

## A loud grumble shakes the Aounist jungle

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There is discontent in the Aounist household. In an interview on Wednesday with Al-Mustaqbal, the former deputy prime minister, Issam Abu Jamra, a senior official in the Free Patriotic Movement, stated that he had sent a written complaint to Michel Aoun after Aoun appointed only one member from the movement, Gebran Bassil, to a cabinet post.

Aside from the fact that Abu Jamra reported his objection in a mouthpiece belonging to his political adversaries, he also noted that "all options [were] on the table" if he received no response to it.

Precisely what Abu Jamra can or will do is unclear. Aoun has treated his followers with considerable disregard over the years — openly favoring his son-in-law, Bassil, over all others, ensuring that none of his parliamentarians becomes too prominent, and running the FPM with a firm hand — and he's done so because he knows they have little political weight without him. However, Abu Jamra's move is significant, because it appears to be the first public salvo in a fight over the future of the Aounist movement, now that Michel Aoun has lost all the major battles that had allowed him to impose unity on his fractious flock.

The reality is that in the past four and a half years, Aoun has failed to capitalize on the considerable political advantages that he successively accumulated. He emerged as the most dominant Christian from the 2005 elections, but was unable to leverage that into his election as president in 2007. Had Aoun remained neutral in the confrontation between March 8 and March 14, he would inevitably have become head of state. No one, on either side of the political divide, would have mobilized against Aoun had he remained on good terms with both the majority and opposition.

Instead, Aoun sided with Hezbollah and Syria's allies, in the hope that their power of intimidation would bring him into office. But in so doing, he only ensured that the March 14 majority would take any and all steps to block him, which they did by supporting Michel Sleiman, someone whom they initially mistrusted as being a Syrian creation.

The Doha Agreement, which endorsed Sleiman as president, was the first nail in Aoun's political coffin, and it was followed by the parliamentary elections last June. Even though the general emerged with a larger parliamentary bloc, it was a Pyrrhic victory. He was unable to bring in a majority, as he and his allies had promised. Indeed, the fact that Aoun had become so polarizing a figure, in large part due to his partnership with Hezbollah, mobilized many more Christians against him, handing March 14 its new majority. That was the second nail in Aoun's coffin.

The third appeared to be general's abysmal performance in the negotiations over the government. From the outset, Aoun's only acute concern seemed to be Bassil's return as a minister, so that he bore a major responsibility for keeping the state on hold in the interest of nepotism. He rejected Saad Hariri's first cabinet proposal on that basis. Recall that Alain Aoun and Farid al-Khazen had been named ministers in the lineup, one no worse than what Aoun ultimately accepted. But the general cared little that those two figures were among the more respected of his partisans; all his anxieties were focused on the son-in-law.

And if that was not enough, who could avoid noticing that a final agreement on the cabinet came when Bassil returned from Damascus, having heard from the Syrians that it was time for Aoun to be flexible. The general spent a decade and a half denouncing other Lebanese politicians for allowing their decisions to be taken in Damascus, only to fall into that nasty habit himself, and with a family member as errand boy.

As Aoun gets older, those under him are preparing for what comes afterward, accumulating cards. The general's big battles are over. He's not president, he failed to spearhead an opposition win, he takes orders from Syria, and he's willing to throw caution to the wind in order to guarantee that Bassil succeeds him as head of the Aounist pack. That gamble, too, is likely to fail, and there are those around the general, his old comrades first, who this time don't want to pay the price for his setbacks if it loses them their one chance of making it themselves.

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