



## Middle East Spotlight

### Lebanese Presidential Election Signals an Ascendant Iran

While our attention is focused on the inauguration of a new U.S. president and the swearing-in of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, it is important not to lose sight of another presidential transition affecting Israel—this one right on her border. Lebanon, Israel's northern neighbor, was without a president from May 2014 until October 2016. The Lebanese election process had been stymied by Iran-backed Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. Ultimately, the terrorist group's preferred candidate—Michel Aoun—won the presidential post.

While some hailed the end of Lebanon's political gridlock, this development is deeply concerning because it highlights the growing influence of Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, both in Lebanon and across the Middle East.

Michel Aoun's political party, the Free Patriotic Movement, has been closely aligned with Iran-backed Hezbollah since 2006, the year Aoun and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah entered into a political alliance. Aoun supported Hezbollah's 2006 war against Israel, backed its 2008 Beirut takeover, and endorsed the group's intervention in the Syrian civil war. He also opposes disarming Hezbollah, which is mandated by international law under United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701.

Shortly after his election, Aoun pledged to "release what is left of our lands from the Israeli occupation."

Hezbollah's tightening grip over Lebanese institutions signals an ascendant Iran, which is expanding its influence in both Lebanon and throughout the Middle East. President Aoun will likely depend on Hezbollah's support to remain in power, and is unlikely to make decisions that contradict the group's wishes.

Iran views Aoun's election as a political victory, and hopes to replicate it elsewhere in the region.

Ali Akbar Velayati, top foreign policy advisor to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said: "The election of Michel Aoun as president shows new support for the Islamic resistance. This is surely a victory for Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of [Hezbollah and] Islamic Resistance in Lebanon."

On Nov. 7, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif became the first foreign minister to meet with Aoun, and expressed hopes that similar political settlements could be reached in Iraq, Syria and Yemen—countries which Tehran has increasingly exploited to further its regional ambitions.

An empowered Iran endangers Israel's security and undermines U.S. interests in the region. The Jewish state is an indispensable American ally, and its safety and security are in America's national interest. The United States, through our new president and Congress, must continue to work with Israel and provide the critical security assistance it needs to defend itself—by itself—against mounting security threats.