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Elections in Lebanon: Implications for Washington, Beirut, and Damascus

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On November 27, 2007, Jeffrey Feltman, Tony Badran, and David Schenker addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Feltman has been the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon since July 2004. Mr. Badran is a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, specializing in Syrian and Lebanese politics. He runs the well-known political blogs [Across the Bay](#) and [OpenSyria.org](#). Mr. Schenker is a senior fellow and director of the Arab Politics Program at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JEFFREY FELTMAN

On November 23, the presidential term of Emile Lahoud expired with no one elected to replace him. This occurred due to a boycott by opposition members of parliament -- namely Nabih Berri, Michel Aoun, and representatives of Hizballah. In previous weeks, French diplomats had taken the lead in trying to broker a consensus on the presidency by asking the Maronite patriarch to make a list of possible candidates. Pro-Syrian forces and the Iran-backed "March 8" bloc -- represented by Berri and Aoun -- vetoed five of the suggested names, however, while Saad Hariri, leader of the pro-Western "March 14" movement, vetoed two. Although the French initiative eventually failed, there was a half victory: Lahoud left office at the end of his scheduled term, and Lebanon remains a democracy, albeit a weak one. Moreover, it is unlikely that the next president will be as sympathetic to Syria and Hizballah as Lahoud was.

For the March 14 coalition, the question remains how best to secure a president who is committed to Lebanon's security and independence and will support the implementation of the UN Security Council's resolutions. But time is not on their side. The Christians will naturally become more restless the longer the presidency -- which is their office by law -- remains vacant. There is also the danger of ongoing political assassinations, which have already taken a toll on the majority. Although the democratic "half-plus-one" formula for electing a president -- which the March 14 movement advocates but the opposition rejects, preferring a two-thirds supermajority -- could plunge Lebanon into civil war, nothing has come of the frequent threats over the past eighteen months. But many March 14 members believe that this time, Aoun and Hizballah will act on their threats of violence if a compromise candidate is not elected.

The March 14 coalition stands for the victory of the state, the end of assassinations, and for the implementation of the Security Council's resolutions. This is exactly why the United States should fortify the movement. There are two groups struggling for power in Lebanon: one allied with the West and the other with Syria and Iran. The question confronting the United States is how to tip the balance toward the former.

TONY BADRAN

The French initiative forced the Maronite patriarch to draft a list of potential candidates. According to the initiative, the names would be discussed, and if no single consensus candidate emerged, the two or three

remaining names would be taken to parliament and voted on.

The result of the initiative demonstrated that diplomacy with Syria always results in failure. Not wanting to admit failure, however, the French stood by their plan. Everything France was offering Syria had already been discussed, including normalization with Europe and progress on the European Union Economic Association Agreement. But Syria conceded nothing because its real objective was resumption of diplomatic relations with the United States.

Similarly, "convincing" Syria to come to the Annapolis peace summit was not a victory -- the Syrians were already more than eager to participate. Despite appearances, it seems that Damascus was just holding out for concessions to attend. Shortly before the meeting, fearing a no-show by Syria, Jordan's King Abdullah visited Damascus carrying a stern message: attend Annapolis or risk a boycott of the 2008 Arab League summit in Syria, a development that would further isolate the regime.

Similarly, many Lebanese feared that pro-Syrian president Lahoud would create chaos before he left office. That did not happen, however, and Damascus is trying to portray the lack of chaos as some sort of concession. But long before Lahoud's departure, it was clear that Syria's choice, Lebanese armed forces chief of staff Michel Suleiman, would not head a transitional or military government, and Damascus has not yet managed to impose its own presidential candidate. For its part, the March 14 coalition has not yet abandoned the half-plus-one option and, on a certain level, retains leverage. Hizballah is livid that Lahoud did not leave office without extracting any concessions, given that the group had been waging a year-long campaign to oust Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

Sectarian tensions may increase as long as a vacuum exists, and Syria will exploit the situation to push for its candidate. For pro-Syrian elements inside Lebanon, their ultimate ally is Hizballah. The notion that Hizballah and Syria will eventually part ways is improbable because Damascus would lose its only available means of exerting influence inside Lebanon.

DAVID SCHENKER

What is the meaning of a "consensus" president? Although the Lebanese presidency is a weak office, Lahoud showed it has the power to block many initiatives and appoint a number of ministers. Lahoud even held a blocking third in Siniora's cabinet at one point (though these ministers eventually abandoned him and joined the March 14 coalition). The president had no commitment to UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701, and if his successor is sympathetic to Syria, he will not support these resolutions either. And while a consensus president might not be able to stop the tribunal from prosecuting the killers of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri -- a trial that the Syrian regime views as an existential threat -- he could undermine international support for it.

Hizballah announced late in the election period that Aoun was its candidate, but it is not clear whether he is truly the group's first choice. Syria's candidate is Suleiman. But in order for him to be a presidential contender, a constitutional amendment would be required to overturn the normal two-year waiting period for senior officials seeking elected office -- a move that is opposed by Walid Jumblatt and other March 14 leaders. Yet, these same leaders have recently suggested the movement might accept a compromise president -- a troubling prospect that may indicate they are hedging their bets. Perhaps this development reflects their concern over the Hariri tribunal's progress. The appointment of a Canadian prosecutor with no experience prosecuting terrorism cases, instead of the former chief prosecutor of the Yugoslavia tribunal, may have undermined the movement's confidence.

There has also been a lot of talk about another civil war in Lebanon, but the issue cannot be discussed without considering Syrian and Iranian interests. Hizballah has pledged never to turn its weapons of "resistance" against the Lebanese people, and the last thing Iran wants is to tarnish the Shiite militia's positive image in the Arab world by returning to civil war. Syria, however, may find it useful to foment such a conflict in order to

undermine the tribunal.

Regarding the Annapolis summit, the government used its newly found executive powers following Lahoud's departure to send a delegation to the meeting. Yet, although some high-ranking Lebanese officials hope this initiative will somehow improve the situation in Lebanon, such a development is extremely unlikely.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Megan Khoury.

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