

Lebanese Elections:

Syrian Key Interests Preserved, For Now

Sep 7, 2000



Brief Analysis

The stunning success of several prominent opposition candidates in Lebanon's recent parliamentary elections has been portrayed by much of the Western press as a "defeat" for Syrian interests in Lebanon, and a "loosening" of Syria's grip over its smaller neighbor. Now that the elections are over, the next step in the process is the selection of a new prime minister that will occur later this year. The question is whether these changes will pose any meaningful challenge to Syrian interests in Lebanon.

A Blow to Syria's 'Proxy Government' in Beirut? Some wishing to see a diminution of Syrian influence in Lebanon are buoyed by the election results. Current Lebanese Prime Minister Salim Hoss-regarded as particularly close to Syria (even by Lebanese standards)-suffered a stinging defeat in Sunday's vote, losing badly to fellow Sunni Muslim and outspoken government oppositionist Rafiq Hariri. Hariri's supporters also fared well in the elections, giving him the single largest parliamentary bloc, making him the odds-on favorite to be named the next prime minister; this, despite his poor relations with President Emile Lahoud, a favorite of the regime in Damascus. The election also introduced 48 new parliamentarians to the 128-seat parliament. These developments have been cast as a "blow" to Syrian interests in Lebanon.

Upon closer examination, however, the election results do not signal a significant backlash against Syria, or threaten Syrian interests or control in Lebanon. First, Hariri, while an opponent of Hoss and current President Lahoud, is by no means an opponent of close ties with Syria. During his previous stint as Prime Minister-between 1992 and 1998-he worked closely with the Syrians, and throughout this election campaign Hariri did not make any anti-Syrian comments or call into question Syrian-Lebanese relations-even though two other prominent oppositionists did so. Second, Syria may actually have favored Hariri in the elections, reportedly having lost confidence in Hoss and reasoned that Hariri may stand a better chance of saving Lebanon's foundering economy, upon which the Syrian economy relies. Lending credibility to this argument is the report that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri announced his support for Hariri last week, following Berri's consultations with Damascus and with the head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, General Ghazi Kannan. Third, Hariri's success was not related to any discernable anti-Syrian movement among voters; rather, it was related to voter hopes that the charismatic billionaire can improve Lebanon's failing economy, and, to a lesser extent, due to a voter backlash over the government's rather vicious campaign waged with state resources against Hariri and his backers.

Two additional factors, not directly tied to the election results, also augur poorly for those wishing to see Syrian influence markedly reduced during the next four years of the new government's term. First, overt opposition to Syria's influence, while arguably growing, remains limited primarily to Christian oppositionists who seem to enjoy more latitude for expressing their views than do their Muslim countrymen. Syria's heavy-handed methods, large troop presence, and economic exploitation irritate both Muslims and Christians, but few openly advocate a removal of Syrian controls. Second, President Lahoud, whose 6-year term does not expire until 2004, remains closely tied to Damascus, so much so that it prompted Lebanon's interior minister to comment recently that "many are not fully

aware of the depth of the strategic relationship that exists between President Lahoud and (Syrian) President Bashar Asad."

Syria's incentives for dominating Lebanon militarily, politically, and economically remain strong, even after the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May. Absent a peace treaty with Israel, Syria will insist on continued occupation by its forces of the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, a major avenue of attack into and out of Israel. A robust security presence elsewhere in Lebanon helps to prevent opponents of the Syrian regime from seeking safe haven in Lebanon. Politically, Syrian domination over Beirut's foreign affairs provides it with a reliable ally, and guards against the prospect of a separate Lebanese-Israeli peace deal. Syria's economic domination permits an exploitation of Lebanon's relatively open market economy. Some 1 million Syrian laborers are estimated to work in Lebanon, a state where Syrian officials are notorious for amassing personal fortunes off of illegal enterprises.

Syrian Concerns. While not a serious challenge to Syrian key interests in Lebanon, the election results may not be totally to Syria's liking. While Hariri is a known entity and has previously worked with Damascus, Syria does not favor any one individual becoming too powerful and threatening its "divide-and-conquer" strategy for Beirut. This strategy entails keeping the power of Lebanon's political elites in check and thus dependent on Syria for their political survival (without guarantees, as Hoss' defeat demonstrated), and thus ultimately beholden to Damascus. By gerrymandering Beirut, Damascus hoped to prevent any single candidate like Hariri from gaining an overwhelming majority. In this case, it didn't work as planned, but initial indications show Syrian support for Hariri's selection as the next prime minister.

Damascus may also be concerned that the rise in overt criticism of Syrian domination of Lebanon indicates a parallel rise in latent anti-Syrian sentiment borne by Muslims and Christians both. During the recently concluded election campaign, prominent Druze leader and oppositionist Walid Jumblatt and Christian candidate Nassib Lahoud (cousin but political opponent of President Emile Lahoud) both questioned Syria's domination of Lebanon. Jumblatt called for "a correction of the relationship with Syria to be re-established on a balanced basis." Lahoud was quoted as stating "there is a need to review the size of the (Syrian) presence, the geography and the duration." In June, a leading Lebanese Christian-run newspaper published an editorial calling for an end to Syrian domination of Lebanon, and small Christian-led protests broke out against Syria's military occupation of the country. The more overt rhetorical challenges could be an indication of a subtle shift in Lebanese public sentiment against Syria. However, it could also reflect a greater willingness on the part of some Lebanese to test the redlines under Hafiz al-Asad's successor, Bashar.

What Does It All Mean? Regardless of who is next appointed prime minister later this year, that individual will remain beholden to Damascus. The Syrians simply have too much invested in Lebanon to permit its small neighbor to chart its own course, particularly while the Syrian-Israeli peace process remains frozen. Whether or not the election results mirrored Syrian desires, Lebanon's political elites will remain dependent on Syria for their survival. If, as some speculate, Syria took a relatively "hands-off" approach to last week's elections, it demonstrates the high level of confidence Damascus enjoys regarding its control over Lebanese policy, and the lack of genuine opposition among Lebanese leaders to the state's relationship with Damascus. Syria's apparent backing in recent days of Hariri, an outspoken critic of the current Lebanese government, underscores the complex web of linkages Damascus maintains with Lebanon's political elites of all stripes. Not until other significant developments occur, such as a Syrian-Lebanese peace deal with Israel or internal turmoil in Damascus, will Syria face real pressure to ease up on the reins.

Steven Hecker is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



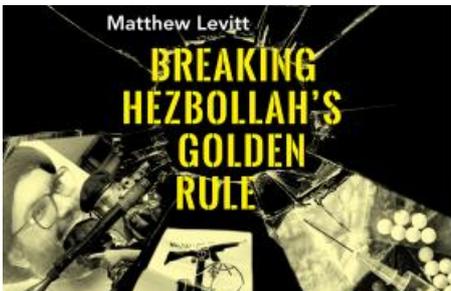
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)