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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Tehran's Man in Beirut

Lebanon's new president is an ally of the Iran-backed terror group.



Lebanese celebrate the election for president of Michel Aoun in downtown Beirut on Oct. 31.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

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Lawmakers in Beirut agreed to elect Lebanon's next President on Monday, breaking a deadlock that had crippled government for 29 months. The decisive vote was cast in Tehran. Iran wanted a Lebanese President who would be an ally of Hezbollah, the Shiite terror group that its chief proxy in the country. It found one in the 81-year-old former general Michel Aoun.

Under Lebanon's explicitly sectarian political system, the President must be a Maronite Christian, while the Prime Minister is a Sunni and the Speaker of Parliament a Shiite. But in recent years Hezbollah has exercised a veto over Lebanese politics and tilted the balance in Tehran's favor. It helps that Iran funds Hezbollah to the tune of around \$200 million annually and supplies it with tens of thousands of missiles, making the group the strongest armed force in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon allows Tehran to threaten Israel and defend Syria's Assad regime, pillars of Iranian regional strategy. Mr. Aoun, though a Maronite, enjoys close ties with Hezbollah and isn't likely to press the group to disarm. His Free Patriotic Movement party signed a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah in 2006, and his rhetoric and positions are usually aligned with the Shiite group.

Mr. Aoun's election marks a détente between Hezbollah and many in the Maronite community who have come to view the group and its Iranian backers as protectors amid a Syrian civil war that has flooded Lebanon with more than a million refugees, most of them Sunnis. It also represents a personal humiliation for Saad Hariri, who will again serve as Prime Minister under the deal. Hezbollah and agents of the Assad regime assassinated Mr. Hariri's father, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, in a 2005 car bombing.

By accepting Mr. Aoun as President, the Saudi-backed anti-Iran coalition led by Mr. Hariri now formally concedes Tehran's position as the main outside power in Beirut. In that sense Mr. Aoun's rise reflects the wider regional balance of power, with the Iranians running the geopolitical table and traditional U.S. allies in retreat.

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