

Syria and Hizbullah after the Lebanese Elections

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Articles & Testimony

- Hizbullah has enjoyed an enviable run of political and military "achievements" including its "divine victory" over Israel in 2006, the "glorious day" in May 2008 when it occupied Beirut, and securing diplomatic recognition by Britain in April 2009.
- More recently the Lebanese Shiite militia has been dealt a series of setbacks including defeat in the Lebanese elections, the arrest of an Egypt-based Hizbullah cell, reports of the group's involvement in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, the apprehension of a Hizbullah cell plotting to bomb the Israeli embassy in Azerbaijan, and the post-election protests in Iran that have irreparably damaged the legitimacy of Hizbullah's chief patron.
- Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri appears to be leaning toward a cabinet formula that provides his majority coalition with 15 seats, the opposition with 10, and the allegedly neutral president with 5. But if even one of the president's cabinet designees is sympathetic to Hizbullah, the Shiite militia would attain its coveted veto power, effectively erasing March 14's hard-won victory at the polls.
- The desire in Washington and Riyadh to repair damaged relations with Damascus is admirable, but should not come at the expense of Lebanon and the larger U.S. strategic goal of weakening Iranian influence in the Levant. While a diplomatic rapprochement with Syria might result in some marginal improvements in its behavior, this would likely have little impact on Syria's thirty-year strategic relationship with Tehran.
- Washington can do little to help March 14 on the ground, but it will be particularly important to demonstrate ongoing U.S. commitment to Beirut at this sensitive time. At a minimum, Washington should veto any deal emerging from Riyadh and Damascus that undermines Lebanese sovereignty or re-establishes Syrian influence in Beirut.

On June 7, 2009, Lebanese went to the polls for national elections, and in a development that shocked the world the pro-West March 14 coalition defeated the heavily favored Syrian- and Iranian-backed alliance led by Hizbullah. For the second time in four years, March 14 was voted into power, confirming the pro-West orientation of Beirut. Yet despite this important development, it remains unclear whether March 14 is in any better position now to consolidate power than it was after the 2005 balloting.

Today, the future of the pro-West government in Beirut remains in question largely because, in the aftermath of the elections, Syria and its Lebanese allies have made efforts to retrench and prevent March 14 from capitalizing on its election victory. Syria and Hizbullah would seem to be in a disadvantageous position to stymie their political adversaries, but Damascus and the Shiite militia have proved resilient.

Hizbullah Down, but Not Out

After an enviable run of political and military "achievements" including Hizbullah's "divine victory" over Israel in 2006, the "glorious day" in May 2008 when the organization invaded and occupied Beirut,[1] and securing diplomatic recognition by Britain in April 2009, more recently the Lebanese Shiite militia has been dealt a series of well-publicized setbacks. Defeat in the Lebanese elections was only the latest in a string of frustrations for Hizbullah.

In April, Cairo announced the arrest of an Egypt-based Hizbullah cell.[2] Then, a month later, reports surfaced of the group's involvement in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, the murder that sparked the Cedar Revolution.[3] In May, a Hizbullah cell plotting to bomb the Israeli embassy in Azerbaijan in retaliation for the assassination of Imad Mugniyyeh was apprehended.[4] And finally -- and perhaps most worrisome for the group -- post-election protests in Iran have irreparably damaged the legitimacy of Hizbullah's chief patron, the clerical regime in Tehran, undermining the controversial doctrine of vilayat e-faqih (Islamic government).

Given this remarkable reversal of fortune, one might have thought that Hizbullah would be back on its heels. On a recent trip to Beirut, however, it was difficult to distinguish victor from vanquished. During his election concession speech, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah admitted "disappointment" with the election, but he appears to have drawn no particular inference from the results. "As far as we [Hizbullah] are concerned," he says, "nothing has changed for us at all." [5]

Meanwhile, preliminary signs suggest that the March 14 coalition has chosen conciliation over confrontation with Hizbullah. Just days after the election, two of March 14's senior leaders, Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, met with Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Since then, other top leaders of the pro-West grouping reached out to Syria's allies in Lebanon.

There is little doubt that the apparent political reconciliation between March 14 and Hezbollah has contributed to a diminution of tensions in Lebanon, a palpable development sure to improve the summer tourist season in the beleaguered state. Less clear, however, is how all this newfound goodwill will impact the policies of the incoming pro-West administration in Beirut, and specifically the formulation of the new cabinet and its ministerial statement, the policy guidance for the incoming government.

Negotiations in Process

At issue is whether the Hezbollah-led opposition will be granted a "blocking third" of the cabinet -- and with it the ability to stymie major government initiatives -- and whether Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri's ministerial statement will legitimate Hezbollah's weapons outside the authority of the state. [6] When Hariri met with Nasrallah a week after the elections, the Shiite leader reportedly told the incoming prime minister that the "blocking third" was a must.

Nasrallah's political allies have likewise been clamoring for this veto power under the euphemism of establishing a "national unity government" that provides the opposition "effective and decisive participation" in the decision-making process, ever since the balloting.[7]

For his part, Hariri appears to be leaning toward a cabinet formula that provides his majority coalition with 15 seats, the opposition with 10 -- just one seat short of what Hezbollah is demanding -- and the allegedly neutral president with 5.[8] On paper, this blueprint -- which provides the president with the swing vote -- seems to be a compromise. But if even one of the president's cabinet designees is sympathetic to the Shiite militia, Hezbollah would attain its coveted veto power, effectively erasing March 14's hard-won victory at the polls.

Syria Reemerges

Because of all the international actors involved in the process of formulating the cabinet, it is unknown how all this wrangling will eventually turn out. Indeed, cabinet negotiations in Lebanon are currently being driven by secret backchannel discussions between March 14 and Hezbollah's respective allies in Riyadh and Damascus. These talks coincide with a fledgling diplomatic rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. (Saudi Arabia appointed a new ambassador to Damascus in July, filling the post that had been open since 2008.) It also occurs as Washington is devoting great efforts to improving relations with the longtime pariah regime in Damascus with an eye toward driving a wedge between Syria and Iran.

Syria emerged from the Lebanese elections in a weaker position in Lebanon because its allies -- particularly General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement -- fared poorly at the polls. Undeterred, in the aftermath of the elections, Syria has sought to improve its position in Lebanon by exploiting Saudi and U.S. interest in repairing bilateral relationships. Briefly stated, Damascus is hoping to leverage the rapprochement process with Washington and Riyadh to renew its influence in Lebanon.

According to Arab press reports and the statements of Assad regime representatives, Syrian efforts to impact developments in Beirut focus on several tracks. First, Damascus is pressing for some kind of formal agreement -- a la the Taif Accord -- that legitimates the Syrian role as a political arbiter in Beirut.[9] Second, Syria is demanding effective veto power for its Lebanese allies and proxies within the cabinet.[10] And finally, as part and parcel of its dialogue with Saudi Arabia, Syria wants to compel Saad Hariri -- who is close to Riyadh -- to visit Damascus.[11] The visit is important to the Assad regime, not only because it would be a humiliation for Hariri, but because it would create the impression that Syria was not responsible for the assassination of Hariri's father, former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri. Syria remains the leading suspect in the murder, which is being prosecuted by a Special Tribunal in The Hague.

For the time being, however, it appears that Hariri -- who is loathe to go to Damascus -- is holding his ground and not making these kind of significant concessions to his political adversaries. Nevertheless, pressures are building. Walid Jumblatt, for example, has already signaled his willingness to travel to Damascus and is pressing Hariri to go,[12] while other coalition members -- like Kataeb representative Sami Gemayel -- are improving ties with Syria's proxies in Lebanon.[13]

Conclusion

In the late 1980s -- the last time Saudi Arabia and Syria negotiated Lebanon's future -- Damascus emerged as a dominant force in Beirut. Today Hezbollah is facing a great deal of adversity, and its Syrian ally's influence in Lebanon is at its weakest.

The desire in Washington and Riyadh to repair damaged relations with Damascus is admirable, but should not come at the expense of Lebanon and the larger U.S. strategic goal of weakening Iranian influence in the Levant. While a diplomatic rapprochement between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia and long-time nemesis Syria might result in some marginal improvements in problematic Assad regime behavior, this development would likely have little impact on Syria's thirty-year strategic relationship with Tehran.

In the coming weeks, Prime Minister Hariri will walk a thin line between consolidating his election victory and provoking Hezbollah. Washington can do little to help March 14 on the ground, but it will be particularly important, even as the Obama Administration moves ahead with its diplomatic engagement with Syria, to demonstrate ongoing U.S. commitment to Beirut at this sensitive time. At a minimum, Washington should veto any deal emerging from Riyadh and Damascus that undermines Lebanese sovereignty or re-establishes Syrian influence in Beirut.

If March 14 doesn't capitalize on its reelection and its adversaries' misfortunes now, the historically resilient Hezbollah will reemerge and this moment of opportunity for Lebanon and Washington will pass.

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Notes

1. See Hassan Nasrallah's speech on May 16, 2009, "May 7 was a glorious day for the resistance," available in [English \(http://english.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=8483&cid=231\)](#) and in [Arabic \(http://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=15248&cid=210\)](#)

2. For a longer discussion of the Hizbullah arrests, see David Schenker "[The Pharaoh Strikes Back \(http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/016/452guiya.asp?pg=2\)](http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/016/452guiya.asp?pg=2)," Weekly Standard, May 11, 2009.
3. Erich Follath, "[New Evidence Points to Hezbollah in Hariri Murder \(http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,626412,00.html\)](http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,626412,00.html)," Der Spiegel, May 23, 2009.
4. Sabastian Rotella, "[Azerbaijan Seen as a New Front in Mid-East Conflict \(http://articles.latimes.com/2009/may/30/world/fg-shadow30\)](http://articles.latimes.com/2009/may/30/world/fg-shadow30)," Los Angeles Times, May 30, 2009. Mughniyeh was the head of the organization's military apparatus. He was assassinated in Damascus in February 2008.
5. Nasrallah's speech can be found [here \(http://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=15248&cid=210\)](http://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=15248&cid=210).
6. A "blocking third" refers to one-third plus one of the total cabinet seats. Hizbullah refers to this quorum of the cabinet as an "assuring third."
7. "[Tazkhim 'gharbalat al siyagh' . . . Jumblat fi Ein al-Tineh . . . \(http://nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=103804\)](http://nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=103804)," Now Lebanon, July 15, 2009.
8. Some sources suggest that Hariri is seeking a 16-10-4 formula, and that the 15-10-5 formula is his fallback position.
9. See "[T'lan Dimashq: 'ard Sa'udi limusalaha Lubnaniyah-Suriyah \(http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/145771\)](http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/145771)," al-Akhbar, July 4, 2009; and Sami Moubayed, "[Time for a Damascus Agreement \(http://www.gulfnews.com/opinion/columns/region/10325148.html\)](http://www.gulfnews.com/opinion/columns/region/10325148.html)," Gulf News, June 22, 2009. Moubayed is close to the Assad regime and many believe he is on the regime payroll. His views reliably represent Syrian government positions.
10. "[Wahhab yuhajim al-ra'is al-mukallaf: hissah al-mu'arada al-thulth za'idan wahidan \(http://almustaqbal.com/stories.aspx?StoryID=357324\)](http://almustaqbal.com/stories.aspx?StoryID=357324)," al-Mustaqbal, July 13, 2009.
11. See Sami Moubayed, "[Hariri Cannot Ignore Syria \(http://www.gulfnews.com/opinion/columns/region/10327118.html\)](http://www.gulfnews.com/opinion/columns/region/10327118.html)," Gulf News, June 29, 2009. It would be particularly problematic if Hariri visited Damascus prior to the formation of his cabinet, as the pro-Syrian media has promoted.
12. See "[Jumblatt: I Will Resolve Personal Disagreements with Syria after Hariri's Visit to Damascus \(http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=103061\)](http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=103061)," Now Lebanon, July 10, 2009. See also, "[Jumblat: al-Hariri sayazur Dimashq fi hudur al-'ahil al-Sa'udi ba'da tashkil al-hukumah \(http://nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=103970\)](http://nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=103970)," Now Lebanon, July 15, 2009.
13. "Franjiyeh, Gemayel Vow to Avert Inter-Christian Discord, Create Dialogue," Naharnet, July 4, 2009. ❖

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