

# Hezbollah Leaders Are Dreading the Election—But They Have a Plan

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Opposition parties may win enough votes to strip Hezbollah's parliamentary majority, but the group is already preparing to employ its usual tactics of postponement, paralysis, and street violence if necessary.**

**A**s the Lebanese political scene gears up for the May 15 general election, one question has become paramount: will civil society and opposition groups win enough seats to change the status quo in parliament, or will Hezbollah maintain control over the body? Although internal challenges and the financial crisis will likely preclude the opposition from achieving an overall victory, they might secure as many as ten or more new seats—a tally that could end Hezbollah's current majority and prevent the militia and its allies from once again holding political sway over the country's security, judicial, and financial decisions. The new parliament will also select the next president—assuming the election is held on time. Given the high stakes and the growing challenge to its political dominance, Hezbollah has devised strategies for every contingency.

## Hezbollah's Challenges

**T**he militia's main challenge is the public downfall of its main Christian ally, Gebran Bassil of the Free Patriotic Movement. According to Lebanese polls, Christian support for the FPM has plummeted below 13 percent, down from 70 percent in 2005. This is due to Bassil's obstruction of the government formation process after the August 2020 Beirut port explosion, as well as his various acts of corruption highlighted by the October 2019 mass protests and the U.S. Magnitsky Act sanctions levied against him a year later. Many former supporters will either abstain from voting this May or choose other candidates (e.g., Kataeb Party leader Samy Gemayel).

Indeed, while the 2019 protests failed to produce real political change, sentiments against the political elite are still

strong, and opposition groups are hoping to channel them into gains at the ballot box. In particular, mistrust and discontent toward Hezbollah have become more collective and widespread given the group's habit of paralyzing state institutions and threatening Judge Tarek Bitar, who is leading the investigation into the port blast. Last October, these threats escalated to **street clashes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amid-beirut-clashes-lebanese-investigators-need-protection>)** in the Beirut neighborhood of Tayouneh, raising serious fears of another civil war.

Even within Hezbollah's main Shia constituency, **voices of discontent (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/strategy-contain-hezbollah-ideas-and-recommendations>)** are growing louder and more numerous. Despite the group's many efforts to silence these voices, the economy has collapsed to the point where more people are struggling to meet their basic needs, including in Shia communities. Hezbollah can no longer provide an alternative source of goods and services to many of these communities, apart from a very small circle of elite members and military personnel.

Hezbollah's other main ally, parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, has become a problem as well. Alongside Bassil and Central Bank governor Riad Salameh, Berri was one of the three main figures targeted with accusations of corruption and calls for accountability during the 2019 protests. To deflate this blame and anger, Hezbollah has allowed and even encouraged Shia participation in protests against Berri and Salameh. Yet this tactic may backfire in May, when the group will either have to convince Shia to vote for Berri or run without him and risk losing votes from his Amal faction.

Hezbollah and Bassil are also concerned about the unprecedented number of expatriates who have registered to vote—244,442 as of this writing, compared to 92,180 in 2018. This major increase is a serious threat to Hezbollah because expatriate voting is more difficult to influence or control. The vast majority of these expatriates are Christians living in the West, and they are likely more inclined to vote for independent Christian candidates, the Lebanese Forces faction, or Kataeb.

Given these complications, Hezbollah cannot guarantee another majority win. Yet the group cannot afford to lose its unrestricted political power at a time when national and regional developments are coming to a head—from choosing the next president to demarcating the country's maritime border, negotiating with the IMF, and securing gas and electricity deals. Therefore, Hezbollah leaders have come up with various options for navigating the next few months.

## Scenarios and Strategies

Last year's parliamentary election in Iraq was a cautionary tale for Hezbollah. Iran's militia allies **lost that vote (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-chance-kingmaking-iraqi-kurds>)** in dramatic fashion, and neither Tehran nor Hezbollah wants to replicate that setback in Lebanon.

One scenario is to postpone the May election, whether until the current Hezbollah-controlled parliament can select a new president or until economic hardship and public discontent fade. There is precedent for such a move: in 2013, parliament extended its mandate for two years, citing domestic security concerns and the war next door in Syria. Another two-year extension was announced in 2014. Hezbollah may try to use this same excuse to delay the May vote—security concerns will loom over Lebanon indefinitely, and in this environment, any spark can ignite internal clashes.

In the meantime, the group is hoping that the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna will soon lead to an agreement that lifts U.S. sanctions and reopens the flow of Iranian cash into its coffers. This might not fix Lebanon's financial crisis, but it could facilitate Hezbollah's election logistics and expenditures while enabling the militia to provide more largesse to its constituents.

The United States, several European governments, and many other international actors strongly support holding the election on time, and this pressure might make it difficult to postpone the vote. Yet if Hezbollah believes the repercussions will be limited, it might engineer street clashes or other security incidents that either provide an excuse for postponement or create public fears that diminish voter turnout.

Another option is paralysis, a game that Hezbollah and its allies have mastered since 2005. Even if they lose the election, they could still obstruct the government formation process for months or even years.

Of course, given its status as Lebanon's most powerful armed faction, Hezbollah may simply resort to threatening or using force if the votes do not go its way. Strong-arm tactics could compel a new government to compromise on the choice of president, on key security appointments, and on negotiations related to the IMF, World Bank, and border demarcation.

Hezbollah has used its weapons for political purposes before. After losing the 2005 election to the March 14 coalition, the group resorted to violence on multiple occasions to bring down the resultant government. In addition to assassinating members of the coalition leadership who did not bend to its will, the group deadlocked the government for months and eventually ordered its troops to launch street battles in Beirut in May 2008. This escalation forced opponents to accept the Doha agreement, which stripped March 14 of its majority and produced a national unity government in its place.

Similarly, in the months after losing the 2009 election, Hezbollah used displays of force to eventually undo the outcome. In a February 2011 incident known as "the black shirts threat," armed fighters in distinctive uniforms marched in the streets of Beirut and various Druze communities. Soon thereafter, the group forced the March 14 government to resign and installed Najib Mikati as the head of a new national unity government.

Unfortunately, there is nothing to stop Hezbollah from using its weapons again if it loses in May. Such a scenario is even more plausible following last October's clashes in Tayouneh. Government probes of that incident have resulted in zero accountability so far, and Hezbollah officials continue to issue veiled threats. In December, for example, parliamentarian Mohammad Raad warned opposition groups that they need to reconsider their plans for changing Lebanon's political scene: "Those who want to govern us tomorrow with a new alleged majority need to understand that no majority in Lebanon has ever been able to govern as a majority."

## The Election Is Still Significant

**D**espite the unlikelihood of groundbreaking results, the May election could still constitute a symbolic win for the protest movement if Hezbollah is stripped of its parliamentary majority. To be sure, the group will do what is needed to keep hold of the twenty-seven seats allotted to the Shia community under Lebanon's confessional system—it has been using violence and intimidation to keep Shia opposition candidates from contesting these seats since 2019 and shows no sign of stopping. Hezbollah will also employ all of its tools to help Bassil's Christian faction maintain a considerable presence in parliament, and to exploit [Saad Hariri's withdrawal](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saads-sad-goodbye-hariri-leaves-lebanese-politics) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saads-sad-goodbye-hariri-leaves-lebanese-politics>) from political life by infiltrating the fractured Sunni street. If the public believes that the opposition is divided or incapable of providing them with a viable political alternative, voter turnout might be very low, further bolstering the chances of Hezbollah and its allies.

Even so, holding the election on time and with international observers could still give a boost to opposition figures and the Lebanese people, who have few sources of hope these days besides the democratic process. Any attempt to postpone or tamper with the election should therefore be met with sanctions against all those responsible. In addition to maintaining current pressures, the United States and other parties should insist on long-term international observers to ensure a free and fair process between now and May.

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