

Lebanon Goes to the Polls: Last Minute Surprises and Long-term Implications

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

On June 7, Lebanon goes to the polls to elect a new government. All told, 587 candidates are competing for the 128 parliament seats, and with just days to go, the contest is too close to call. Both the pro-West March 14 coalition incumbents and the Syrian-Iranian-backed Hizballah-led March 8 alliance are predicting victory. In the region, there is little doubt that a Hizballah majority will be a perceived victory for Iran and Syria and a setback for Washington. Less clear, however, would be the implications for Lebanon of a Hizballah electoral triumph.

Background

In the 2005 elections, March 14 won seventy-two seats, a victory attributed to both the mobilizing effect of the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri -- whose son, Saad, currently heads the coalition -- as well as to March 14's electoral alliance with Hizballah. Lebanese political dynamics have changed dramatically since then.

Relations between Hizballah and March 14 started to deteriorate shortly after the government was established. The initial wedge issue was the establishment of an international tribunal to prosecute Hariri's killers (Hizballah opposed the tribunal, since its ally, Syria, was the leading suspect), but differences also quickly emerged regarding Hizballah's independent weapons arsenal. By February 2006, Hizballah had signed a memorandum of understanding with Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), establishing a formidable fifty-six-seat opposition bloc in parliament.

Tensions worsened between Hizballah and the government as a result of the Hizballah-provoked war with Israel in 2006 and the near-coup undertaken by Hizballah's deployment of troops in Beirut in May 2008. Given the deep divide between the March 8 and March 14 camps, most Lebanese view these elections as a kind of referendum on the future of their country

October Surprises Abound

Ideological divisions between these camps notwithstanding, Lebanese campaign the old-fashioned way. In the south, for example, Amal leader Nabih Beri has spent the last few months dipping into a regional development slush fund, the Council of the South, to lay cornerstones for schools and municipal buildings in Baalbak and Shaath. At the same time, current prime minister Fouad Siniora, facing a tough race in Sidon, unveiled his own \$20 million Saudi-funded project targeting the perennial problem of the municipal dump.

The election season has also been punctuated by several surprise developments, which could have an impact on voting -- particularly among the Christian swing vote:

Hizballah operatives in Egypt and Yemen. In April, Cairo announced the November 2008 arrest on Egyptian soil of dozens of Hizballah operatives for funneling arms to Hamas and allegedly targeting Israeli tourists and Suez Canal shipping. The violation of sovereignty sparked harsh Egyptian criticism of Hizballah, an organization that Cairo is now comparing to al-Qaeda. This was followed in May with Yemeni president Ali Abdul Salih's accusation that Hizballah was training Shiite rebels in Yemen. These accusations highlight Hizballah's global reach, undermining claims that the organization is merely a Lebanese national resistance, a perception that could hurt the organization at the polls.

Israeli spy network roundup. In May, Beirut heralded the arrest of several alleged Israeli spies in Lebanon. Weeks later, detentions numbered in the dozens. The arrests -- bona fide or otherwise -- are being exploited by Hizballah to support its demand to retain an independent military arm, outside the control of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

Release of the four generals. In late April, the international tribunal decided to release four Lebanese generals long affiliated with Syria, who were believed to have participated in the Hariri murder. The release was demoralizing to March 14, which viewed the release as a sign the tribunal will not reach convictions.

Der Spiegel article. On May 23, the Germany weekly Der Spiegel ran a story implicating Hizballah in the Hariri murder. Hizballah officials, including the organization's secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, have vigorously denied any involvement in the killing. On May 28, the pro-Hizballah daily al-Akhbar

blamed March 14 for the story, which "target[s] the weapons of the resistance." The Der Spiegel article has proven explosive: if the tribunal holds Shiites responsible for assassinating the Sunni leader of Lebanon, it could lead to a resumption of the civil war.

Visit of Vice President Biden. In an unprecedented show of U.S. support for March 14, Vice President Joseph Biden traveled to Lebanon on May 22. Not surprisingly, Hizballah roundly criticized the trip; as its parliamentary bloc leader Muhammad Raad said, "Whether you [the United States] interfere or not, you're too late. Your project is collapsing and the bloc you're betting on will lose." How the visit will affect voting is unclear: it will reassure some pro-West-leaning constituents, but could also scare away some more neutral undecided voters.

Impact in Lebanon

Despite concerns in the Middle East and Washington, recent March 14 polling shows it will retain a slim parliamentary majority, despite losing ground in the vote. But even March 14's best-case scenario would not fundamentally change the status quo on the ground: a pro-West majority would still be limited in its ability to effect policy changes by virtue of the opposition's "blocking third" in the cabinet and its military prowess. (March 14 maintains that following the elections, the Doha Agreement, which mandated the blocking-third arrangement, will be void, but Hizballah is sure to protest.) Moreover, if the majority is only one or two seats, election results could be reversed by assassination. Indeed, a series of assassinations between 2005 and 2008 nearly wiped out the March 14 majority.

Although Hizballah would derive unprecedented international legitimacy from an electoral victory, the organization and its allies would face significant challenges in governing the state. Reports in May that Hizballah held talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to secure continued financial support for Lebanon highlight the Shiite organization's concerns about potential sanctioning of the state, ala the Gaza Strip. The IMF's subsequent denial of the meeting suggests that the leak emanated from Hizballah. Moreover, several parties in the March 14 coalition -- most notably Saad Hariri's Future Movement (Mustaqbal) -- have indicated they will not join the government if defeated, leaving March 8 without the largest Sunni party, a key element of domestic legitimacy, and likely without Saudi support for the Lebanese currency.

Of course, without March 14 in the cabinet, March 8 could conceivably have a freer hand to effect changes in the constitution or the electoral process. A Hizballah-led government would also be less prone to cooperate with the international tribunal (although this alone would not put an end to the court and would risk exacerbating Sunni-Shiite tensions) and more amenable to maintaining Syrian influence in Beirut via the Syria-Lebanon Higher Council. There are some indications that FPM leader Michel Aoun, who has long coveted the presidency, may try to engineer the removal of President Michel Suleiman from his post.

Impact on Lebanon

One obvious implication of a Hizballah electoral victory would be a change in Israeli policy toward Lebanon. In October 2008, then prime minister Ehud Olmert said that Israel "did not use all means to respond [during the 2006 Summer war], but if Lebanon becomes a Hizballah state, then we won't have any restrictions in this regard." On May 27, Defense Minister Ehud Barak confirmed this policy, stating that a Hizballah takeover would "give us a freedom of action that we did not have completely in July 2006." Lebanon sustained an estimated \$4-6 billion in damage during Israel's "restrained" 2006 campaign. Based on Israel's declaratory policy, the next round promises to be even more costly for Beirut.

Even if there is no resumption of hostilities with Israel, Washington would be sure to revise its policy toward a Lebanese government led by Hizballah. As Biden noted during his May 22 visit to Beirut, the United States would "evaluate the shape of our assistance program based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates."

At a minimum, a Hizballah takeover would spur a comprehensive review of the robust military assistance program, which has delivered more than \$400 million to the LAF since 2005. Conceivably, U.S. funding could be downgraded to the single-digit millions per year disbursed during the period of Syrian occupation. U.S. development and financial assistance could also be scaled back, something March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt hinted at this during an interview on the popular local television program Kilam an Nas on May 27, when he asked "If the opposition wins, what would prevent [the United States] from ending their financial support to Lebanon?"

Less tangible, but perhaps equally important, would be a change in administration attitude toward a Lebanese government headed by a terrorist organization. Unlike the UK and other European states, Washington is unlikely to subscribe to the fictitious disaggregation of Hizballah into political and military wings, so the United States would not be able to meet with the power behind Lebanon's next government. (Hizballah could appoint nonparty figures to the cabinet in order to avoid such a showdown.) Given the existence of the executive order "Blocking Property of Persons Undermining the Sovereignty of Lebanon or Its Democratic Processes and Institutions" -- widely viewed at the time as targeting FPM leader Michel Aoun -- it is not clear whether Washington would establish contacts with Aoun. Absent a dramatic change in U.S. policy, Washington's ties to a March 8 government in Beirut almost certainly would be downgraded.

Conclusion

Given the fractious nature of Lebanese politics and the potential for a return to civil war, significant short-term changes in Lebanese foreign or domestic policy are unlikely, regardless of the election outcome. Regionally, however, the consequences of a March 8 victory would be more pronounced. Washington's moderate Arab allies -- Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco -- already concerned about the Iranian nuclear threat and ongoing subversive activities, could see a March 8 victory as another sign of Iran's growing influence and be tempted to seek accommodation with Tehran, diminishing U.S. leverage at a critical juncture. At the same time, a March 8 victory would buoy if not embolden Damascus and Tehran. At a minimum, this would complicate U.S. engagement with Tehran and reduce the likelihood of achieving any practical results within the timeframe enunciated by the president.

If Washington's allies win the elections, it would confirm the pro-Western trend in Lebanon and perhaps deal a blow to Syria. But even if March 14

returns to power, Iran and Syria's Lebanese allies are certain to secure political gains in the process. To be sure, even in this optimistic scenario, the outcome would not dramatically improve the negotiating environment with Iran for the Obama administration. Regrettably for Washington and its Lebanese allies, while the return of March 14 to power in Lebanon would defer a checkmate, it would do little to alleviate the ongoing local tensions or to end the regional face-off between the United States and Iran.

David Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the [Program on Arab Politics \(/templateI02.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Arab%20and%20Islamic%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchAreas\)](#) at the Washington Institute. ❖

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