



ROAD TO RUIN

AOUN'S POPULARITY: HISTORY OR MYTH?

The fortunes of Michel Aoun, who returned amid the optimism of 2005, are on the decline. Unwise alliances and internal party conflict have taken their toll on the erstwhile presidential hopeful. The findings in this report examine the reasons that led to his fall.

The numbers in this report were provided by Sofres Liban.

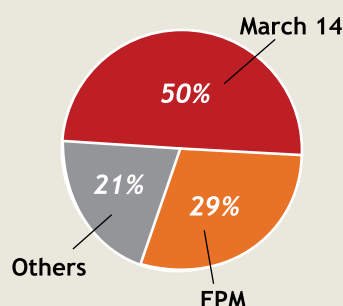


POPULARITY IN DECLINE

Aoun: "I represent 70 % of the people and they will take to the streets"
An-Nahar 30-4-2006

CHRISTIAN SUPPORT

100% = 2,000 christians



FAVORITE PARTY

Q. Which political party do you support?

100% = 2,000 christians



SOFRES - FEB 08

Spring 2005 was a period brimming with optimism and one which saw, after 15 years of exile, the triumphant return of General Michel Aoun, the anti-Syrian par excellence whose supporters were at the vanguard of the Cedar Revolution. With his return came the promise of a new leader ready to offer a fresh alternative to what was perceived as a stale and corrupt old guard, empty of ideas.

In the heady atmosphere of the 2005 parliamentary elections, Aoun presented himself as a Christian leader with pan-Lebanese credentials. Christians in particular saw him as the embodiment of the new Lebanon created by the Cedar Revolution. When his bloc and his allies initially won 22 seats, Aoun claimed that he had the support of 70% of the Lebanese Christians, despite accusing the other parties of ganging up on him during the run-up to the elections.

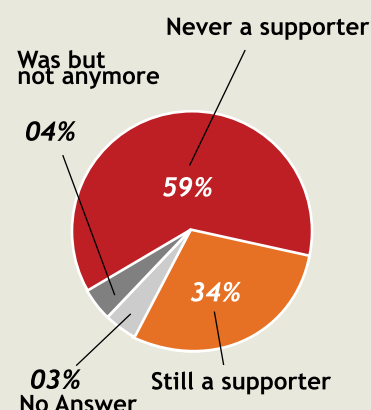
Unfortunately, what looked like a brave new beginning was, in fact, the start of an unraveling. Even before he returned to Lebanon, there were rumors circulating that Aoun had met with former Kataeb President Karim Pakradouni and MP Emile Lahoud Jr., both of whom had been charged with negotiating the General's return. It was a meeting that hinted at a deal between Aoun and his erstwhile adversaries in Damascus. Meanwhile, it was becoming increasingly apparent that Aoun's myopic focus on reaching the presidency would derail and even contradict his manifesto.

DIFFICULT ANSWERS

General Michel Aoun in the pursuit of his ambition to become president alienated most of his supporters. Is he willing to face those difficult facts and answers?

ALMOST 60% OF THE CHRISTIANS CLAIM WERE NEVER SUPPORTERS OF AOUN.

100% = 2,000 christians



100% = 2,000 christians

59%
believe Hezbollah's agenda is Iranian

64%
Fear the Islamization of Lebanon

61%
Think General Aoun is allied with Syria & Iran

61%
Blaim Syria and allies for obstructing the election of a new president.

60%
Believe that March 14 is not trying to naturalize the Palestinians

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is a branch of Taylor Nelson Sofres, the world's largest provider of bespoke market research. This survey was conducted using a representative sample of 2,000 people aged 18 years and above. The sample was randomly chosen according to geographical distribution (i.e. electoral region), age and gender. Asking 40 questions, the survey was carried out face to face with 20% of the sample back checked at the end the fieldwork.

SYRIA ACCOUNTABILITY GRAND ACT

Michel Aoun has segued seamlessly from Syria's most vocal critic to its most enlightened sympathizer. As an exile in France, he assailed the Assad regime and was a supporter of the 2003 Syria Accountability Act. Today, with all his political partners made up of pro-Syrian elements, he has declared that he has forgiven Syria for what it has done to Lebanon.

PRE 2005

Yedioth Ahronoth

An-Nahar 10/4/1995

Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin "is making a double mistake first, by negotiating with Syria and disregarding Lebanon, and second, by asserting that Iran is training Hezbollah militants... [Hezbollah] "is Syrian-made as Syria is training its fighters and providing them with weapons."

Hudson Institute Washington

An-Nahar 8/3/2003

"The Syrian regime has cancelled Lebanon. We call upon the US to reunite the international community to liberate it. We welcome the American policies that would help establish democracy in Lebanon..."

Paris

An-Nahar 31/1/2005

"We call on the party to relinquish its weapons since its mission is over. The Lebanese are aware of this, and so is Hezbollah. The story of the Shebaa Farms is a failed pretext on the legal level both in shape and in essence. [UNSC] Resolution 1559 represents a way out, since Hezbollah falls on the international level under the scope of Resolution 1566, which pertains to the fight against terrorism."

Notre Dame University

Al-Mustaqbal 7/6/2003

"The American intelligence does not harm, and Washington works on establishing democracy in the region. The US is a nation that aims at creating a stable world order."

US Congressional hearing in 2003

"One cannot rationally dissociate the Syrian regime from terrorism. Syria provides safe haven for a myriad of terrorist organizations, directs their operations, and uses Lebanon as their main field of training and operation."



Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem, Al-Mustaqbal, 3/1/2008

"Michael Aoun will negotiate on behalf of the opposition... Anyone who would want a solution in Lebanon should contact Aoun ..."



Aoun in an interview, Al-Hurra TV, 4/4/2005

"After the Syrian withdrawal, I believe our problem with the Syrian regime is over."

POST 2005

OTV

26/3/2008

"The American administration pushed Syria and Iran to be involved in the presidential issue. They attack Syria from Lebanon, thereby pressing the Syrian regime to respond, then they accuse it of interfering [in the Lebanese affairs]."

Al-Diyar

20/07/2005

"As far as I'm concerned, UN Resolution 1559 does not exist. If the other forces would be comfortable if Resolution 1559 is not implemented, I have no problem. For me, it does not exist."

Talk in Berlin

SANA 26/7/2007

"Our Syrian brethren have helped us in the past and they will help us in the future... [The problem in Lebanese-Syrian relations is] a mere media problem and not a political problem. Some [factions] want to direct accusations against Syria to distort its image. This media problem has been imposed on the world to implement some people's objectives internally and externally."

Al-Bayraq

20/12/2006

"Don't you see that demonstrating is a sort of coup against the Taif Accord? By going to the streets, we are, in fact, reclaiming the rights of the Christians."

Al-Mustaqbal

14/05/2007

The Memorandum of Understanding has "transformed the issue of Hezbollah's armament from an Arab issue to a purely Lebanese matter. He also added that this armament is legitimate and will not be handed over before all the Lebanese territory is liberated, the detainees freed and an armistice concluded."

The road to ruin

In September of 2003, things had been so different. That month, Aoun, still persona non grata in Lebanon, in a testimony to the US Congress, predicted that “following a Syrian withdrawal, it is quite conceivable that the Syrian regime will leave behind many of its instruments of terror and destruction, as well as its paramilitary and intelligence apparatus. Therefore, it is imperative that a Syrian withdrawal be accompanied by a complete disarmament of all armed elements.” By armed elements, it is safe to assume that Aoun meant Hezbollah and pro-Syrian Palestinian factions outside the camps, among others.

Since then, Aoun has figured out what he needs to survive in the new Lebanon. Within months of his return – lending credence to allegations that a deal had been struck in Paris – Aoun was reaching out to pro-Syrian regime figures, such as former Prime Minister Omar Karami, Marada leader Sleiman Franjieh and, last but not least, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. By 2008, these dubious alliances had grown to include pro-Syrian mouthpieces such as Wiam Wahab, Nasser Qandil and Assem Qanso, all of whom today speak of him warmly as their candidate of choice for

SAVING PRIVATE AOUN

Ever since the MOU 6-2-2006, Nasrallah has tried to position Aoun as an ally, while Aoun insists on behaving as a disciple. Was their recent joint appearance on OTV another example of Nasrallah attempting to salvage Aoun's fading credibility? Was it a case of “Saving Private Aoun?”

BEFORE

Nasrallah

An-Nahar 6/11/1989

“Aoun only thinks of himself and of his sect. He follows the racist Maronite approach in East Beirut.”

Aoun

Al-Balad 14/08/2005

“The main problem is that Hezbollah puts preconditions for dialogue and refuses to talk about them. That's why I cannot argue with Hezbollah, especially since it recently crossed continents from Syria to Iran.”

AFTER

Nasrallah

OTV 6/2/2007

“The General is an honest man, and it is on this basis that we could establish our alliance and could establish a country.”

Aoun

Al Jazeera, 21/08/2006

“My support to the resistance was not a gamble but a choice. The resistance represents a big part of the Lebanese people, and we will live together in victory and in loss.”

the presidency.

Finally, there is the very disturbing nature of Aoun's relationship with the Sunni cleric and Islamic Action Front leader Fathi Yakan. Yakan, who has close ties with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and other high-ranking officials in Damascus, is also the owner of al-Jinan University in Tripoli, a number of whose students belong to Fatah al-Islam. One of them, Saddam

Dib, fought with the Islamists at Nahr al-Bared in the bloody, four-month campaign in the summer of 2007 against the army Aoun once commanded.

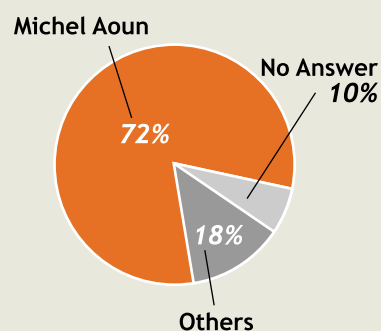
However, Aoun's moment of fatal political misjudgment was the famous February 2006 “Memorandum of Understanding” with Hezbollah, in which he appeared to backtrack his earlier views on the necessity of the

THE MAJORITY OF CHRISTIANS

Aoun constantly claims that he represents the majority of the Christians. As no one contested this claim, Aoun seems unaware of the changing tide within the Christian community. He might have represented the majority of the Christians for a short period in 2005, but the statistics show that that was just a blip.

Q. Who do you support for the 2007 presidential elections?

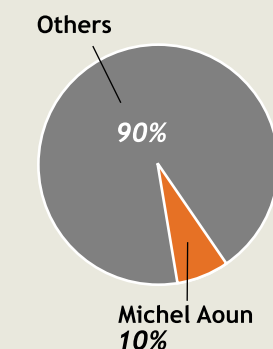
100% = 2,260 shiites



SOFRES - AUG 07

Q. Who do you support for the 2007 presidential elections?

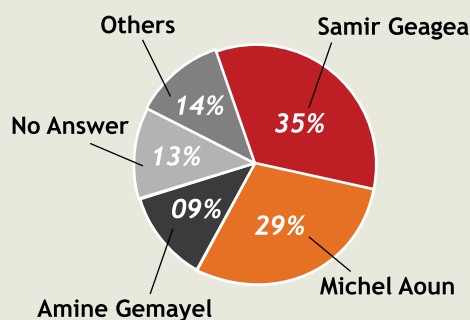
100% = 2,000 sunnis



SOFRES - AUG 07

Q. Which political leader do you support?

100% = 2,000 christians



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party's disarmament.

Two years later, the U-turn appears complete. On February 28, 2008, Aoun announced on the Kalam al-Nass talk show that he had "forgiven" Syria and turned a new page, conveniently demolishing all the pillars of his long held creed: freeing Lebanese political detainees in Syrian jails, establishing diplomatic relations with Syria, demarcating the Syrian-Lebanese border and, of course, backing the setting-up of the UN tribunal on the Hariri assassination and other subsequent political murders. He also appeared to forget that Syria was, not only responsible for the string of bomb attacks and assassinations that have plagued Lebanon since February 2005, but was also almost surely behind the infiltration into Lebanon of Shaker al-Abssi, the leader of Fatah al-Islam who led the 2007 summer insurgency in the northern refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared.

Aoun has tirelessly tried to convince his supporters that the Memorandum was designed to protect the Christians and Lebanize Hezbollah; that it was all for the sake of the Lebanese state and the people's interest. In reality, it appeared that Hezbollah had skillfully absorbed Aoun into its agenda.

Today, figures show that 64% of Christians do not believe that Syria is out of Lebanon. Seventy percent believe that Syria is trying to regain control over Lebanon. Fifty seven percent of those think that the Syrian regime will accomplish this via its allies. Also, 75% consider Aoun to be allied with Syria and Iran.

Hezbollah

Despite the catastrophic July 2006 war, Aoun has never re-examined his alliance with Hezbollah. On the contrary, Aoun endorsed the "open war" proclamation made by Nasrallah after the February 13, 2008 assassination of its top strategist, Imad Mugniyah, a move which further eroded his support among Lebanese Christians. "Israel was the one who declared open war," Aoun argued. "It transferred the conflict from the Lebanese stage to Damascus, as it has dreamed of dragging Syria and Iran [to war] ever since the July War."

THE SUNNI SCARE



On 15/3/2007, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) quoted former Iranian President Rafsanjani telling Yakan, leader of the Islamic Action Front in Lebanon (of which Fatah al-Islam is its Palestinian branch), that the front is a "Sunni resistance group, its cooperation with Hezbollah has thwarted several plots aimed at creating discord among Muslims."

On 17/3/2006, Yakan, who also speaks highly of Aoun, told Al-Jazeera:

"Osama Bin Laden is a highly honest, true and transparent man. He belongs to the Islamic ideology, and he is very dear to me."

In truth, Aoun's decline had already begun long before that. His active participation in the downtown sit-in – now entering its second year – and his, albeit limp-wristed, performance during the January 23, 2007 general strike were the first indications that he was losing it as a political strategist. Empirical evidence of his crumbling popularity first came with the 2007 Metn by-election, when the "independents" who voted for him in 2005 stayed at home. He may have won the seat left vacant by the assassinated Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel, but in two

While Aoun frightens his Christian constituency with claims of a Sunni plot, he has forgotten to tell them that one of his allies is opposition-aligned Sunni cleric Fathi Yakan, an outspoken fan of Osama Bin Laden's ideology with ties with Syria. It seems that Aoun prefers the 5% of Sunnis who consider themselves extremists to the mostly moderate and open-minded majority that he opposes.

Q. Do you support the naturalization of Palestinians?

100% = 2,000 sunnis



Q. Do you support al Qaeda and the Salafist groups?

100% = 2,000 sunnis



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years, his majority had slipped from 25,000 votes to a mere 400.

The alliance of minorities

Key to Aoun's "minority vs. majority" ideology is the "Sunni threat" – the idea that there is a plan afoot "to



turn Lebanon into a Sunni nation by eliminating first the Shia and then the Christian presence.” This was the line peddled by Tony Haddad, the FPM representative in Washington, DC, at a meeting in July, 2007. Haddad has also declared that the “Syrian regime today is the best [ally] we can have as Lebanese and Christians. Bashar is our

guarantee for the moment. Hezbollah constitutes our first line of defense as Christians. Without them, we cannot face the Sunni threat out of Saudi Arabia.”

Haddad also argued that Iran has nothing to do with the Lebanese problem, saying, “Their only concern is to preserve the Lebanese Shia, which actually helps our Lebanese Christian agenda.”

This conveniently circumvents Aoun’s dilemma vis-à-vis Hezbollah weapons, which, he says, are now necessary to take the fight to Sunni radicals – Fathi Yakan excluded – and Palestinian militias. Only when they are defeated will Hezbollah lay down their weapons.

Shifting tides

Clearly, Aoun has come a long way since the late 1980s, when he fought the “battles of the Christians” and on October 13, 1990, when, in what was meant to be his last defiant stand against Damascus, he abandoned his post and left his soldiers to the mercy of the advancing Syrian army. Many of those who were not executed after

they surrendered have languished in Syrian jails, while others have simply vanished. Today, Aoun is betting that aligning with pro-Syrian regime figures will bring him closer to the presidency. In truth, it appears that Syria will never trust its former enemy and that Aoun will never really be the opposition’s presidential candidate.

The reality is that Hezbollah has simply made Aoun their “negotiator” during the ongoing presidential crisis, knowing that he can block progress and prolong the presidential vacuum. Although Aoun still claims that he represents the majority of the Christians, the figures show that 60% never supported him. Moreover, 2007 saw significant victories for March 14 candidates in professional syndicates – lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects, among others. – and student elections at AUB and LAU. It was a message to Aoun that he could no longer count on the current and future professional classes.

Sin-dicates

From the start, much of Michel Aoun’s support came from Lebanon’s upper-middle and professional

BRAIN DRAIN

SYNDICATES’ ELECTION

This year’s syndicates’ elections revealed a significant shift towards March 14 lists. What are they trying to tell Aoun, who repeatedly claims to represent secular, middle class and educated people?

Order of Engineers and Architects Elections and by-elections (2007-08)

The April 13 elections saw a landslide for March 14 (5 seats out of 5) and a shutout for March 8. Earlier in 2008, the March 14 list prevailed in the North by- elections, winning 122 seat out of 131.

Order of Physicians Elections (2007-08)

All March 14 candidates were elected for the function of President of the Order as well as on the Order’s Council (8 members), Pensions Fund (3 members) and Insurance and Benefits Fund (3 members).

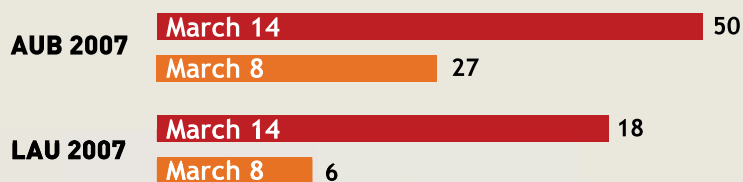
Bar Association Elections (2007-08)

In another blow to the opposition members among the professional classes, March 14 managed to get all their candidates elected to the Order and secure the five seats available.



STUDENT-BODY LANGUAGE

Student body councils at major universities- with a multi-confessional student body- were secured by March 14 lists, signifying a loss in the student forces within the March 8 coalition and the FPM in particular.



“I once believed that General Aoun can lead our country forward... But unfortunately I was mistaken.”

Kalim Chidiac
AUB student

classes. They embraced his positions on democracy, secularism and anti-sectarianism but since his return, his self-seeking political trajectory has not escaped the attention of this particular

FAMILY TIES



On 3/5/2005, Aoun told Al-Jazeera that the Lebanese should fight feudalism and nepotism.

“Thank God I am not part of this feudal system, because I grew up with the people,”

However, Aoun seems to be surrounded in the FPM by family members, many of whom have been given high ranking positions:

Claudine Aoun: activist and prominent leader in the FPM – his daughter

Roy Al-Hachem: CEO of OTV; Aoun's son in law

Naim Aoun: FPM Central Committee; Michel Aoun's nephew

Alain Aoun: FPM official; Michel Aoun's nephew

Gebran Bassil: Political relations officer; Aoun's son in law

Also, the FPM Tayyar.org website staff includes Patrick Bassil, Alain Bassil and Chadi Al Hachem.



demographic, as evidenced by Aoun's wafer-thin victory in the 2007 Metn by-election and a swing to March 14 among the professional syndicates. The survey shows that 60% of the Christians never supported Aoun. (Highlight - graph – title: Forgive me Father for I have sinned.)

Elsewhere, Aoun appears to be losing allies. Following a number of critical statements on the Change and Reform bloc and its political position, MP and powerbroker Michel al-Murr has launched a major push in the Metn, a supposed stronghold of Aoun, to seek the immediate election of General Sleiman as president. It is a campaign that appears to be aimed at both reasserting Murr's political power and highlighting Aoun's inadequacies. Murr's new position indicates that he might form a new alliance in the Metn, perhaps with Kataeb President Amin Gemayel. He probably won't officially join March 14, but any quasi-alliance will have a huge impact on Aoun's fortunes in the 2009 elections. In fact, Murr's maneuverings point to a deeply-rooted problem within the Christian opposition, namely that it does not share a united vision for either change or reform.

logistical and administrative reasons for the delay, but this report can reveal that there is a growing conflict between two increasingly divergent groups within the movement: General Michel Aoun's inner circle, and others who describe themselves as the “FPM opposition.”

By all accounts, the lack of a coherent organizational structure is at the root of the FPM's broader problems and not everyone is happy with the way Aoun would like to rectify the issue. Sources close to the FPM opposition say that the current dispute is centered on Aoun's plan to create a structure that would allow his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, to become his deputy president. The fear is that Bassil would use this position to consolidate the considerable political and financial power it carries within Aoun's immediate family.

Other leading FPM opposition figures like Alain Aoun have voiced their objection to what they see as blatant nepotism. What is clear is that the internal opposition has many axes to grind. It is made up of disgruntled FPM members whose ambitions within the party have been thwarted,



All In The Family

Aoun's problems have been compounded further by the postponement, until October 26, of elections for the Free Patriotic Movement's Central Committee and reports in the Lebanese media that internal disputes are behind the hold-up. Official FPM statements have cited

idealists who disagree with Aoun's political agenda and those disgusted by Aoun's barefaced policy of giving family members the best positions and most power.

On one issue, however, they are united (and this more than anything may be the reason for the recent flaring of tensions) and that is the party's

distribution of financial patronage. Heading the list of grievances is the fact that the FPM was awarded multi-million-dollar projects in the southern suburbs that were “given” to Bassil and Hikmat Dib, because of the latter’s close ties to Hezbollah.

There are also allegations that Aoun’s family members are acting as the FPM’s bankers, allegations that the party’s money, plus the recent donations received during elections and financial support from the diaspora, was put into the accounts of Aoun and his family members, as well as into institutions such as OTV, which is run by Aoun’s other son-in-law, Roy al-Hashem.

The FPM – long hailed by its supporters as one of Lebanon’s only true political parties – is today, quite possibly, the country’s most fragile grouping. Without a solid organizational structure, the party’s ability to function is completely dependent on Aoun, his family and a few diehard allies. Without him, many believe, the party would fracture – or even collapse – long before the 2009 parliamentary elections.

This state of fragility was highlighted on May 4, when An-Nahar published excerpts from the minutes of a tense

meeting held between Aoun and the FPM’s founding committee on April 4. “Some 80 cadres came into the tent in which meetings were held at the General’s residence in Rabieh. When [Aoun] entered, he asked if [former US Ambassador] ‘Feltman [is] organizing meetings to lure you into Hariri’s arms?’” The minutes also show that Aoun came under attack from senior members who complained that the party’s mission had been supplanted by Aoun’s presidential ambitions. Aoun remained calm until it was the turn of his nephew, Naïm Aoun, to speak. “The General suddenly exploded with such anger as had never been seen before. He stood ranting and shouting at his nephew, whom he accused of spearheading the attack [against him], before dismissing him from the room.”

In a “nut” shell

Despite these outbursts, Aoun clearly believes his supporters will follow him blindly, accepting his contradictory declarations and alliances. However, the polls suggest otherwise, showing Aoun’s popularity is in freefall – and there are indications that Aoun might now be waking up to the fact that all

MURR GOES SOUR



MP Michel al-Murr has regularly disagreed with the Change and Reform bloc policies which advocate transparency and state building, he expressed his outrage on the campaign against Bkirki and the call to take to the streets spearheaded by Aoun and allies.

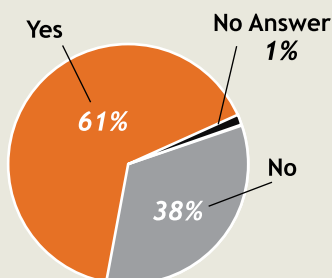
An-Nahar 24/1/2008

“All we needed was the latest campaign against Bkirki and the army command so that no institution would remain standing in Lebanon... The inhabitants of Metn do not express their positions through demonstrations.”

BANKRUPTCY

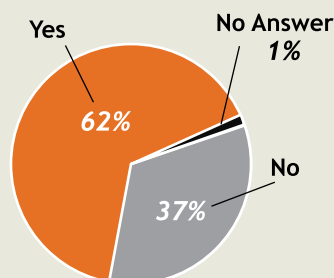
Q. Do you feel that Aoun is betting on Syria’s backing?

100% = 2,000 christians



Q. Do you believe that Aoun receives external funding?

100% = 2,000 christians



SOFRES - FEB 08

Al-Shiraa reported that Aoun has around \$22 million in Lebanese banks and over \$150 million in European banks, wealth accumulated during his war against Syria, paid to him by Arab leaders like Saddam Hussein and Yasser Arafat. Meanwhile, the former FPM coordinator in the North, Bassam al-Agha, revealed to Al-Shiraa that Aoun’s son-in-law Gibran Bassil has been snapping up property in the northern region of Batroun and has various other commercial interests.

BATROUN



is not well. In anticipation of the 2009 parliamentary elections, he is rabidly advocating for the enactment of what he sees as the more advantageous 1960 election law. Given that he has he has auctioned off his principles, and that neither his allies nor the Syrian regime will make him president, they’ll drop him in a heartbeat, should he lose in the polls.

And then what? With his own ambitions in tatters, Aoun should, like the proud warrior he claims to be, admit that the battle has been lost and hope that in the process he hasn’t created irreparable divisions among Lebanon’s Christians. That would be the real tragedy.