

Lebanon's Government by Murder

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

Oct 17, 2007

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.



Articles & Testimony

Forty Lebanese members of parliament belonging to the pro-Western, anti-Syria March 14th majority bloc currently reside in Tower 3 at Beirut's Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel. With plush couches, stereos and flat-screen TVs, the two-bedroom units at the Phoenicia are swank. But the lawmakers aren't guests; they're prisoners.

To get into the Phoenicia, you have to traverse no fewer than three security checkpoints, pass through a metal detector and show ID. Armed escorts from Lebanon's Internal Security Forces accompany guests to their rooms. Inside, curtains are permanently drawn to discourage snipers from targeting the MPs. One confined parliament member described the setup as "Abu Ghraib."

As the isolation of these legislators suggests, the March 14th bloc is taking its security seriously, and with good reason. Since 2005, four members of parliament affiliated with this bloc have been assassinated in Beirut. These killings, the death by natural causes of one MP and the political defection of yet another have sorely depleted the ranks of the majority. A government that once had 72 out of 128 legislators now rules by a razor-thin margin of 68 of 127 seats.

The Bashar Assad regime in Syria is widely assumed to be behind the campaign of assassination. Its goal is to weaken, supplant or intimidate the democratically elected government in Beirut and thus end the international tribunal that will almost certainly implicate Damascus in the 2005 murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Presidential elections -- which began on Sept. 25 and run through Nov. 25 -- have only increased the threat to the majority. The president in Lebanon is elected by parliament, and the majority has made clear that although it would prefer to choose by consensus, it will elect the chief executive by a simple majority if no acceptable compromise candidate can be found.

The Hezbollah-led, Syrian-backed opposition says it will not recognize a non-consensus president. For its part, Damascus has stipulated that the next Lebanese president should be moqawam, i.e., a supporter of Hezbollah, and "of Arab belonging," i.e., pro-Syrian. Should the Syrians and the opposition succeed in either toppling the government by attrition or installing a crony like outgoing President Emile Lahoud, the tribunal could be delayed if not derailed.

The tribunal, convened at the behest of the U.N. Security Council, appears to be a train that has left the station. But election of a "compromise" president -- someone more sympathetic to Damascus -- could weaken Beirut's commitment to and undermine international support for the tribunal. Syria could also scuttle the tribunal by ending March 14th's control of the government.

The good news, if there is any, is that in the short run it will be difficult for the Syrians to kill enough March 14th MPs to change the majority before the end of presidential elections. This is because, unlike what occurred following previous assassinations, Lebanon will not hold new elections to fill vacant seats before Nov. 25. The simple, macabre math means that the Syrians would have to kill eight more parliamentarians -- leaving March 14th, with 60 of 119 seats, short of a half-plus-one majority -- in order to force new elections.

Of course, given Syrian persistence, the math is not reassuring. For Damascus, the numbers game likely makes the Phoenicia a more appealing target. And even if the majority survives the presidential elections intact, there is no indication that the campaign of assassinations will stop.

Clearly, Lebanon cannot protect itself. Likewise, to date, the U.N. resolutions censuring Syria for its role in Lebanon have not proved an effective deterrent to Syrian misdeeds. Given the stakes -- a revitalized Syrian and Iranian presence in Lebanon and the potential reorientation of Beirut away from the West -- the preservation of the current Lebanese government is a must.

For Washington, the key will be to craft a policy to prevent Syria and its Lebanese allies from subverting the government in Beirut. One possibility is to deploy, at Lebanon's request, international forces -- under the auspices of already-in-force U.N. Security Council resolutions -- to protect targeted politicians. A more effective but politically difficult option would be to hold Syria accountable for all future political murders in Lebanon.

Regardless of how Washington proceeds, immediate action is required. The ongoing thinning of the majority raises the very real specter that the results of the 2005 parliamentary elections in Lebanon will be reversed by terrorism. Should this trend of assassinations continue unchallenged, the pro-Syrian opposition, led by the Iranian-sponsored Shiite terrorist organization Hezbollah, waits in the wings.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in [Arab politics \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template103.php?SID=1\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template103.php?SID=1) at the Washington Institute. From 2002 to 2006, he served in the office of the secretary of Defense as country director for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian territories. ❖

Los Angeles Times

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)