing its local branch, i.e Hezbollah, to control the political and security apparatus and almost unilaterally design the broad lines of internal policy as well as the foreign policy of the country.

Nevertheless, an American interest in Lebanon resurged with Washington trying to besiege Iran and put an end to its expansion in the region. The warnings presented by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to the Lebanese Government during his last visit to Beirut are an indicator that Lebanon is once again used as a field for settling regional and international scores, and its future is largely dependent on the results of the region's map reshape.

"Maison du Futur" held the second out of a series of War

Games Simulation seminars organized in cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. The session's title was **“Lebanon on a tightrope act: Balancing the Influence of Competing Alliances”**. It was a two-session meeting held with the supervision of a main expert, and under the Chatham House rules. The simulation was based on the hypothesis of Lebanon's more steady alignment within the regional “Axis of Resistance”, and the purpose was to assess the repercussions of this position on its political balance, according to three scenarios: the best, the worst and the most probable. In such a hypothesis, Lebanon increasingly abandons its traditional neutrality and disassociation policy vis-à-vis regional and international conflicts, and aligns with an axis that would include Iran and its proxies in the region (Hezbollah mainly), the Syrian regime, with an affinity to other parties like Turkey, Russia and Qatar.

The first question is to determine how the compass of Lebanese policy went towards the other direction: was it voluntary or forced, gradual or at once?

The next question revolves around the repercussions of this alignment on the situation in Lebanon; will it lead to a renewed polarization between the two broad camps of March 8 and March 14? Will it yield conflicts and a surge in security breaches?

Subsequently, what would the reactions of regional and international main players opposed to Beirut's new

positioning be, and how will this affect their relationship with Lebanon? Will the Gulf States, for instance, sanction Lebanon for its positioning? Will the United States punish Lebanon for its alignment, and to what extent? What will be Russia's posture then? Would the European Union act as a mediator in order to "save" Lebanon from the results of a deadly polarization?

Last, what if Israel considers this new positioning as a Casus Belli, and launches a preemptive large-scale operation on Lebanon?

1- How did Lebanon slip into the "Axis of Resistance"?

How did Lebanon shift towards this axis? Was it gradual, or was it a decision made at once? Did the March 8 Alliance impose this alignment on other parties due to the weakness of the now-defunct March 14 Alliance following domestic and regional developments? What are the factors that allowed the March 8 Alliance to impose this option? Were they internal factors like the military arsenal of Hezbollah, or were they external such as the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East, the absence of the Saudi support to Lebanon, and the comeback of Russia to the region after the salvation of Bashar el-Assad's regime?

A- The March 8 Alliance:

In the reading of players representing the March 8 Alliance, the most important internal factor leading to this drift is the disintegration of the March 14 Alliance reflected in the so-called “presidential compromise”, and enhanced by the lack of unity within the Sunni scene. This was crowned by the last legislative elections -held under the proportional system- which ensured the majority of parliamentary seats to the March 8 Alliance. Added to this was the decision of Hezbollah to engage in domestic governance and give priority to domestic issues.

Externally, several factors led to this new alignment, like the resilience of the Assad regime which gave a great momentum to the March 8 Alliance, followed by an American withdrawal from the region in general, coupled with the bad Saudi performance that reached its peak with the detention of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Riyadh and his forced resignation, with all its repercussions.

All these developments led to a gradual slip, especially as this new positioning might be backed by a Russia regaining its status as a major player in the region.

B- The March 14 Alliance:

It is obvious that the March 14 Alliance is going through

a very bad period in light of its fragmentation. How could it then face the new alignment of Lebanon within the “Axis of Resistance”?

For its representatives, March 14 Alliance is not an entity but rather a state of mind symbolizing the pulse of the Lebanese people. This is why such developments could lead to the regrouping of this Alliance, especially in light of the ramping tension between the United States and Iran, and the Big Stick policy used by Washington against Tehran.

However, the expert group agreed with the March 8 Alliance portrayal of the March 14 Alliance’s drawback, nevertheless, some players emphasized the first responsibility for the current deteriorated situation in Lebanon, suggesting that it should weather the storm and devise new policies to address the country’s serious economic challenges. Regionally, Hezbollah is nostalgic for the times of U.S. President Barak Obama, when the United States was more open to talks with Iran. Today, with President Donald Trump’s pressure on Iran, this grace period is over, and the March 8 Alliance will have to face internal and external setbacks due to the new American position.

In such a context, betting on the definitive dissolution of the March 14 Alliance is speculative, as this gathering can still resuscitate.

C- Syria:

Does this imply that the Syrian regime exerted direct or indirect pressure on Lebanon to adopt this position, or did Lebanon voluntarily opt for this alignment? Is the Syrian regime currently capable of exerting pressure or is it still going through the recovery period?

One could argue that Lebanon is currently not the main priority for Syria, which has to come to grips with the presence of many regional and international forces on its territories. Also, Hezbollah is not obedient to the regime anymore, but rather the latter is dependent on the party and on Iran for its survival.

Assad knows, like so often, that time is on his side and that his country is not a priority in the American Middle Eastern agenda, barring the Iranian presence. It will thus not endanger this dynamic by overly mingling in Lebanon's choices.

Moreover, the Assad regime still has many cards to play, like betting on the tension between Iran and Russia, on the rift between Iran and the Gulf Arab States, as well as the several agreements between Russia and Israel.

D- Iran:

An official Iranian stance is that Tehran's policy towards Lebanon is based on the principle of supporting its allies' choices without interfering in the internal affairs of their

countries. For Iran, the parties interfering in the internal affairs of the region's countries are the United States in coordination with Saudi Arabia.

In this respect, the situation in Lebanon is not the result of Iranian choices, but rather due to the fact that Saudi Arabia gave up on its Lebanese allies. In short, Lebanon moved progressively towards the "Axis of Resistance" without any Iranian or Syrian pressure.

2- Reactions of Regional and International Powers:

If the March 14 Alliance rejects the option of joining the "Axis of Resistance", but both March 8 and 14 have a reluctance to resort to violence, what will then be the reaction of foreign powers concerned by Lebanon and by the region?

A- Russia:

The first obvious question is whether Russia is part of the "Axis of Resistance" or not. Second, what role does it play in Lebanon, and what position does it take towards Lebanon's pro-Axis of Resistance status? Has Russia played a role in driving Lebanon towards this axis or is it a mere intermediary and neutral observer? Can Russia be considered the guarantor of Lebanon's return to neutrality and its withdrawal from the "Axis of Resistance"?

The relations between Russia and Lebanon have always been friendly, and Moscow barely interferes in Lebanon's affairs or choices.

The two countries' mutual relations have grown further recently, especially at the economic level, as showcased by the Lebanese President Michel Aoun's latest visit to Moscow. The drivers of the relation were highlighted by the visit's outcomes: several bilateral trade agreements, mainly in the energy sector (a Russian company has joined the offshore oil and gas exploration consortium and the rehabilitation of the oil facilities in Tripoli); assistance to Lebanon in its electricity crises; plus a renewed pledge to protect the minorities in the region, notably the Christians, which is paramount for Lebanon.

In Syria, Russia's intervention saved the legitimate regime and defeated terrorism. Hezbollah has assisted Moscow in this endeavor, and in return, Russia will support it to overcome the pressures it is subjected to. In addition, Russia is playing an important role in ensuring the return of the Syrian Refugees from Lebanon. Russia has also recently invited Lebanon to participate in the Astana conference as an observer, in order to bring it closer to the political solution in Syria, within which is included the return of the Syrian refugees and the reconstruction of Syria.

Furthermore, Russia has backed Lebanon's Baabda Declaration, and it had already approved all the

international decisions emphasizing Lebanon's neutrality. Should Lebanon choose to join the "Axis of Resistance", Russia will not be able to interfere in its affairs, for only the Lebanese can decide what is best for them. Notwithstanding that Russia main worry is to avoid an open confrontation or a regional war, it considers Iran as a great state whose stature in the region is well deserved. But Iran must be part of the solution, not the problem. On that level, Russia could have disagreements with Iran when it comes to Syria, but regional escalation is the worst scenario that could happen to the region: If Iran was hit either in Syria or Lebanon things could get worse, at least for the refugees.

B- The United States:

The American position has undoubtedly changed after Trump's election. Under Obama, the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East ignored America's allies in the Gulf, Lebanon, and even Syria in order to reach a deal with Iran over its nuclear program.

As to the actual administration's policy towards Lebanon, the starting point is the impossibility of accepting Hezbollah as a predominant political entity while this party is engaging in battles in Syria and supporting the Houthis in Yemen. However, the U.S. relations with Lebanon will remain strong because Washington sees the country as irreplaceable, but it will not accept that Lebanon remains a launching pad used to undermine

American influence in the region. The United States considers its friends in Lebanon to be few – although it is providing the Lebanese army with military and logistical assistance and is supporting its resilience facing the burden of hosting refugees – while Russia has not spent a penny to help the Lebanese overcome their crises and has even offered to sell the army weapons while failing delivery.

The representative of the U.S. considered that the knock-out that drove Lebanon towards the “Axis of Resistance” was the memorandum of understanding signed between the Free Patriotic Alliance and Hezbollah. The U.S. will retaliate with the “Big Stick” policy, rebuffing any further Iranian control over Lebanon. In such a context, the U.S. would find it hard to continue supporting and assisting Lebanon as long as it is revolving in the orbit of the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance”.

The U.S. does not consider Russia to be a friendly state. If one skims over the 2019 National Intelligence Strategy Report, one would find that the United States designates two adversaries – Russia and China –, and classifies two states as being rogue and destabilizing regional and international situations – Iran and North Korea. The battlefield with Iran is the Middle East, where Moscow and Tehran both benefited from the vacuum left behind by the former U.S. administration.

Lebanese should remember that in 2006, Israel was not

able to eliminate Hezbollah due to American pressure. But if any new war is to erupt between the two today, the U.S. will not pressure Israel but will leave it to act freely. Should Israel consider that preserving its national security requires the destruction of Hezbollah the U.S. will not stand in its way; a point should be made clear: American interests come before international legitimacy, and American laws supersede any international law, unless the U.S. administration decides otherwise depending on its objectives. In the event of an escalation in the South of Lebanon, the war decision would be in the hands of Israel – not Iran – and should Israel make that call, Washington would support it.

C- The European Union:

The EU recognizes that its capabilities and influence in the region are very limited. The EU main objective is to keep the nuclear deal alive because Tehran's possession of nuclear capabilities is not in Europe's interest; hence the EU is trying to preserve a minimum level of relations with Iran. Furthermore, Iran possesses the world's second largest gas reserve, and Russia is ready to take its place in case of a vacuum. The EU wants to safeguard its relations with Iran so it can assume the role of intermediary between Teheran and the United States, between Iran and the Gulf countries, and between the U.S. and Russia.

Another crucial parameter for Europe in this regard is the

Syrian refugees in Lebanon; if security breaches are to hit the country they would flee Lebanon and potentially try to reach Europe. Curbing such a scenario is the main driver behind the EU eagerness to maintain stability in Lebanon.

This is why Europe fears the day when stability in Lebanon will no longer be in the core policy of the United States. That said, European interests with the U.S. are too high to be compromised, and the European Union will not engage in a confrontation with Washington for Lebanon's sake.

Fears are high. The EU anticipates that if a war erupts between Lebanon and Israel, the security apparatuses, the Lebanese army, and the ministry of defense will not be immune anymore to Israeli strikes.

D- Iran:

In the eyes of the representatives of Iran, the American project in the region is authoritarian and aims at controlling the entire region. This is why the U.S. is Iran's prime enemy and because Iran's political identity is closely linked to the resistance, it shall grow stronger.

Furthermore, it is the United States that has broken its commitments by withdrawing from the nuclear deal, and imposing unilateral sanctions on Iran irrespectively of the United Nations and the international law.

By supporting the Lebanese army, the United States intends to control Lebanon and strengthen Israel through putting a lid on how strong the Lebanese army should be. Iran has repeatedly emphasized its readiness to assist the army.

As to the Saudi project in Lebanon, Iran perceives it as subversive and obedient to American injunctions; it is a negative scheme merely based on counteractions and will bring Lebanon to its demise.

Regarding Russia, Iran maintains a good collaboration with Moscow, since it is a major power in the world. But Iran's decision will always remain independent when it comes to resistance, and if Russia confronts Iran, Iran will retaliate.

In case a military confrontation occurs with Israel, in Syria and/or Lebanon, and although neither Iran nor Hezbollah are interested in a large-scale war, Hezbollah has the capacity to inflict serious pain on Israel considering the type of weapons and missiles it possesses.

E- Israel:

The player representing Israel believed that Lebanon is already aligned with the Iranian axis. The decision to escalate and wage a war against Israel from Lebanese territory is in Iran's hand, and Lebanon has no input in this matter. Should an escalation occur, there will be no

prohibited targets for Israel in Lebanon, since Tel Aviv now considers the Lebanese government and Hezbollah to be one and the same. Israel is strongly supportive of the U.S. sanctions on entities and individuals connected to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In terms of theaters of operation, southern Syria is considered by Israel as an extension of the South of Lebanon; consequently, it shall strike any Iranian post along the whole border of the two countries. Strikes, in that case, will be coordinated with Russia and with some Arab countries that are sensing the Iranian threat.

3- What about the scenario of an Israeli military operation facing Lebanon's alignment with the "Axis of Resistance"?

A- Israel:

In case Lebanon opts for escalation, war will proceed according to three parallel scenarios:

- A total war waged on land and in the air from the Lebanese and Syrian borders
- Hitting internal targets to cripple both Hezbollah and Iran's capabilities to move weapons
- Imposing an embargo in addition to hitting internal

targets which could cause internal fighting.

Israel feels that it is highly unlikely that there would be negotiations between America and Iran, while chances of a war erupting in Lebanon are high. In addition, the region faces the risk of heading towards an escalation as pulling out Hezbollah from the Lebanese political cauldron can only happen through military means.

Israel's strikes will have the objective of disturbing relations between Hezbollah and its supporters on the one hand, and between Hezbollah and its allies, especially the Christians, on the other hand; they will come to realize that their alignment with Hezbollah will increase the risk of targeting their areas, and that Israel will inflict maximum pain in order to push them to repudiate the party of God.

B- Iran:

Iran anticipates that if it will be the target of a direct or indirect war, Russia would not play the role of intermediary or defender of the Islamic Republic; it would rather seek its own interests. Iran may have common goals with Russia in Syria, but Russia is also benefiting from the sanctions imposed on Iran. This is why, in such a case, Iran will decide according to its sole national and strategic interests.

If Israel initiated an attack, it would be forced to end

it within few days due to the advanced weapons of Hezbollah. Iran's defense budget is the highest in the region and it will not concede any of the cards it possesses, surely not Lebanon and Syria.

C- Saudi-Emirati tandem:

For the Saudi and Emirati tandem, the war scenario is the worst for the region, but it may, on the other hand, fall in the interest of the Gulf States. The main problem that Israel would have to deal with during such a war is Hezbollah's missiles. Viewed from Riyadh and the UAE, Israel would wage a land blitzkrieg to rid itself of the risk of missiles. It will not hesitate to destroy the South of Lebanon and control all its crossing points. It will not allow anyone to return to the South before destroying Hezbollah. In other words, it will throw the ball in the Lebanese court. Israel will also target the Lebanese army sites, government institutions, and vital facilities. This scenario is extremely dangerous for Lebanon as well as for the region; and it should be prevented dearly.

An assessment and prospect in conclusion:

It is quite clear, from the round of exchanges during this Diplo-Game, as well as from a sober reading of the Lebanese overall situation, that built-in brakes for a gradual drifting of Lebanon towards the "Axis of

Resistance” in the region are more than weak, and that nothing endogenous could really stop such a trend.

However, it is more the “instinctive” preservation reflexes of many parties that would prevent such a scenario, at least under its stark form, and with the extreme nefarious consequences it could trigger.

Domestically, Hezbollah is well-aware that one of its ultimate shields is the preservation of a Lebanese State structure -a shell at best, of course. Therefore, it is attached to the kind of “forced consensus” it has ended up imposing to almost all the forces of the political spectrum, and its strong entente with the presidency and the National Free Movement camp is a guarantee for that- in the foreseeable future at least.

Hezbollah’s contenders are not in a shape to challenge or to even try to alter this state of affairs. Mainly, the strong attachment of PM Saad Hariri to its understanding with President Michel Aoun, and corollary his strong desire to stay in power for the years to come would prevent him to attempt any act of resistance towards the actual balance of power and its translation into policies. Along the same vein, the other two pillars of the March 14 Alliance i.e. the Lebanese Forces and the head of the Progressive Socialist party Walid Jumblatt, do not have the resources to embark Hariri on another path, not to mention to try to impose another reality.

On the regional and international levels, and if one looks closely at the dynamics that are unfolding in the Gulf, the American option of slow strangulation of Iran in order to bring Tehran to a renewed and tougher negotiation round is still the name of the game. As long as things remain as they are, the general assessment is that both President Trump himself -for domestic and electoral reasons- as well as the Iranian leadership -for survival reasons- do not want global confrontation and all-out war.

In such a context, neither the U.S. nor its Gulf allies able to pressure their friends and proxies in Lebanon, are really willing to open a front in this country at least before things get clearer in the Gulf waters.

What could be expected is rather a slow pressure, in the form of “reminders”, such as the sporadic actions and moves of sanctions taken from time to time, or some signals the Gulf tandem (Saudi Arabia and UAE) send periodically to Hariri; a slow pressure aimed at framing and deterring from a full-blown alignment to the “Axis of Resistance”. Within these limits, this does not really constitute a threat to Hezbollah, but concurs in its self-limitation.

The game would drastically change, however, in case the two coming years that separate us from the Trump’s presidency termination or renewal, witness a serious scenario of large-scale confrontation in the region. This

is a possibility, either if a serious and uncontrolled rogue act triggers a slippery slope no one could stop, or if radicals on one of the two sides finally prevail.

In that case, gloves would then be off; and this will undoubtedly translate into Lebanon being absorbed by the conflictual dynamics, and a much clearer alignment and sticking to the “Axis of Resistance”, at least in a first step before if even possible, other forces try to seize it back.

An additional factor here, and a potentially important one, the more is the future awaiting Syria; with the status-quo in Syria consolidated, the fate, future, and subsequent behavior of the Assad regime would impact Lebanon. How far its “survival” would and will be translated in Lebanese terms? What kind of future retribution is in stock in Damascus, where revanche feeling towards a large part of the Lebanese political class as well as Lebanon as such is almost certainly brewing?

If for now, Assad has much on his plate, and if he is presently still mainly concerned with regaining the rest of his lost territory and the control of his subdued population, and constrained by his backers-patrons (Iran and Russia) who saved his lifeline, then time, as always has been the case for Damascus, is a precious ally and resource. This is where the built-in resilience factors of Lebanon, or rather their absence or extreme weakness, are extremely worrying. In that case as well, the “natural”

slope in Lebanon could easily translate into a slow and incremental shift of its policy choices towards the “Axis of Resistance” where Syria will have positioned itself.

Facing this, and the Syrian parameter -or unknown- in particular, a consistent U.S. strategy, both towards Syria and towards Lebanon, is in reality non-existent.

In Washington, the only integrated policy regarding the region is so far at least an Iran policy wherein Syria, Lebanon, and even Iraq, are only parts and parcels of this focus. On the margins of this core objective, respective countries’ domestic political aspects are a variable; in this regard, it has become obvious that questions such as the Syrian so-called “political process”, the fate and future of the regime, etc, are all questions that are sub-contracted to Russia, with Israel’s expressed or implicit acquiescence. This leads us to the rationale above, namely that Lebanese inner trends and dynamics are still largely autonomous to operate and create a de-facto situation such as the one envisaged in the scenario we discussed here and during the Diplo-Game day.

Remains to say and admit that, in such a scenario, the tools at disposal in Lebanon for various forces to operate are both limited and lethal -if used; besides, the domestic environment has never been so fragile and vulnerable, threatening a total collapse- thus the ultimate deterrent aspect.

In an economic conjuncture such as the one prevailing in the country, any adventure towards escalation and further friction could well cause the edifice to crumble. This is maybe the most effective limit to any attempt by Hezbollah, as well as by its regional patrons and backers, to take the cursor further to extremes. Confronted to rising sanctions abroad, to a dire financial situation with Iran's purse tightening, and with a social distress mainly jeopardizing its own social base, Hezbollah is bound to stick to a certain level of status-quo, if it does not want to see its regional efforts, might, and its Lebanese quasi-hegemony reversed and irremediably damaged.

On the military front, Hezbollah also knows that, contrary to 2006, any war with Israel will not -or will not necessarily- remain limited, especially if it is coupled with a confrontation at large with Iran anywhere in the region. If Hezbollah has developed enough deterrence as to make Israeli military planners think twice before embarking on a new Lebanon campaign, the party also knows that if Israel decides that it is now time to cut the Gordian knot, all means will be put to task for that. In all simulations, a confrontation with Israel could definitely not remain restricted to the Southern Lebanon theater, but would spread to the entire territory, economy and resources, and, mainly and most dangerously, a new sociology of forces hostile to Hezbollah inside Lebanon, where Syrian refugees could well be mobilized in order to take on the party's rear bases, and create a hostile

environment to the population fleeing combat zones in the south of Lebanon.

Faced with such doomsday scenarios, both Lebanese political forces -across the board- as well as the forces seeking to roll-back the regional “Axis of Resistance” in Lebanon positively weigh the cost-benefit equation, and clearly see that their vested interest and advantage is in keeping the prevalent status-quo alive.

Nevertheless, this status-quo does not offer Lebanon surreptitious erosion, as its incremental drifting if not towards the “Axis of Resistance” but at least towards parameters that are taking the country far from its original and almost moribund “liberal pro-Western” outlook is already noticeable. What is dangerous is that this drift is not only occurring in terms of politics as such, but also in terms of social and societal modes of being.

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Biography

Joseph Bahout is a nonresident fellow in Carnegie's Middle East Program. His research focuses on political developments in Lebanon and Syria, regional spillover from the Syrian crisis, and identity politics across the region.

Previously, Bahout served as a permanent consultant for the Policy Planning Unit at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009–2014). He was a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Sciences Po Paris (2005–2014) and a senior fellow at Académie Diplomatique Internationale (2008–2014). He also served as a professor of political sociology and international relations at Université Saint-Joseph in Lebanon (1993–2004), and a researcher at the Beirut-based Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporain (1993–2000). Bahout is currently an associate fellow at the Geneva Center for Security Policy, and a member of the scientific board of the Institut Français du Proche-Orient.

He is the author of books on Syria's business community and its political outlook (1994), and Lebanon's political reconstruction (1998), in addition to numerous articles and book chapters. He is a frequent commentator in European and Arab media.