

A New Electoral Law for Lebanon: Continuity or Change?

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

Although the new legislation constitutes another win for Hezbollah, potential shifts in Lebanese political alignments may not be in the militia's favor.

On June 21, Lebanon's parliamentary term is set to end. Unable to agree on a new electoral law, the current legislature has already voted to extend itself twice, in 2013 and 2014, making 2009 the last time the Lebanese people actually voted for their representatives. With the deadline fast approaching, the long-deadlocked negotiations saw a breakthrough last week. Instead of reverting to the decades-old status quo, a tentative agreement was reached to institute a proportional representation system on a one-time basis.

In some ways, the new legislation is a win for the Iranian-backed Shia militia cum political party Hezbollah. But the organization did not get everything it wanted, and Lebanon's shrinking Christian community may also benefit.

Whether the deal is finalized or not, the negotiation process between the (Sunni) Future Movement and its (Christian) political adversaries in the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) appears to have strained the latter's relations with its coalition partner, Hezbollah.

A COMPLEX NEW LAW

In January, recently elected president and FPM founder Michel Aoun told the cabinet that he would not allow the parliament to extend its term again without a new election law, saying that he would choose "a vacuum" over another indefinite extension. This mindset no doubt stemmed from the long void in the presidency itself -- the parliament took more than two years to fill that office, finally electing Aoun last October. Since then, politicians have haggled over various formulations, producing a complex new bill that maintains the post-civil war 50-50 allocation between Muslims and Christians (64 seats each), but stipulates that members of parliament must be elected by proportional representation in reorganized districts (versus the current winner-take-all approach).

The full details of this arrangement have yet to be hammered out, but preliminary reports indicate that Lebanon will be divided into fifteen constituencies with seats allocated per district based on religious affiliation. Voters will have two ballots -- one for party, the other for a preferred candidate within that party's list. Seats will be allocated by list percentage received, with voters determining the order of the list via their second ballot. As part of the deal, the current parliament's term will be extended by up to a year to allow for preparation and voter education. The new law will replace the so-called "Syrian law," a decades-old arrangement in which nearly half the Christian legislators in multiple districts were chosen by non-Christian voters, diluting the Christian vote.

SANCTIONS AND OTHER PROBLEMS

Although Hezbollah has benefited from the years-long vacuum in Lebanese politics, the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, spoke forcefully against allowing a void in parliament on May 2, warning that the country stood "at the edge of the abyss." According to a June 4 article in the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*, the latest agreement was reached only after a "decisive" meeting between Nasrallah and FPM leader Gibran Basil, the president's son-in-law. Nasrallah reportedly used the meeting as an opportunity to dictate the outlines of the new law. Hezbollah has long advocated a proportional system, so the new arrangement is suitable; technically, the group would prefer a single constituency in order to further cement its political dominance, but it has more pressing concerns at the moment.

Consider that Hezbollah has had to open a second mammoth graveyard in Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiya to ease overcrowding for its "martyrs" killed in Syria. Dahiya has also been the epicenter of frequent gun battles pitting criminals -- some tied to Hezbollah -- against the police. These incidents are seen locally as a symptom of increasing economic pressures on the Shia community, perhaps related to diminished Iranian largess for Hezbollah or beefed-up U.S. sanctions against the group.

Washington's 2015 Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA) has been particularly burdensome on the militia, complicating its access to the financial sector and exacerbating the difficult economic situation in primarily Shia and Hezbollah-controlled areas of Lebanon. Hezbollah and the Shia Amal Party are concerned that new U.S. legislation -- the so-called HIFPA II -- will make things even worse, in part by deterring foreign direct investment. In June 2016, a bomb was detonated outside a Beirut branch of Blom Bank, one of the state's leading financial institutions. While no one was hurt by the nighttime explosion, the incident was widely understood as Hezbollah's not-so-subtle way of warning the Central Bank not to be overly ambitious in implementing U.S. sanctions.

Yet despite some low-level Shia discontent about economic difficulties in Lebanon and the high rate of casualties in Syria, Hezbollah is rather confident about its position. With the group's help, the Assad regime is on the offensive again next door, backed by Iran, Russia, and Iraqi Shia militias. At home, the group has repeatedly flaunted its ongoing control of the south and its excellent working relationship with the national intelligence organs that man checkpoints en route to the border. In April, for instance, it brought more than a dozen international journalists on a tour of Lebanon's frontier with Israel. And in May, it turned over several of its Syria border observation posts to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Although this smooth handover and the ongoing cordial negotiations about more sensitive border locations might suggest increased LAF capabilities, they also point to Hezbollah's comfort with the level of coordination, communication, and deconfliction it has achieved with the army. And by handing over border posts, the group could free up additional troops and resources for Syria and/or the south.

CHRISTIAN-SUNNI DETENTE?

At the same time, Hezbollah may be growing concerned about the burgeoning ties between the FPM and the Future Movement. While serving as FPM leader in February 2006, Aoun signed a memorandum of understanding that aligned his party with Hezbollah. Yet when Aoun was elected president last year, he received

less-than-enthusiastic support from Hezbollah. Consistent with the memorandum, Aoun continues to defend the group's possession of weapons outside state control and its "resistance" agenda against Israel. But on other issues, Hezbollah may not be able to count on the former maverick general. For example, the militia is said to be disappointed in his choices for LAF chief and several other top army posts, including the head of military intelligence.

Meanwhile, Aoun's election came with the consent of Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, despite the longstanding rivalry between their two parties. And current FPM leader Basil is reportedly forging a close working relationship with Future Movement consigliere Nader Hariri, as evidenced by their daily consultations, joint family vacations, deep coordination on the electoral law, and assorted business deals that some critics have described as shady. It remains to be seen whether this detente will continue -- and, if so, whether it has more to do with boosting shared commercial interests or readjusting stagnant political alignments.

Another interesting development is Aoun's apparent rapprochement with his erstwhile rival Samir Geagea, leader of the Christian party Lebanese Forces. While Geagea remains a fierce critic of Basil's purportedly prodigious corruption, he has come to accept the Aoun presidency, raising the possibility of a more unified Christian bloc in the coming parliamentary elections. Yet it is unclear whether this acceptance is a long-term strategic shift or a temporary tactical step in his struggle with Basil to succeed the allegedly ailing octogenarian president. Either way, according to *al-Hayat*, Nasrallah's intervention on the electoral law may have been a "high caliber" message to the FPM that it "should not go very far in its new alliances," either with the Future Movement or the Lebanese Forces.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

In recent years, U.S. policy toward Lebanon has focused on sanctioning Hezbollah, arming and training the LAF, and providing financial support for the state's 1.5 million Syrian refugees. While limited in scope, this approach has been relatively successful in preventing a more precipitous deterioration inside the country -- despite the flood of refugees and Hezbollah's ongoing participation in the Syria war, Lebanon has largely maintained its stability and security.

At the same time, Beirut has continued its slide toward Iran. This trend was accentuated during the waning days of the Obama administration, when Saudi Arabia grew fed up with the perceived tilt toward Tehran, cut aid to Lebanon, and distanced itself from Saad Hariri, its leading Sunni ally in the state.

For now, it is unclear what trajectory U.S. policy will take under President Trump. His administration's recently submitted State Department draft budget for 2018 would zero out funding for the LAF and dramatically cut assistance for the country's Syrian refugees. Even so, there are other steps the administration can take to promote U.S. interests there. Additional sanctions targeting Hezbollah economic interests in Lebanon and abroad would put more pressure on the organization. Raising the cost for Hezbollah in Syria would also increase the group's difficulties with its constituents at home. Meanwhile, the administration could leverage its revitalized ties with Riyadh to encourage greater Saudi generosity toward the pro-Western Saad Hariri and his Future Movement. Finally, U.S. diplomats in Beirut should try to build on the recent signs of improved Christian unity and Sunni-Christian political ties. Regardless of how the electoral law saga turns out, the realignment of Lebanese political coalitions could help marginally undercut Hezbollah and Iranian dominance.

David Schenker is the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. ❖



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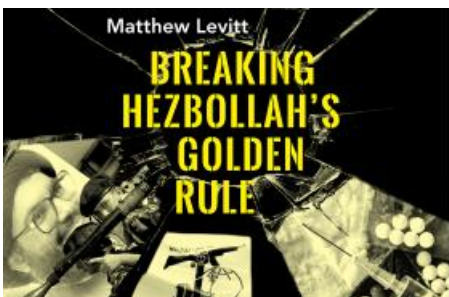
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