

Hezbollah-Shia Dynamics and Lebanon's Election: Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Implications

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Brief Analysis

On the eve of the election, two Lebanese experts joined a former U.S. official to discuss the prospects for widening the cracks in Hezbollah's core Shia constituency.

On May 12, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Hanin Ghaddar, Bashshar Haydar, and David Schenker. Ghaddar is the Institute's Friedmann Fellow and author of its recent book [Hezbollahland: Mapping Dahiya and Lebanon's Shia Community](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community>). Haydar is a professor of philosophy and the Mohammad Atallah chair of ethics at the American University of Beirut. Schenker is the Institute's Taube Senior Fellow and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Hanin Ghaddar

In Hezbollah's relationship with the Shia Muslim community, it often projects power and representation it does not necessarily have. Many observers inside and outside Lebanon believe that the country's Shia citizens universally support the group, but in reality, Lebanese Shia hold many different views.

Cracks have been appearing in Hezbollah's claims of power and Shia representation for years, beginning with the 2006 war against Israel, when the group declared a "divine victory" and people realized the high price they had to pay for this conflict. In 2007, Hezbollah used weapons against the Lebanese people for the first time. A few years later, the group intervened in Syria's civil war on behalf of the Assad regime, a decision that caused broad backlash at home and even affected the Shia in terms of budget shifts, isolation, and sectarian rhetoric. In 2019, the Lebanese people rose up in mass protests against the ruling class, including Hezbollah, and Shia areas witnessed many demonstrations as well.

The United States now has opportunities to take advantage of these vulnerabilities in Hezbollah's power and representation, mainly through democracy promotion, diplomacy, and broader foreign policy toward Lebanon. In carrying out such efforts, officials should keep in mind that the group's local power is based on three pillars, each of which is cracking to a certain degree:

1. **Christian support.** Hezbollah relies on certain non-Shia factions to assert its agenda in parliament, but its main Christian ally, Gebran Bassil of the Free Patriotic Movement, has been losing support since 2019. [*Editor's note:* For a full breakdown of how Bassil's party and other factions performed in the May 15 election held after this forum, [see PolicyWatch 3612](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-hezbollahs-parliamentary-loss-means-lebanon) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-hezbollahs-parliamentary-loss-means-lebanon>)]
2. **Threat of armed force.** Hezbollah seems to realize that for now, the threat of its weapons is often more effective than the weapons themselves. Once it uses military weapons abroad, it will essentially lose them, because Iran would have great difficulty restocking the group's arsenal if another large-scale conflict erupts in the near term. For this reason, it is easier for Hezbollah to use small arms domestically than to use missiles and rockets against Israel. Yet even the group's domestic armed forces are suffering. During the Syria war, it had to lower its standards for fighters in order to recruit more people. Its newer recruits are more sectarian, but also less religious, less ideological, and less disciplined.
3. **The Shia community.** As described in the book [Hezbollahland](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community>), the group's core Shia constituency is growing more divided and outspoken. This core is still steadier than other pillars, but the potential is there for more serious cracks.

To maintain Shia support, Hezbollah relies on the social services it provides, its "resistance" ideology, and its Shia identity. Each of these factors is linked to and inspired by *velayat-e faqih*, the doctrine that grants authority to Iran's Supreme Leader. Yet Hezbollah's budget has been increasingly limited since Iran came under economic pressure due to heightened international sanctions. The group has therefore been limiting certain services and catering more to its members and other elites rather than the Shia community as a whole. It has also sought to compensate for lost Iranian funding by increasingly [trafficking Captagon](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dethroning-lebanons-king-captagon) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dethroning-lebanons-king-captagon>), smuggling goods, and siphoning revenue from Lebanese government coffers.

The group's image has been further tarnished by its [threats against the judge](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amid-beirut-clashes-lebanese-investigators-need-protection) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/amid-beirut-clashes-lebanese-investigators-need-protection>) investigating Beirut's 2020 port explosion, as well as the clashes it caused during last year's Tayouneh protests in the capital's southern suburbs. Such actions have convinced many that Hezbollah was involved in the explosion.

In light of these developments and the 2019 mass protests that preceded them, it seems clear that many Shia are looking beyond Hezbollah to a broader Lebanese identity. Today, more people see the group not as a legitimate national authority, but as a thuggish drug cartel that steals resources from the people and impedes justice. Some even believe the group is a de facto part of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps instead of just an independent organization with Iranian backing.

Regarding the May 15 election, Lebanon will win a symbolic victory if Hezbollah loses its majority in parliament. The major factor is the Christian vote—Hezbollah could lose its Christian support and, by extension, its claim that it is more than just a Shia organization. The performance of Sunni factions will also be significant given that former prime minister Saad Hariri and his party are not running.

Bashshar Haydar

Although there is definitely a divide in the Shia community, it is important to temper one's optimism about it. Shia voting results in the May 15 election will provide a good test of this divide. In terms of how people see Hezbollah, the issue of resistance to Israel has been relegated to the background, and the group's social services are not as important to Shia support as people think. Many Shia still rely on the state even if

they receive Hezbollah services, so providing alternative services may not win much support away from the group.

The fact remains that many Shia continue to back Hezbollah because it empowers their community inside the state and gives them privileges others do not enjoy. Although they do not necessarily connect with the Iranian part of Hezbollah's identity, they still enjoy the power it gives them. More important, many Shia fear that Hezbollah's use of violence has implicated their entire community in the eyes of other Lebanese. If the group grows weaker, some believe that other communities will seek revenge on them and take away the advantages they have gained over the years.

As for the parliamentary election, Hezbollah fears losing its Christian support and is therefore relying on a fractured Sunni vote. Accordingly, it is important to isolate Christians from Hezbollah, drawing on the fact that they see themselves as victims of the group.

David Schenker

The growing Shia discontent with Hezbollah provides U.S. policymakers with some opportunities. During the Trump administration, the United States took several steps against the group, such as denying it funding through a policy of maximum pressure on Iran, sanctioning its financial institutions, designating corrupt Lebanese officials (some of whom were allied with Hezbollah), supporting broader Shia civil society, and working with Shia businesspeople to promote economic opportunities and reduce dependence on the militia.

The Biden administration is more focused on the Iran nuclear negotiations and has thus been more conciliatory toward Tehran. In the event a nuclear deal is reached, Hezbollah believes its Iranian funding will return to previous levels.

Across administrations, U.S. policy has consistently focused on providing humanitarian support to the people and funding the Lebanese Armed Forces. Although assistance to the LAF does not affect Hezbollah's destabilizing behavior, it has nevertheless become Washington's default lead policy initiative toward Lebanon. To truly affect the country's trajectory, the U.S. government will have to push back on Hezbollah more concertedly, both inside Lebanon and by economically pressuring its Iranian patron.

The May 15 election is unlikely to bring dramatic change because Hezbollah does not respect elections. Moreover, the opposition is very divided, which limits its ability to win more seats in parliament. Notwithstanding popular anger at Lebanon's political elites, the economic crisis may accentuate sectarian sentiments at the ballot box. Saad Hariri's [departure from politics](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>) also leaves a gap in Sunni leadership. Lebanese politics are driven by big personalities, and the Sunni community currently lacks a replacement for Hariri. Ultimately, the country's political system remains broken, and Hezbollah's track record of employing violence to ensure its dominance will likely limit the scope of any post-election transformation in Lebanese politics.

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