

Lebanon Unstable and Insecure

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

Military coordination with Hezbollah may be providing a quick fix, but the country's long-term strength can only be achieved with a reconstituted March 14 coalition.

During his June 4 visit to Lebanon, Secretary of State John Kerry encouraged lawmakers to elect a new president, pledged \$51 million to help Beirut host Syrian refugees, and announced that the administration would seek additional funding for Lebanese security forces. "The bottom line," he said, "is that a secure and stable Lebanon is a prerequisite for a secure and stable region." Coming a day after the "reelection" of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and amidst a presidential vacuum in Beirut, Secretary Kerry's visit actually highlighted Lebanon's insecurity and instability. Regrettably, it is unclear if the administration's latest initiatives will do much to prevent a further deterioration.

Presidential Vacuum

On May 25, Michel Suleiman completed his six-year term as president and vacated Baabda Palace. In accordance with the Lebanese constitution, the parliament should have elected a new president by that date, but the pro-Western March 14 bloc and the Hezbollah-led pro-Syrian March 8 coalition have been unable to agree on an acceptable candidate. In the absence of consensus, the political blocs have refused to attend parliamentary sessions since the initial balloting on April 23, preventing the quorum necessary for a vote.

Because the Lebanese president -- who by law is a Christian -- wields few powers, the government can technically muddle through without an elected chief executive. In 2007-2008, for example, then prime minister Fouad Siniora, a Sunni Muslim, served as acting president for nearly half a year.

The U.S. administration is concerned, however, that a presidential vacuum will exacerbate Sunni-Shiite tensions and undermine Lebanon's power-sharing agreement. Reflecting the standard practice, Washington has not officially

endorsed a specific presidential candidate. "It's up to the leaders of Lebanon," Secretary Kerry said. Yet the divisions between March 14 and March 8 remain cavernous.

For the March 14 bloc, a source of stress has been the ongoing flirtation between its leader, Saad Hariri, and Free Patriotic Movement head and perennial presidential hopeful Michel Aoun, who is aligned with Hezbollah. At the same time, Syrian elections -- and recent regime military gains -- appear to be strengthening Hezbollah's hand. Also working in the Shiite organization's favor is that its preferred president -- Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) chief of staff Jean Kahwaji -- remains the leading "compromise" candidate.

Hezbollah's preference for Kahwaji is no coincidence. During interviews -- his April 2010 conversation with the Lebanese daily *an-Nahar*, for example -- Kahwaji has frequently articulated both a willingness to coordinate with Hezbollah and an admiration for "the resistance." Straining credulity, Kahwaji has also claimed that the group had made a "commitment to international resolutions, notably [UN Security Council] Resolution 1701," which called, among other things, for Hezbollah's disarmament.

Refugees Abound

Today, more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees reside in Lebanon, according to the Lebanese government. With a population of just over four million in 2011, Lebanon is currently the world's fastest growing country. Not surprisingly, these refugees are taxing the Lebanese infrastructure. In 2013, the World Bank estimated that the cost of reinstating "the access to and quality of [Lebanese] public services to their pre-Syrian conflict level" would be \$2.6 billion.

After the worst winter drought on record, provision of potable water could also prove a challenge. For refugees -- many of whom have no consistent access to clean water -- the situation carries special risks. According to the World Health Organization, the combination of unvaccinated youth and poor sanitary conditions makes Lebanon ripe for a polio outbreak.

While the financial burden created by the refugees is substantial, the potential long-term social impact posed by 1.5 million predominantly Sunni Muslims on Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance of Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians is of equal concern. Hence, last week Minister of Social Affairs Rashid Derbas announced that Syrians who returned home even temporarily would lose their refugee status. Derbas also said that Lebanon -- which currently has no official Syrian refugee camps -- would seek to establish encampments "in Syria or in no-man's-land" across the border.

The Shiite Security Strategy

After a tumultuous 2013, when more than a dozen car bombs were directed at sectarian targets, Lebanon is witnessing a period of relative calm. It appears that the diminished violence is the product of a government initiative led by March 14 Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk. In April, Machnouk -- a Sunni Muslim -- met with Hezbollah's internal security apparatus chief, Wafiq Safa, and Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, the Hezbollah-friendly Shiite commander of Lebanon's General Security Directorate. Press reports suggest that during this unusual meeting, the three agreed to seal off the Sunni border town of Aarsal, a crucial line of communication for Syrian rebels where several of the car bombs deployed last year are believed to have entered Lebanon. The accord also seems to have tacitly endorsed continuing operational coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah against Sunni militants, in the spirit of the July 2013 joint military attack in Sidon against forces led by the Lebanese Salafi cleric Ahmed Assir.

Lebanese government collusion with Hezbollah, along with a concurrent LAF campaign of arrests of Sunni militants in the north, has curtailed at least temporarily the Sunni sectarian attacks targeting Shiites. Meanwhile, judging from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's latest speech -- given two days after Secretary Kerry departed Beirut -- the Shiite militia is more confident than ever. Not only did Nasrallah describe Assad's reelection as "a historic

achievement," he revealed in the trajectory of Lebanon. "Praise be Allah," he said. "It is really a blessing that the entire world wants that Lebanon enjoy security, stability, peace, and quietness at this stage."

Conclusion

During his Beirut press conference, Kerry described Lebanon's security as "a paramount concern to the United States." While the administration's concern may be genuine, the policies don't seem to reflect the requisite urgency. For example, the \$400 million Washington has provided to defray refugee-related costs has no doubt been helpful, but the sum is relatively modest, given the problem's scope. Moreover, to date, the administration has been unable to convince other donors to commit and deliver on a similar scale.

The Lebanese press, in addition to panning the U.S. offer of additional refugee assistance as meager, savaged Kerry's purported naivete in cajoling Hezbollah and Iran to "engage in the legitimate effort to bring this [Syrian] war to an end." A June 6 op-ed in the pro-Western *an-Nahar* went so far as to say such language gave the impression of a "banana republic" rather than an American secretary of state.

Such hyperbole may not be warranted, but the U.S. approach to Lebanese security indeed seems shortsighted. Consistent with Washington's counterterrorism strategy in the Levant, which considers Sunni—not Shiite Iran or Hezbollah—terrorists the leading threat, Lebanon is targeting its Sunni militants. While this tack is an effective short-term answer for Lebanon, Hezbollah cooperation with the state and the LAF enhances the organization's security at home, freeing up resources for its Syria deployment and paving the way for a postwar modus vivendi in Lebanon that legitimizes Hezbollah's political dominance and military autonomy. At the same time, the military's cooperation with the Shiite militia against Sunni militants risks undercutting the perception of LAF neutrality, weakening the institution.

Worse, absent an effective Western strategy to reinvigorate March 14, the coalition is deteriorating, making the election of LAF commander Kahwaji more likely. To shore up the coalition, Washington would be well advised to encourage March 14 to hold out for an acceptable president, one who at a minimum is not closely affiliated with or sympathetic to Hezbollah. Likewise, notwithstanding the Lebanese military's recent successes against Sunni militants, Washington should warn Beirut of possible consequences -- perhaps by invoking Congress to threaten the \$71 million per year in Foreign Military Financing -- in the event that operational cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah persists.

While LAF-Hezbollah coordination has almost certainly diminished the short-term threat posed by Sunni militants, the current U.S. policy facilitates a reinvigorated Iranian-Syrian role in Lebanon, particularly if Assad remains in power. If Washington is truly committed to long-term Lebanese security, the more ambitious priority should be to cultivate a more cohesive and effective local ally in a reconstituted March 14.

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

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