

# The Ruling Alliance between Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement Under Scrutiny

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**Abstract:** Fifteen years have passed since Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), which both occupy a central place in Lebanon's sectarian political system, signed a Memorandum of Understanding and formed the political alliance currently governing Lebanon. These two parties, which were ideologically and politically opposed, came together for strategic and pragmatic purposes in the new political atmosphere created after Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Through the alliance, Hezbollah gained a Christian umbrella to legitimate its weapons, while the FPM gained an ally to end its isolation from Lebanese politics. Nevertheless, the unfolding national, regional, and international developments over the last three years may jeopardize the agreement that has allowed both sides the opportunity to flex their muscles in the political arena for a long time. This brief will outline the strains that threaten the sustainability of the alliance between Hezbollah and the FPM.

## Introduction

On 6 February 2021, Gebran Bassil, the president of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), released a statement that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Hezbollah should be re-visited. He stated that "developing this understanding in the direction of opening new horizons and hopes for the Lebanese [people] is a condition for its continued viability, as it is no longer needed if those committed to it do not succeed in the battle to build the state and the honorable Lebanese victory over the corrupt alliance that destroys any resistance or struggle."<sup>1</sup> Announced on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strategic agreement between FPM and Hezbollah, this statement reveals the ongoing problems the alliance faces despite its success in securing parliamentary dominance and electing Michel Aoun as president in 2016. The national, regional, and international developments of the last three years have made the future of the alliance more uncertain than at any point over the past fifteen years.

This brief aims to analyze the increasing strain in the alliance due to the cost and burden of certain domestic and regional developments. The brief initially concentrates on the political, ideological, and social context that united these ideologically divergent parties. The brief then assesses how concession bargaining has evolved during the historical evolution of Lebanese politics. Lastly, the brief ends with an examination of the existing cracks in the alliance under six main titles: (1) the 2019 protests; (2) Lebanon's economic crisis and isolation; (3) the Beirut explosion and changing

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threat perceptions; (4) Patriarch Al-Rai's opposition to Hezbollah; (5) divergences in foreign policy approaches and the international pressure on FPM and Hezbollah; (6) clashing interests between Hezbollah's allies.

### **Agreement in Context**

Fifteen years ago, FPM (possessing a predominantly Maronite Christian electoral base) and Hezbollah (the Shiite political party and armed non-state organization) signed a MoU at Mar Mikhael Church in Beirut. At the time of the MoU's signing, often known as the Mar Mikhael Understanding, it was hard to imagine that these two parties with such divergent ideological and political stances could establish strong cooperation. While the text of the agreement emphasized dialogue, democracy, and security, it was mainly a strategic agreement for both parties to increase their influence over the Lebanese political theatre.

Until the signing of the MoU in 2006, Hezbollah and FPM followed completely opposing paths in Lebanese politics. Hezbollah was established in 1982 by Shiite clerics with ties to Iran to fight against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon amid the Lebanese Civil War. In their "Open Letter" manifesto announced in 1985, Hezbollah stated three main ideological constituents: (1) the establishment of an Islamic State in Lebanon, (2) the pursuit of *jihad* against Israel and other Western powers, and (3) submission to the *wilāyat al-faqīh* that administers both the Islamic jurisdiction and general politics of the nation.<sup>2</sup> Following the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, Hezbollah made certain concessions by abandoning its rigid ideological vision of establishing an Islamic State in order to be a part of the post-war democratic process. More importantly, while Hezbollah evolved from a militant organization into a political party, it succeeded in securing its arms on the basis of fighting Israel thanks to Syria's tutelage of Lebanon during the civil war which kept a tight grip over the country until 2005.<sup>3</sup> Although Hezbollah participated in every single parliamentary election since the end of the war,<sup>4</sup> it did not however become part of any government formed in the country until 2005. Meanwhile, it maintained its attacks inside and outside Lebanon during this period.<sup>5</sup>

The FPM headed by Michel Aoun, on the other hand, is a Maronite Christian political party that followed an opposite direction during and after the Civil War. While a commander in the Lebanese army, Michel Aoun opposed the Taif Agreement and declared a War of Liberation in

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1989 against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. In 1990, Aoun surrendered after a military assault on the presidential palace, and was exiled to France on the condition of a media ban to disconnect him from his political base in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> Since Aoun's supporters were prevented from forming an official political party, in 1994, FPM was initially organized as an informal political movement around a non-sectarian, secular, and nationalist ideo-political agenda, targeting middle-class Christians, student organizations, and syndicates.<sup>7</sup> The movement strongly criticized the Syrian influence in Lebanon and the corruption of Lebanese political elites. After the liberation of South Lebanon from Israeli occupation in 2000, the "Qornet Shehwan gathering" was established as a coalition of Christian political and intellectual figures to demand the complete withdrawal of Syria.<sup>8</sup> These developments created a space for FPM to rally audiences opposed to the Syrian presence, and Aoun exploited the disagreement between the United States (US) and Syria over Iraq after 9/11 to lobby against Syrian existence in Lebanon. Aoun effectively lobbied in the US Congress<sup>9</sup> to enact the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act<sup>10</sup> in order to end Syrian presence and their support for "terrorism" in Lebanon. A year later, UN Security Council decided to implement UNSCR 1559, which called "upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon."<sup>11</sup> The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon enabled Aoun to return from exile and turn the Free Patriotic Movement into a political party in 2005.<sup>12</sup>

Perceptions on the post-war parliamentary structure put in place after the Taif Accord in 1989 is another point where the two parties ideologically and politically differed. The Taif Accord introduced an even distribution in the parliament between Sunnis and Christians (5:5), changing the pre-war allocation that gave Christians a majority in the parliament with a 6:5 ratio. Furthermore, it transferred executive powers from the presidency (Maronite) to the Council of Minister (the prime minister is Sunni) while also enhancing the powers of the Speaker of Parliament (Shia).<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Maronites feared the demand by Shia voices, who constitute a third of the population, to alter the power sharing agreement from being a dual Christian-Muslim division to a tripartite division (*muthalatha*) between Maronites-Sunnis-Shias.<sup>14</sup> Although both Aoun and the Shiite parties are critical of the Taif Agreement, they categorically exclude each other's sought-after models of power sharing.

Coming to 2005, while the FPM was one of the main parties that protested the Syrian presence, on the other side, Hezbollah and its allies gathered big protests in Beirut on March 8 to show appreciation for Syria's administrative role in Lebanon. However, widespread protests following the assassination of Rafik Hariri, also called the Cedar Revolution, led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. This would be the turning point for both Hezbollah and FPM in terms of their political and ideological stances. For Hezbollah, the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the

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adoption of UNSCR 1559 directly posed a threat to Hezbollah's arms given the resolution's clear statement about the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Syria's absence forced Hezbollah to increase its involvement in Lebanese politics by participating in the democratic process and seeking to find a new political alliance within national politics.<sup>16</sup> For the FPM, the Cedar Revolution gave it a legal opportunity to transform its movement into a national political party. Under a sectarian democratic structure, the FPM abandoned its secular discourse for a sectarian (Maronite) tone. The main rallying focus of the FPM became fighting against corruption and promoting the "rights" of its Christian constituency, with the new political discourse based on the concepts of "change and reform."<sup>17</sup>

Despite their different ideological stances, structural transformation in Lebanese politics made these parties need to cooperate by making certain concessions under the MoU. In this context, Hezbollah, whose weapons were in danger due to the UNSCR 1559 and needed to find a place in post-2005 Lebanese politics, thereby secured legitimacy of its weapons with the agreement (see MoU, Article X).<sup>18</sup> FPM, on the other side, overcame its political isolation in exchange for granting much-needed Christian legitimacy to Hezbollah's weapons.

### **From Exclusion to Power: The Evolution of the Alliance**

After signing the MoU, the Hezbollah-FPM alliance experienced various political developments. Only four months after the memorandum, the 2006 war broke out between Lebanon and Israel. This war cemented the inter-party relations between the FPM and Hezbollah, especially after the FPM's calls for Christians to host Shiite refugees bombarded by Israel in Southern Lebanon.<sup>19</sup> Following the war, disagreements in the cabinet between March 8 and March 14 led to a severe crisis.<sup>20</sup> Aiming to weaken Hezbollah,<sup>21</sup> the March 14 Alliance sought to dismantle Hezbollah's telecommunication network and limit their stronghold.<sup>22</sup> While the March 8 alliance, mainly composed of Hezbollah, FPM and Amal Movement, a fellow Shia party, conducted their opposition through sit-ins for the first two years, the decision of the government to dismantle the telecommunication channels of Hezbollah resulted in Hezbollah's military forces taking to the streets and occupying strategic points of Beirut on May 7, 2008.<sup>23</sup> The Doha Agreement, signed on 21 May 2008, ended the political crisis and granted constitutional veto power to the opposition by changing the electoral law.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the agreement turned certain Christian-dominated areas into separate electoral districts, increasing the electoral advantages of Christian parties, especially the FPM.<sup>25</sup> However, Hezbollah's military action in Beirut, and other factors, cost FPM its Christian votes in the 2009 general election, which dropped from 70% to 50% compared to the previous elections in 2005.<sup>26</sup>

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Coming to 2011, the regional turmoil after the eruption of the Arab Uprisings also positively affected relations between FPM and Hezbollah. Hezbollah sent military support for Bashar al-Assad, in coordination with Iran, against the Sunni military opposition. During this period, the Syrian War experienced the rise of some radical Sunni groups like ISIS, which was perceived as a threat against Christian minorities in Syria and Lebanon. By fighting against the radical Sunni groups threatening the Christian minority in Syria, Michel Aoun and Hezbollah presented themselves as defenders of Lebanon and guardians of Christians in the region.<sup>27</sup> Under this context, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces fought and arrested a prominent Sunni Salafi cleric Ahmad al-Assir, who went to Syria to fight alongside Syrian rebels.<sup>28</sup> They also conducted a cooperative military operation in 2017, called Operation Fajr al-Juroud, against 600 self-proclaimed Islamic State fighters near the Syrian border.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, FPM and Hezbollah were bolstered by the changing of power on the ground in Syria as Assad emerged victorious and recaptured lost territories. These developments shifted the power balance in favor of the FPM-Hezbollah alliance.

The 2014-2016 presidential elections and the 2018 parliamentary elections were an important milestone for the FPM and Hezbollah in their alliance and the pinnacle of their capture of Lebanese politics. The main figures of the March 14 alliance, Saad Hariri (The Future Movement) and Samir Geagea (The Lebanese Forces) stroke independent deals with FPM and Hezbollah that paved the way for Michel Aoun to become president in 2016. This weakened the defining political claims of the March 14 alliance and blurred the lines between the previously opposing camps rendering the alliance irrelevant to its base.<sup>30</sup> In this period, due to the increasing Iranian influence in the region, Saudi Arabia increased the intensity of its threatening policies against Hezbollah have increased in intensity.<sup>31</sup> Saad Hariri's resignation on 4 November 2017, announced in Riyadh under alleged pressure from Saudi Arabia to isolate Hezbollah,<sup>32</sup> caused Hariri a serious loss of prestige. These events brought tensions within the March 14 Alliance to light.<sup>33</sup> However, Aoun's active role in solving this crisis was reflected as a positive development for Aoun and his party.<sup>34</sup> As a result of all these developments in the realpolitik area, the balance of power seriously tilted in favor of the FPM-Hezbollah alliance.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, while Aoun won the 2014-2016 presidential elections, Hezbollah and FPM captured the majority in the 2018 parliamentary elections.<sup>36</sup>

**“All Means All”: The Cracks in a 15-year-long Alliance**

Following the bitter developments beginning in 2019 and afterward, the once carefree alliance between the FPM and Hezbollah has seemingly begun to be shaken due to the political turmoil in the country. Endemic corruption, Hezbollah's isolationist policies, the ramifications of the Beirut Port explosion, the

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changing Maronite discourse, foreign policy divergences and increasing international pressure, and the deadlock in forming a government have constituted the main points of discord in the alliance.

#### **a. The 2019 protests and Its Burden on Hezbollah**

The 2019 protests put new burdens on Hezbollah's alliances with the FPM and Amal movement, both of which are publicly accused of being at the center of corruption.

On 17 October 2019, hundreds of angry protestors across Lebanon took to the streets to protest new taxes on gasoline, tobacco, and WhatsApp calls.<sup>37</sup> However, the protests quickly turned into a condemnation of the stagnant economy, unemployment, and corruption.<sup>38</sup> The endemic corruption was especially a main complaint by the protestors. Among those elites, Gebran Bassil, Free Patriotic Movement chief and President Aoun's son-in-law, was the protester's main target as the epitome of corruption in the economic and political system. In addition to targeting Bassil with harsh derogatory slogans<sup>39</sup> during his attendance of the 2020 World Economic Forum, the protesters demanded the revoke of Bassil's invitation through online petitions<sup>40</sup> citing his corruption, thereby forcing Bassil to acquit himself before global public opinion.<sup>41</sup> Bassil is publicly accused of various corruption scandals amongst which are related to his term in the energy ministry,<sup>42</sup> the transfer of government funds to individuals close to him through front companies, massive budget deficit, and the unknown fate of \$33 million from seismic survey sales and others.<sup>43</sup> Thus, FPM's cornerstone political discourse of anti-corruption since 2005 looked hollow as the public increasingly associated FPM politicians with corruption. Meanwhile, the Shiite community, which is suffering from the current economic stalemate and political deadlock, also seemed tired of the corrupt order to which Nabih Berri, the speaker of parliament and leader of the Amal movement, is also associated.<sup>44</sup>

Hezbollah leader Nasrallah's attack and defaming of the protests posited Hezbollah as the main protector of this political order.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the violence of some Hezbollah sympathizers against the protesters<sup>46</sup> and party leaders' tacit support showed Hezbollah's readiness to mobilize all its means, even to the point of provoking a sectarian conflict, to maintain this established order. These associations have dealt some serious damage to Hezbollah's public image as it continues to protect its allies and the political order it leads.

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#### **b. Lebanon's Economic Crisis and Isolation**

In its 2019 country report, the IMF estimated the unemployment rate in Lebanon to be around 20%<sup>47</sup> while its debt-to-GDP ratio was the third highest in the world in 2020.<sup>48</sup> By 2021, Lebanon's economic and financial crisis was ranked in the possibly top 3 most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> As the Lebanese pound lost about 90% of its value since 2019,<sup>50</sup> Hezbollah is being blamed for Lebanon's isolation, which is deepening the economic crisis. During the Arab uprisings, Hezbollah was increasingly seen as an Iranian proxy and supported the Assad regime by participating in the Syrian War, which distanced Lebanon from other countries in the region and especially from the Gulf Countries.<sup>51</sup> This isolation created a financial aid crisis.<sup>52</sup> In response, the Maronite religious authority represented by Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai often called for internationalization and international meetings to save Lebanon, mentioning the rising threat that Lebanon's isolation poses.<sup>53</sup> This has put the FPM in an awkward situation between its ruling partner and the Maronite patriarchy that continues to influence the sympathies of the Christian community.

#### **c. Hezbollah's Armament Threatening Lebanon: Beirut Port Explosion**

The traumatic explosion in the port of Beirut on August 4 also marked a watershed in the state of the relationship between the two parties. Ammonium nitrate, suspiciously stored in the port, caused great destruction due to the negligence of the responsible authorities. The explosion in the Port of Beirut, considered to be under Hezbollah's control and allegedly one of the main supply areas in the Syrian War, strengthened the discourse among Hezbollah's opponents that its weapons are a threat to Lebanon and Lebanese Christians.<sup>54</sup> The FPM that portrayed itself as the patron of the Christians, felt pressure to take harsher and more critical stances towards the traumatic explosion in the heart of Beirut and the ensuing investigation feud as shown below.

#### **d. Shifting Discourse of the Maronite Patriarch Al-Rai**

The Maronite patriarchy considers itself as the founding element of the Lebanese state, and the religious authority embraces this as a "historic" mission. The discourse of religious authority on politics has a significant influence on the Maronite community.<sup>55</sup> In FPM's relationship with Hezbollah, Al-Rai initially adopted an inclusive, moderate, and dialogue-centered discourse on Hezbollah. He considered Hezbollah's armament as a crucial element for protecting Christian minorities in Syria.<sup>56</sup> However, in May 2014, Al-Rai became the first patriarch to visit Israel, and this visit broke the warm atmosphere with Hezbollah since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War.<sup>57</sup> Later, Al-Rai emphasized the unity of the

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Lebanese state and started to adopt a critical discourse on Hezbollah's "divisive" influence in Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> During this period, Al-Rai started to adopt a similar discourse as the Christian parties in the March 14 Alliance. Al-Rai's visit to Saudi Arabia was perceived as a message during the escalating Saudi-Iranian conflict over Lebanon.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Al-Rai attributed Lebanon's economic crisis to Hezbollah's isolationist policies.<sup>60</sup> He further expressed that parties should be free from external intervention and should form a government to solve the crisis after the explosion of Beirut Port, indirectly referring to the close relationship between Iran and Hezbollah.<sup>61</sup>

**e. Contrary Foreign Policy Approaches and International Pressure**

Foreign Policy is another point where FPM and Hezbollah are increasingly adopting different approaches over the last few years. In contrast to Hezbollah, FPM is keener on maintaining working relations with Western countries and adopting internationally accepted positions regarding Syria, Israel, and Iran. The FPM is very active in diaspora politics and is involved in lobbying activities in the US, where it is careful to not lose ground. In 2017, after Michel Aoun's visit to Saudi Arabia, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani invited Aoun to visit Tehran several times,<sup>62</sup> but Aoun did not respond to these invitations. In the same year, Gebran Bassil stated that "Lebanon does not have an ideological clash with Israel, and they are not against Israel's security",<sup>63</sup> which is contrary to Hezbollah's ideological position towards Israel. In 2019, Hezbollah's national ally did not invite Syria to the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit, which Hezbollah harshly criticized.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, in the maritime border talks with Israel that started in November 2020, while the Hezbollah bloc emphasized that these talks cannot be associated with any peace agreement with Israel,<sup>65</sup> Aoun stated that the talks were open to peace negotiations.<sup>66</sup>

Later, the differences started to deepen with the Beirut Port explosion and Al-Rai's discourse as international pressure started to mount on FPM due to its relation to Hezbollah. During the period when the Trump administration applied a "maximum pressure" campaign on the Iranian regime and its regional proxies, many officials and institutions of Hezbollah were subject to international sanctions. In addition to the sanctions on many Hezbollah-related individuals and companies,<sup>67</sup> on November 6, 2020, the US imposed economic sanctions on Gebran Bassil due to corruption allegations.<sup>68</sup> Then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo said in a statement: "Through his corrupt activities, Bassil has also undermined good governance and contributed to

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the prevailing system of corruption and political patronage that plagues Lebanon, which has aided and abetted Hezbollah's destabilizing activities."<sup>69</sup> Former U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, Jeffrey Feltman also said: "No one has done more to expand Hezbollah's political dominance in Lebanon than Bassil."<sup>70</sup> The cost of this international pressure has become heavy to bear for the FPM, and criticisms of Hezbollah by FPM figures have started to be heard more in public. If not well-compensated for by its ally, the FPM might eventually come to decide that the alliance is too costly to sustain.

**f. Clashing Interests between Hezbollah's Allies and Disagreements over Government Formation**

Another point of tension between Hezbollah and the FPM is the serious disagreement between Hezbollah's Shiite ally Amal and its Christian ally FPM. Although Hezbollah has been managing these conflicts for a long time, the confrontations between the two parties are escalating, posing the question as to how Hezbollah will continue to manage these relations. During the 2016 presidential election, Amal Movement leader Nabih Berri declared that he won't vote for Aoun.<sup>71</sup> In a leaked video of an election rally, Bassil called Berri a "*baltaji*", or a thug, sparking violent street protests.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the disagreements in various cabinet issues,<sup>73</sup> most famously regarding energy, electricity and parliamentary elections, as well as the two sides mutual accusations of corruption have kept the tension fresh.<sup>74</sup>

In the government formation crises that have deepened since the 2018 parliamentary elections, both the disagreements between Amal and the FPM, and clash of interests over the cabinet have also sometimes directly confronted the allies. FPM on one side and the Shiite duo on the other could not agree on three main points in the government formation crisis.

The first is the issue of veto power in the cabinet. During the formation of the second government of Aoun's term starting from May 2018 elections, Hezbollah was reluctant to give Aoun and Bassil veto power and control of 11 seats in the cabinet and demanded the representation of its six Sunni allies, which was initially refused by Aoun.<sup>75</sup> After the resignation of prime minister-designate Mustapha Adib, Saad Hariri was appointed as prime minister-designate with the support of Hezbollah and Amal. However, Hariri failed to form a government due to Aoun's demand of a third of the seats, seeking veto power.<sup>76</sup>

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The second point of disagreement between Hezbollah and FPM on the cabinet is the power struggle over the finance ministry, which oversees all national and international capital flow, together with the central bank. Claiming that this ministry should be allocated to a Shia, the Shiite duo Hezbollah and Amal have been eager to control this ministry even to the point of clashing with the FPM who criticized a sectarian allocation to this ministry.<sup>77</sup> Later, Hariri also gained the support of Shiite duo by promising to nominate an independent Shiite figure to this ministry.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Najib Mikati followed the same strategy and appointed Youssef Khalil, who was the former central bank official nominated by Nabih Berri and close friend of head of central bank Riad Salameh.<sup>79</sup>

The disagreement over naming Hariri for the premiership was another straining point between the FPM on one side and Hezbollah and Amal on the other. As mentioned above, despite his national ally's support, Aoun opposed Hariri during both his government formation in the year before. When Nabih Berri, strongly stood behind the premiership of Hariri,<sup>80</sup> Aoun forwarded the early election card knowing that Hezbollah would be concerned that early elections would reduce its weight in parliament under Lebanon's current conditions. Previously, while establishing a new government under Hariri's premiership in January 2019, Gebran Bassil, who served as foreign minister in the cabinet representing the FPM, was also in an overt power struggle<sup>81</sup> with Hariri due to his holding of veto power in cabinet.

The Tayyouneh clashes that took place on October 14, 2021 following the Beirut Port investigations, and the subsequent cabinet crisis have further complicated relations between FPM, Amal and Hezbollah. The Shiite duo, who had already succeeded in dismissing Fadi Sawan to relieve the pressure of the port investigation,<sup>82</sup> strongly demanded the removal of judge Tarek Bitar after he lifted the immunity of Amal deputies and summoned them to a hearing.<sup>83</sup> When this request was rejected, the Shiite Duo organized street protests and 7 people lost their lives in the armed conflict between the Duo and the Christian Lebanese Forces (LF) sympathizers in the Tayyouneh neighborhood.<sup>84</sup>

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During this process, the Shiite Duo was disturbed by the FPM's passive attitude towards Bitar and the FPM's statement that the investigation could not be resolved with street protests.<sup>85</sup> Lebanese President Michel Aoun further tweeted an accusatory tweet that "Those who are innocent don't fear the judiciary."<sup>86</sup> Following the incident, Amal and FPM issued strongly worded statements mounting to attacks against each other. Thereupon, Berri accused the FPM of supporting the LF in the Tayyouneh incident, breaking the "real alliance" between Amal and Hezbollah, and openly blamed it "for the disasters and deficiencies it has dragged the country into during its reign, until the country arrived in hell."<sup>87</sup>

Although Hezbollah tries to show in public that it maintains an unbreakable alliance with the Amal movement, it also tries to side with FPM in issues on which FPM and Amal seemingly disagree over, the latest of which is the disagreement in parliament over the expatriate vote.<sup>88</sup>

## **Conclusion**

When looking at the developments after 2019, while the FPM and Hezbollah were blamed for Lebanon's free fall, the strategic foundations of the 15-years alliance seem to be weaker than ever. FPM and Hezbollah have not only differed on issues such as the cabinet formation but also created a burden for each other in certain dimensions, whether internally or externally. To what extent the allied parties will tolerate these burdens in exchange of new benefits, and the possibility of alternative alliances will ultimately decide the alliance's sustainability. While different domestic alliances are straining this relationship in the background, another factor that will determine the MoU's future is the international factor. The resumption of US-Iran nuclear talks, for which Biden gave the green light,<sup>89</sup> could reverse the momentum in Lebanese isolation and give Hezbollah some respite at home. Meanwhile, the FPM and Amal continue to take strong rhetorical stances on the port investigations and against each other, trying to rally their electoral bases ahead of the elections. To this moment, these mutual public attacks can be regarded as tactics rather than signs of a strategic rift. It remains to be seen the electoral alliances that will emerge in the coming days.

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