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A surprising deal shatters politics in Lebanon.

January has brought surprising developments in Lebanon, a country without a president and parliamentary elections for nearly two years. The standoff came at the worst possible moment, against the backdrop of deep divisions over the Syrian conflict and grounding all government functions, already shaky, from the management of more than one million Syrian refugees, to the inability of providing functional basic services such as the provision of water and electricity, culminated into an disgraceful garbage collection crisis that has ignited street protests in the past months. The main reason for this political standoff has been the remarkable rivalry between the two main political movements in the country: the Sunni Future movement and Shia Hezbollah. Aligned respectively with Saudi Arabia and Iran, the relations between the two parties often mirrors those between the two regional powers, now more tense than ever.

This is the intricate context in which two of Lebanon's most prominent Christian politicians sealed a deal on January 18th that could provide an interesting alternative way forward. In details, the leader of the Lebanese Forces party, Samir Geagea, officially expressed his support to the presidential candidacy of his lifelong rival, Michel Aoun, whose Free Patriotic Movement is Hezbollah's main Christian ally in Parliament.

The deal is significant because of Lebanon's peculiar political system that uses sectarian belonging as a criteria to determine an equal sharing of the political power. Indeed, the president must be a Maronite, the

country's largest Christian group. However, the support of the Muslim parties is necessary as the candidate must be approved by Parliament. For this reason it is important to analyse the effect of this deal on the respective Muslim political allies. Hezbollah is a little wary about this new developments: the Shia group never trusted Geagea, viewing him too close to Washington, now this weariness extends to Aoun who might go back to his old ways of aggressively campaigning against all forms of foreign (Iranian) intervention in the country. As for the Future movements, its leader Saad Hariri publicly said that he would not stand in the way of Christian solidarity but Riyadh seems concerned that this deal comes with the intervention of Doha, and would accept it only if it leads to Hariri's premiership.

Should this not happen, Hariri's movement would become politically isolated, speaking volumes also of the position of Sunni politics more broadly, as it is usual for Lebanon's politics to be a blueprint of the regional outlook.. At the same time, Mr. Geagea's move might put into question the very nature of his own party, known as March 14, the Future Movement's largest Christian ally in the parliamentary bloc, created with the purpose of contrasting Hezbollah.

The presence of a bigger political project is the only way to explain this recent deal, given that the two signatories have been fierce adversaries thorough Lebanon's history: they have been on opposite fronts regarding the treatment of Israel and the war in Syria, and their individual militias have fought one another during Lebanon's civil war. Many interpret it as a carefully calibrated political strategy crafted by Geagea himself. Indeed, should Aoun become president, the Lebanese Christians will likely see Geagea as the only politician able to restore a long-lost intra-Christian peace, bring the Christians back to power, and, most importantly, break the political deadlock. As a result his influence within the communities will inevitably increase.

In any case these developments, if approved by Parliament in the coming weeks, do provide an alternative out of the current political stagnation, which might not be too negative, given that the country is in such a fragile situation.