ICWA
LETTERS

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

AJT-4
MIDDLE EAST

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The Tsunami

By Andrew Tabler

JUNE 2005

BEIRUT, Lebanon–Riding south in a rickety '70s Mercedes taxi along the Lebanese coast toward Beirut, I could not even hear myself think. The radio was blaring, not music, but the sounds of shouting and commotion. The station's microphones could be heard falling to the floor. After about ten minutes of this torture, a voice suddenly pierced the chaos.

"Shut Up!" it boomed. The radio fell silent, except for the muffled sound of bodies rustling around microphones.

The voice was that of Michel Aoun, arriving at Beirut International Airport following 15 years' exile in France. It was a day I never thought I would see. Politics is often defined as "the art of the possible." Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri on February 14, Syria's hurried withdrawal from Lebanon on April 27, and the major political reconfigurations that have since shocked the Lebanese political system, it seems most anything is possible — even the return of a man who nearly took Lebanon to the brink of destruction in the last years of that country's disastrous civil war in the late 1980s and early '90s.

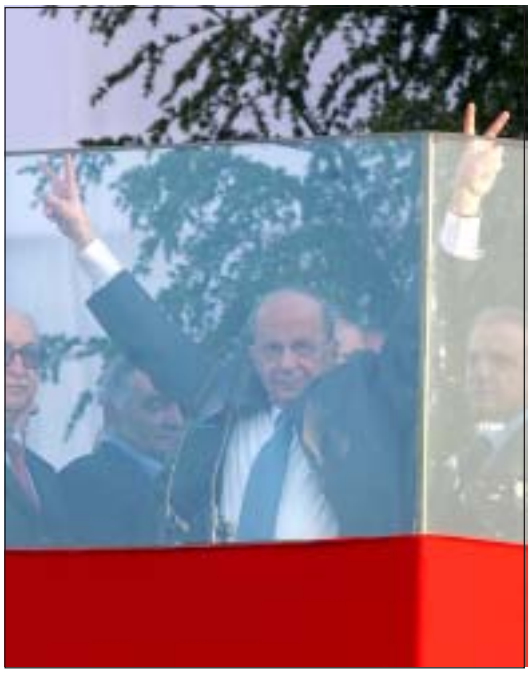
Following his initial outburst, Aoun began orating. As the taxi driver and I listened to Aoun speak to reporters for about 20 minutes, I watched the driver's response to Aoun's rambling speech, in which he claimed primary responsibility for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon.

As Aoun ended the press conference, the driver turned the radio's volume down. We looked at each other and simultaneously raised our eyebrows.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked.

"He does not speak like a cultivated, intelligent man," the driver said. "*Mukh jeesh* [Military mind]. But you know where he stands."

Or do we? Aoun has always been an enigma for me. Preparing to return from exile, he predicted the impact of a "tsunami" on the Lebanese power structure. And indeed, after his return Aoun catapulted himself back to the top of Lebanese politics, as his initial



Michel Aoun returns to Lebanon after 15 years in exile in France. Security concerns have been so high that Aoun frequently speaks from behind a bulletproof shield.

Thousands of Aoun supporters greeted "the general" in a rally on Martyrs' Square upon his return.

success in Lebanon's recent Parliamentary elections grabbed international headlines. Prior to his return, he was vehemently anti-Syrian. In the days after he got back, he negotiated to join forces with the "opposition bloc" — the alliance that demanded Syria pull out of Lebanon following Rafik Hariri's assassination, led by al Hariri's son Baha and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Those talks quickly broke down, however. In the final stage of the election, he aligned himself and his party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), with Lebanon's pro-Syrian political leaders in a bid to stop Baha al Hariri's bid for a parliamentary majority. If a loose cannon can ride a tsunami, Aoun has been a mixed metaphor ever since.

Or perhaps he always has been. General Michel Aoun was Commander of the Lebanese Army in 1988 when the term of President Amin Gemayal expired. In the months leading up to Gemayal's departure, various Lebanese factions tried to find a consensus Maronite candidate to assume what was then Lebanon's most powerful political post. Under "confessionalism" the system of sectional and religious power-sharing put in place in 1943 when Christians were a majority, the President was always to be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shi'ite Muslim.

Consensus building in Lebanon on such issues involves both domestic and international players, however. As Lebanon's civil war raged on, the Lebanese put forward a list of five candidates for the post of president. This list was then submitted informally to Damascus, whose forces had occupied large parts of Lebanon during the war. Shuttling back and forth between Damascus and Beirut was US Ambassador Richard Murphy, who claimed his country had no preferred candidate.

Syrian President Hafez al Assad refused the list, and instead nominated former Lebanese President Sulieman Franjiyyeh as his preferred candidate. Franjiyyeh was rejected by Aoun and Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces (LF) Christian militia. Aoun, himself a Maronite Christian, said that he would not stand for the Presidency — but would serve if elected. In reality, Aoun negotiated behind the scenes with the United States and Syria to become president. When both parties instead settled on a Maronite MP, Mikhail Daher, Aoun and the LF blocked Lebanese deputies from assembling to vote on Daher in August 1988.

The result was constitutional crisis. On September 22, in his last 15 minutes in office, Gemayal issued an order appointing Aoun Prime Minister, heading a military government made up of the country's "confessionally" balanced Military Council. This broke the rules of Lebanon's "National Pact" of 1943, which said that the Prime Minister must be a Sunni Muslim. Promptly, the three Muslim members of the Military Council resigned, and the sitting Prime Minister, Selim al Hoss, refused to recognize the Aoun government.

For his part, Aoun refused to recognize the Hoss gov-

ernment. And since the Lebanese constitution says that if the post of President falls vacant, the powers of the Presidency are entrusted to the Council of Ministers, Aoun professed to believe he then controlled both the Prime Ministry as well as the Presidency.

The result of this constitutional crisis, or showdown, was the creation of two governments — Aoun's in the Ba'abda Presidential Palace and Hoss's in West Beirut. Aoun controlled the Lebanese Army, which quickly began implementing his policy of bringing Lebanese territory under the control of his government. Wars between militias had devastated Lebanon, as various factions fought each other at the behest of each warlord. These conflicts were also internecine, with Shias fighting Shias, Sunnis fighting Sunnis.

In the early days of his government, Aoun gained the respect of Lebanese throughout the country for trying to put an end to such conflicts. Divisions soon surfaced, however, over efforts to end the war. A year earlier a meeting of the Lebanese Parliament, convened in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, passed what was called the "Accord for National Reconciliation." Now known as the Ta'if Accord, the agreement outlined a process to reform the Lebanese political system, to end the war, to establish a "special relationship between Lebanon and Syria" and a framework for an initial redeployment of Syrian forces to Lebanon's Biqa Valley two years following the end of hostilities.

Initially, Aoun had allowed deputies from areas under his control to travel to Ta'if to participate in the meeting. Following their return, Aoun rejected the agreement out of hand, since Syria was not required under the Accord to carry out a complete withdrawal of its troops from Lebanon. Instead, Aoun issued a decree dissolving Parliament before it could meet, elect a new President, and pass the Ta'if Agreement into law. Parliament ignored the order, met, and elected Rene Mouad president. When Mouad was assassinated two weeks later, Parliament met again and elected Elias Hrawi. While Aoun ignored the election, calling it "illegal," Hrawi, Hoss and Parliament passed and began implementation of the Ta'if Accord.

In the meantime, Aoun escalated his offensive against the militias. He began a sea blockade of all militia ports, throwing the Shi'ite Amal movement and the Druze Popular Socialist Front (PSP) into opposition, as well as the Christian Marada of Sulayman Franjiyyeh — whose main patron was Syria. Damascus called the blockade a violation of international law, which in turn led Aoun to declare a War of Liberation against Syrian forces in Lebanon in March 1989.

Aoun held out until the fall of 1989, when he ran into opposition from Lebanese Forces Commander Samir Geagea, who threw his weight behind Ta'if. This began the most bizarre and ultimately catastrophic phase of the war, where Christian fought Christian throughout East Beirut. Civilians fled to the mountains, as Aoun's forces launched successful offenses to gain control of the Port of Beirut — the LF's material lifeline for weapons supplied by Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

As Aoun's massive battles against the LF made international headlines, the international community began to see Ta'if as a way out of the Lebanon quagmire. As Washington began working behind the scenes to implement Ta'if with sponsor Saudi Arabia, Aoun became more agitated. In a fit of anger, Aoun said in an interview that the only way to attract the attention of the United States was to kidnap its citizens — a cheeky reference to Washington's ongoing efforts to free American hostages in Lebanon. The Administration of George H. Bush duly closed its embassy in East Beirut. Aoun was now isolated.

Aoun's battles with the LF ended in stalemate — a situation that might have continued indefinitely, had not both parties' patron, Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Washington needed Syria's support to isolate Hussein. Although the Bush Administration never admitted it, Syria's support for the US effort to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait was in exchange for Washington's tacit agreement for Syria to implement the Ta'if Accord by force. On October 13, 1990, Lebanese forces under the command of Emile Lahoud, together with Syrian Army units, laid siege to the Ba'abda Presidential Palace. After promises to stay and fight to the end, Aoun escaped to the French Embassy and into exile.

Aoun promptly fell into obscurity. In the mid 1990s, he founded the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), whose activists began protesting in front of Lebanese and Syrian embassies in Paris and elsewhere in Europe. By the late 1990s, when I first arrived in Beirut, Aoun was a bit of a laughing stock. For most Lebanese, their last vision of Aoun was something like a madman, barking out orders and decrees on Lebanese TV newscasts that he was not in any position to enforce.

An Arabic proverb says, "For some men, nothing is written." Aoun launched a comeback campaign following the attacks of September 11, 2001, especially among Washington's growing neo-con community. As he saw it, Lebanon's problem was Syria, and the Lebanese who worked with Syrians to build the post-Civil-War order. First and foremost, Aoun said, Lebanon's sovereignty had to be respected — and that meant withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese soil.

From the end of 2001 until the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the current Bush Administration cooperated with Damascus, sharing intelligence on Al Qaeda and other Sunni fundamentalist groups. Simultaneously, some US Congressmen began drafting legislation to enact harsh sanctions on Damascus. In Congressional hearings on the sanctions bill, Aoun was featured prominently, so much so that he now claims to be an author of what is

now the Syria Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA).

As US pressure mounted on Syria in 2003-4, Aoun began to talk about a return to Lebanon. Most observers completely dismissed the matter, especially since the Lebanese government began to file charges against Aoun for various transgressions and began preparations to try him *in abentia*.

That all changed around 11am on the morning of February 14, 2005, when Former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in a massive explosion in Beirut. Lebanese rallied in the streets, holding Syria responsible for the blast. Despite counter-demonstrations in support of Syria, most notably by Hizbollah, Syria withdrew from Lebanon at the end of April, with its tail between its legs.

That's when Aoun made plans to return to Lebanon like a "tsunami."

The metaphor was strange from the outset. Aoun immediately visited Rafik Hariri's grave on Martyrs' Square, where thousands of FPM supporters gathered in a massive rally. They wore orange t-shirts — a reference to the recent Orange Revolution in Ukraine. On the back of their shirts was the Greek letter omega, the scientific symbol for resistance. Demographically, they were largely either over 40 or under 20 years of age.

"We have been waiting for General Aoun to return," said 46-year-old Sonia, who claimed she was among the "human shields" around Ba'abda Palace during Aoun's last days in power. "He tried to break Lebanon free of confessionalism when he was in charge, and he is going to do it again."

Those under 20, who made up the majority of Aoun supporters, were much more enthusiastic.

"We need Aoun to change Lebanon," said 22-year-old Layla. "There is so much corruption, and it's damaging our economy. There are no good jobs."

Then a 26-year-old named Walid encapsulated what for me would be the red thread running through Lebanese politics for the weeks to come.

"The same people have been running our political life since Lebanon was formed," Walid said. "These "*zaim*" [powerful political families] are like political fiefdoms. Its all the same names, father passed down to son. Aoun is different. He comes from humble origins and he speaks to the Lebanese people, not just to the political classes."

Indeed, Michel Aoun is a self-made man. Born in Haret Harayk, a southern suburb of Beirut, to a lower- middle-class family, Aoun entered the Lebanese Military Academy in 1956. Army training took him abroad, most notably to France and the United States. When civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, Aoun quickly climbed military ranks. In the early 1980s, he was appointed commander of the Eighth Brigade of the Lebanese Army, which played a key role in defending the mountain town of Suq al-Gharb above the Ba'abda Presidential Palace. In many ways, Aoun's defense of the town kept the palace from falling under militia control, and preserved what was left of the Lebanese state.

As a reward, Aoun was appointed overall commander of the Lebanese Army in 1984. He was enormously popular among the troops as a front-line general who mixed easily with officers and enlisted personnel alike. He resisted political pressure on the Army, and he purposely kept a low profile, apparently to avoid being sucked into Lebanon's sectarian mess. When the constitutional crisis happened in 1988, Aoun was therefore seen as an independent force with strong nationalist tendencies.

While he ultimately failed to maintain his grip on power at the end of the war, his emphasis on Lebanon's sovereignty and independence still resonates in Lebanon, especially after the Syrian pullout this year. Seeds of a political message, however, have to have ground in which to grow. Immediately following his return, Aoun was quickly dismissed by Beirut's chattering classes as a brash charlatan. His taking credit for kicking the Syrians out of Lebanon through FPM activities and his efforts in for-

eign capitals did not sit well with other voices who had been calling for Syria to withdraw from within Lebanon. New opponents to Syria, such as Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Sunni leader Baha Hariri, did not feel comfortable with Aoun's brash style as well, and kept him out of their "opposition alliance".

It was a tactical mistake, however, because of one very important fact: Christians in Lebanon were without a strong leader to guide them through the elections. When Syria pulled out of Lebanon, the grouping of Maronite leaders against Syrian occupation, called the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, began to fall apart, as their goal of a Syrian withdrawal was complete. MP Nassib Lahoud, a well-respected independent Maronite, had aligned himself with Hariri's bloc in a bid to bring the Christians on side. This plan quickly broke down, however, due to widespread concerns among Christians that they were being strong-armed by what they saw as a Druze-Sunni led alliance.

"The elections became so sectarian," said Fadia, editor of a popular woman's magazine who lives in the Metn region northeast of Beirut. "Hariri was even using the mufti [Sunni religious leader] to say all Sunnis had to vote for the opposition. This is Lebanon. How can we tolerate this? We have democracy, and democracy means free choice, no matter what your sect."

Lebanon's Parliamentary elections took place in stages: in Beirut (19 seats) on May 29; the south (23 seats) on June 5; Mount (central) Lebanon (35 seats) on June 12; and the north (28 seats) and east (23 seats) on June 19. To form a government, a bloc must capture a majority of parliament's 128 seats. In the first round of voting in Sunni-dominated Beirut, Hariri's bloc swept all 19 seats. The following Sunday, the Amal-Hizbollah alliance also captured all 23 seats in the Shi'ite dominated south.

In the third round of voting on June 12 in Christian-dominated Mount Lebanon, Aoun showed his ability to rally Christians. Issuing a firm secular electoral program called "The Alternative", Aoun rammed home a plan to "restore the state in Lebanon." Well organized in book form, and wrapped in a bright orange cover, the plan detailed reforms: Revitalizing democratic institutions; Rehabilitating the country's armed forces; Reforming the judiciary; Developing a plan for economic recovery; Cleansing and restructuring the Lebanese administration; Preserving the environment; Devising a new national roadmap centered on Lebanese citizenship; Rehabilitating the role of Education; Reviving the initiative in foreign policy; Defending public freedoms; and Ensuring fair access to health services.

The list might seem mundane, but it produced a powerful positive reaction among many reform-hungry Lebanese, even those in traditional political camps.

"This is the first comprehensive plan I have ever seen on Lebanon," said one shop owner in the Metn town of Bikfaya. "We normally support Kita'ib [Phlangist] around here, but we also know that the Lebanese state needs to be rid of corruption."

An aging supporter of the pro-Syrian leader Sulieman Franjiyyeh singing me jibberish chats about her candidate's virtues. Aoun made a surprise alliance with Franjiyyeh in a bid to win Parliamentary elections in northern Lebanon.

The plan's motivation also rang true with voters: to combat rampant corruption. When Aoun arrived from exile, his message opposing Syria-in-Lebanon and ensuring Lebanese sovereignty and independence was basically synonymous with that of the Hariri-Jumblatt opposition bloc. Given that Rafik Hariri had been assassinated by what is believed to be forces working with Syria, Hariri and Jumblatt's followers were able to tap into a wave of resentment against Syria. But many Lebanese began to ponder: Just how anti-Syrian were Hariri and Jumblatt, really?

"During Syria's occupation of Lebanon, Hariri and Jumblatt worked closely with Damascus," said one physician from Mount Lebanon. "They were up to their armpits in Syrian money and business deals. Hariri even built palaces for the Assads in Syria free of charge."

To gain popularity among Lebanese, Aoun began to talk of "opening files" that the Lebanese intelligence services had gathered on "corrupt" activities of Lebanese officials during the Syrian occupation. Such announcements were hailed throughout Christian areas, largely as a counter-balance to Hariri's rising power. With Leba-

nese Forces leader Samir Geagea in jail, Aoun quickly became the charismatic national leader Christians were looking for. Thus, in the elections of June 12, Aoun's FPM-alliance captured 21 seats. The opposition movement's ability to form a majority was suddenly not so sure.

All eyes then turned to the final round of the elections in northern Lebanon, which included both Christian and Sunni Muslim areas. With a solid victory under his belt, and now clearly at odds with the Hariri-Jumblatt opposition alliance, Aoun decided to bury the hatchet a week before the last poll. He aligned the FPM with Suleiman Franjiyyieh — perhaps the most pro-Syrian major politician in Lebanon.

When the announcement of the election alliance was aired on TV, I knew I had to see how this worked myself. To take it all in, I journeyed north with a friend from Reuters, hitting three major communities on election day.

We first arrived in the coastal, largely-Sunni Muslim city of Tripoli around 8:30am. Visiting three polling stations surrounded by canvassers in orange, red and yellow t-shirts working for Aoun, Hariri and the Amal-Hizbollah alliances respectively, it was easy to see that Tripoli would be in the hands of Hariri. In Lebanon, there is actually no official ballot. Citizens are required to show up with their "list" of 14 candidates, which must contain a certain number of candidates from each of Lebanon's major sects. So, for example, Hariri's alliance is dominated by Sunnis, by virtue of his sect. However, Hariri's list also contained a certain number of Maronite and Orthodox Christian candidates. This ensured that no matter who won, the ratio of Muslim to Christian deputies would be 5:5, the formula outlined in the Ta'if Accord in 1989.

But remembering which 14 candidates belonged to which "confession" was difficult. So canvassers distributed pre-printed lists that voters could grab on their way into the polling station. Only hard-core idealists, like my colleague from Reuters, made their own lists.

In Tripoli, most voters were solidly behind Hariri, but voiced concerns about corruption.

"We want better jobs, and lives," said Mohammed, a 37-year-old Sunni Muslim engineer. "I voted for Hariri, but we need to do something about thieves in government. It's time to clean things up."

It was hardly surprising, since the Mufti of Lebanon had been running around Tripoli telling all Sunnis it was their duty to vote for Hariri. But I would hear more and more about corruption all day, meaning Aoun's message about opening files was getting through.

In Zaghorta, Franjiyyieh's base, there was no doubt who would win. Photos of Franjiyyieh's smiling, youthful face — some four or five stories high — were plastered on everything from light posts to buildings. Polling station canvassers were overwhelmingly wearing the orange t-shirts of the Aoun-Franjiyyieh alliance. A few very attractive women with red t-shirts tied around their heads were doing their best for Hariri.

"Sulieman Franjiyyieh is the only Lebanese politician who tells you how it really is," said Mariam, a 27-year-old student. "His father led us, and he leads us."

Repeating so many similar statements here would be a waste of paper, but it was interesting to see how deeply embedded Franjiyyieh is in the minds of Zaghorta residents. In fact, Aoun's emphasis on corruption was not mentioned by a single voter we spoke to exiting the polls. Instead, for example, an old lady dressed all in black, with a friendly, wrinkled face, grabbed my Reuter's colleague out of the crowd of canvassers and began hopping up and

Poll canvassers pass out voting "lists" — de facto ballots in Lebanon — with 14 candidates from each bloc.

down, spewing gibberish accounts of Franjiyyieh's virtues.

We next drove up the mountain to Bsharre, the Maronite Christian stronghold of Samir Geagea's LF, which was in alignment with the Muslim opposition bloc. As Geagea is in jail, and therefore banned from running in the elections, his beautiful wife, Strida Geagea, ran instead. Massive posters of Strida hung throughout Bsharre, dominating the otherwise quaint village. Geagea supporters, dressed in white t-shirts with LF symbols, packed the streets with their sports cars, beeping their horns and playing LF marching music at sound-level 10. Young men with shaved heads or short-cropped hair and macho attire walked the streets with LF flags, often flanked by young women dressed in skin-tight, stylish wraps.

"We demand that Samir Geagea be released," said Tony, a 68-year-old shopkeeper. "He supported the Ta'if Accord, like other militia leaders who remained free. He opposed Syria, however. Since Syria is gone, its time to let him out."

My colleague and I returned to Zaghorta for dinner, driving along mountain roads with sharp curves. As we both took in the stunning view, we talked of our impressions of the polls. Zahorta and Bsharre were basically feudal political plantations. Many of the giant posters adorning the streets of northern cities and streets we visited were accented by posters with the candidate in the foreground, and their father's faces or figures lightly stenciled in the background. We both agreed that neither of us had any idea of who would win the election, despite the fact that we had been speaking to voters all day.

As my colleague called her editor to pitch a story about the father-son election posters of northern Lebanon, I anxiously drove through the election traffic of Zaghorta at a snail's pace. My left leg, tired from engaging the clutch, fell numb. Suddenly there was the sound of multiple gunshots. Staring ahead to see what was going on, I could see Franjiyyieh supporters firing rifles into the air. It seemed victory for the Aoun-Franjiyyieh alliance was at hand, at least in Zaghorta.

After taking a dinner of mountain fajitas while staring at the back of my colleague's laptop as she typed her story, we headed down the mountain towards Beirut. The setting sun was beautiful, raining streams of orange and yellow light across mountains of green. Approaching Beirut, we tuned-in to Lebanese national radio to take in the results. Early results were very close, leading radio announcers to predict a late result. I went home, had a stiff drink, and went to bed.

I woke up the next morning, took my coffee and turned on Lebanese radio. To my surprise, the Hariri-Jumblatt opposition alliance swept all 28 seats — enough to form a government with a total of 72 seats. Aoun's Tsunami, so it seemed, was more like a severe storm that had blown itself out. Given the mixed reactions we had found from voters exiting the polls, I was surprised about the opposition landslide. After taking a shower and putting on a pair of shorts and a linen shirt — key to bearing humid Beirut in the summertime — I headed downtown to Casper & Gambini's café.

Supporters in sports cars and trendy clothes of jailed Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea campaign in his home city of Bsharre.

I stayed at Casper's most of the day, using its wireless internet connection, sucking down café lattes, and receiving friends. Everyone I met talked of the election results in the north, and what to make of them. Everyone had a theory about the Hariri victory.

A good Lebanese Christian friend told me that he had "good information" that Hariri had been making cash payouts in the north to citizens willing to vote for the opposition list. The north, especially in many parts of Tripoli, Qora and the Akkar region, are some of Lebanon's poorest areas. During my trip, I had only driven through the Akkar and Qora, and felt a bit stupid for not spending more time there. But then again, I guess voters leaving the polls that had received a few hundred dollars for the vote for Hariri would have hardly told me about it — at least anytime soon.

Another journalist friend I met later in the day had heard reports that Hariri's main regional supporter, Saudi Arabia, had purchased large numbers of various types of farm machinery and delivered them to Akkar farmers

Aoun supporters continue to sport orange T-shirts adorned with the Omega "resistance" symbol.

in exchange for promises to vote against Aoun. When I asked for the evidence supporting this claim, he said only that it was based on reports from area residents.

In the days leading up to the last round of elections reports circulated that Syrian agents — specifically intelligence agents — were running around the traditionally pro-Syrian north, encouraging voters to support, ironically, the Aoun-Franjiyyieh alliance. If true, that might have backfired politically. In the eyes of Damascus, Franjiyyieh is their strongest ally in Lebanon, and a friend of Franjiyyieh, no matter his past, is a friend of Damascus. This of course would not have been possible when Syrian forces were in Lebanon. But now, following the full Syrian withdrawal, Aoun might not be Damascus's mortal enemy that he once was. And Aoun, for his part, has shown he will deal with "any quarter" in pursuing his agenda of "cleaning up" Lebanon. He's now a clear favorite to become the next Maronite Christian President of Lebanon. Brace yourselves for the next Tsunami. ❑

Source: Salem, Paul, "Two Years of Living Dangerously: General Awn and the Precarious Rise of Lebanon's 'Second Republic'". Beirut Review, 1992

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Author: Tabler, Andrew J.
Title: ICWA Letters (Middle East/North Africa)
I**SSN:** 1083-4281
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia, The Americas; Europe/ Russia; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4281) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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