

Hizballah's Influence in Lebanon and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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The results of Lebanon's May 6 parliamentary elections, according to many initial commentaries, are likely to strengthen Hizballah.¹ Even before the final tallies were issued on May 7, Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett tweeted that the election results "strengthen what has been our approach for a while: Lebanon = Hizballah."² Analyst Tony Badran similarly noted, "Lebanon is another name for Hizballah. Its 'government' is a front for Iran, which gives Hizballah its orders."³ However, other Beirut-based analysts, such as Scarlett Haddad, have justifiably called for a more nuanced view of the election results. Although the Islamist group's political allies did win more than half of the 128 total seats in parliament, Hizballah's 13 seats, combined with a low voter turn-out in key constituencies, do not spell a total victory for the Islamist group. Yet, as Haddad also notes, Hizballah did achieve unprecedented success by effectively expanding its base of support beyond the Shi'i communities to include independent Sunni, Christian, and Druze candidates.⁴ The Future Party, headed by Sunni Prime Minister Sa'ad al-Hariri and leader of the coalition opposing Hizballah and its main allies, lost seven seats and no longer holds a parliamentary majority. While Hizballah's gains and the Future Party's losses are likely to increase Hizballah's political clout, the coalition-building process that will lead to the next government is far from over. In the lead up to the election, Hizballah and its allies promised to quickly resolve the Syrian refugee crisis regardless of the actions of

¹ For instance, see: "[Lebanon Election 2018: Hezbollah declares victory amid claims of voter fraud](#)," *The National*, May 7, 2018, and Zeina Karam and Bassem Mroue, "[Hezbollah, allies score major gains in Lebanon election](#)," *Associated Press*, May 7, 2018.

² "[Bennett: Terror group's election success shows Hezbollah is Lebanon](#)," *Times of Israel*, May 7, 2018; and Halim Shebaya, "[Memo to Israel: Lebanon is not Hezbollah; Gaza is not Hamas](#)," *Al-Jazeera*, May 21, 2018.

³ Liel Leibovitz, "[Getting the story right on Lebanon](#)," *Tablet Magazine*, May 9, 2018.

⁴ Scarlett Haddad, "[Pour le Hezbollah, un bilan positif, malgré quelques couacs](#)," *L'Orient*, May 21, 2018.

the international community. In practice, however, it is unlikely that the "resistance axis" comprised of Syria, Iran, and Hizballah can return the one million refugees now in Lebanon to Syria without international backing and coordination. On this issue, as well as other key issues facing the Lebanese state, Hizballah's current allies realize that external funding and additional domestic political support will be necessary. As a result, the refugee issue is one factor that is likely to limit Hizballah's ability to translate its recent political success into *de facto* control of the Lebanese government.

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia and the United States have been the biggest supporters of Hizballah's rivals, as well as major financiers of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Saudi Arabia and its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries provide a major pillar of the Lebanese economy, and Saudi deposits in the Lebanese Central Bank serve as both a financial asset and a political vote of confidence. While the Saudis cut \$4 billion of grants to the LAF in early 2016, they announced an offer of soft loans to Lebanon in the lead up to the May election.⁵ This move may have been designed to win back Saudi political allies in Lebanon following the November 2017 fiasco, during which Lebanese of all stripes accused the Saudi government of kidnapping Sa'ad al-Hariri. (Hariri was eventually released, but his "resignation" televised from Riyadh was withdrawn after his return to Beirut.)⁶

Thus far, the U.S. has been sending mixed messages in response to the May election results. The U.S. has added several top Hizballah members to its sanctions list and further toughened rhetoric on Iran, while at the same time renewing its financial commitments to the LAF. Meanwhile, continued U.S. support for the LAF allows the Lebanese security forces to continue their campaign to limit Sunni Islamist violence. Hizballah and its Syrian and Iranian backers have few solutions – and even fewer resources – to improve governance in Lebanon.⁷ Hizballah's future role in Lebanese politics may depend on how it deals with the Syrian refugee crisis, as well as how domestic power struggles extend or undermine Hizballah's power within the political system.

The personal friendship between Nabih Berri, the head of the largest Shi'i party, *Amal*, and Speaker of the House, and Walid Jumblatt, long considered the leading Druze politician in Lebanon, has the potential to threaten Hizballah's political gains. Jumblatt is considered anti-Syrian and works closely with Sa'ad al-Hariri's

⁵ "[Saudi Arabia reinstates pledge of \\$1 billion in soft loans to Lebanon](#)," *The Daily Star Lebanon*, April 6, 2018.

⁶ Ann Barnard and Maria Abi-Habib, "[Why Saad Hariri Had that Strange Sojourn in Saudi Arabia](#)," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2017.

⁷ Ariel Ben Solomon, "[Hezbollah's rise casts doubt on Lebanon's status as the 'Paris of the Middle East'](#)," *Jewish News Syndicate*, January 22, 2018.

coalition.⁸ However, Jumblatt also occasionally emphasizes his friendship with Speaker Berri, who in turn does not always get along with President Michel Aoun — currently the leading partner in the ruling coalition with Amal that includes Hizballah.⁹ According to reports, Jumblatt and Berri have been considering the formation of a third bloc should they grow weary of their current coalition partners.¹⁰ A separate Jumblatt-Berri bloc would hold 26 seats. Although such a scenario is currently unlikely, this potential alliance could threaten the two-bloc system that has provided a degree of stability in Lebanon over the past decade.

Following the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, Lebanese political factions split along a pro- or anti-Syrian axis. Since then, Lebanese political forces have been divided into two camps: the March 14 Alliance (against Hizballah) and the so-called March 8th Alliance, which includes Hizballah, Shi'i-based Amal, and the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). The March 14th Alliance is headed by Sa'ad al-Hariri (son of Rafiq) and includes his Sunni-based Future party and the Maronite-based Lebanese Forces party led by Samir Geagea, which nearly doubled its representatives in the elections and now holds 15 seats in parliament. These alliances are quite fragile and the medium-term results of the May elections could lead to a considerable political realignment. The FPM, which is the largest party in the March 8th Alliance, has its own "strong Lebanon" bloc, which is expected to maintain its current alliance with Hizballah and Christian and Sunni independents. Together, this political coalition is estimated to have around 69 (of 128) seats – enough for a simple majority but not enough to change the constitution, which requires a two-thirds majority.

Though Hizballah received support from non-Shi'i independent candidates in the May elections, this development is unlikely to translate into a lasting alliance between Hizballah and traditionally Christian parties in the March 8th Alliance, such as the FPM. Recent developments indicate that previously close ties between Sa'ad al-Hariri and Gebran Bassil, leader of the FPM and possible presidential successor, have soured due to the poor showing of the Future Party in the May elections. Now, there are signs that Hariri and his Saudi backers may be calling for more political distance between the Future Party and the March 8th Alliance, which could in turn create tension between Bassil and Hizballah.¹¹

⁸ "[Jumblatt visits Hariri: We have a long history](#)," *National News Agency* [Lebanese state-owned], May 22, 2018.

⁹ For instance, see: "[Aoun, Hariri targetting Berri: PSP's Jumblatt to Al-Akhbar](#)," *The Daily Star* March 30, 2018.

¹⁰ David Enders, "[In Lebanon's elections, one man's place in parliament is certain](#)," *The National* [UAE], April 4, 2018.

¹¹ Joseph Bahout, Twitter Thread, May 12, 2018, 11:16am, <https://twitter.com/jobahout/status/995370002994868224>.

Though he has clashed with Hizballah supporters in the past,¹² Bassil has expressed support for a Hizballah-led plan to transfer the Syrian refugees from Lebanon and affirms Hizballah's right to retain its arms. Therefore, Bassil's strong Lebanon bloc is unlikely to undermine Hizballah's role in Lebanese politics unless the West make an alliance with Hizballah sufficiently costly to render it untenable for its political allies.

Regional or international pressure could also exacerbate an already fragile political landscape should Lebanese domestic politics remain divided for the duration of the coalition building process. At the moment, stability is the primary concern for Lebanese across the political spectrum. For example, following the recent events at the border in Gaza, Samir Geagea, the pro-Western critic of Hizballah and leader of the LAF employed uncharacteristically careful language in an attempt to avoid sparking riots and instability in Lebanon. Although Geagea is a staunch member of the March 14th Camp, he has begun to employ similar language as used by Hizballah-aligned Maronites such as President Michel Aoun and Gebran Bassil. Geagea recently said that Lebanon could no longer host Syrian refugees "even temporarily."¹³

Considering the abovementioned factors, Hizballah and the major Christian parties on both sides of the aisle share an interest in preventing violence emanating from Palestinian or Syrian refugees and solving the refugee crisis. Recently, tensions between mostly Sunni Syrian refugees and the non-Sunni Lebanese population have increased due to efforts to pass new legislation that discriminates against Syrian refugees. For instance, Gebran Bassil has been trying to change the 1925 Lebanese Nationality Law, which only allows Lebanese citizenship to be passed down by the father. Bassil's latest version of the law would allow non-Lebanese men to get Lebanese citizenship if they marry a Lebanese woman, unless they are from "neighboring countries," i.e. Syrians and Palestinians. As one Sunni woman on Twitter stated in response to Bassil's proposal, "you only want to ban Muslims."¹⁴

Once a government is formed, the cabinet, likely to be still headed by Sa'ad al-Hariri (or another Sunni Muslim as required by the constitution), will have to devise a strategy to begin returning Syrian refugees in Syria and resettling them. Beginning in the summer of 2017, Syrian refugees were transported back to Syria as part of a joint Hizballah-Assad regime operation near the Lebanese

¹² "[Lebanon FM slammed for saying 'We are not against Israel living in security'](#)," *Times of Israel*, December 28, 2017.

¹³ "[Geagea: We reject an idea or step for keeping Syrian displaced in Lebanon](#)," *LBC International*, May 15, 2018.

¹⁴ Gebran Bassil (authenticated), Twitter Post, March 21, 2018, 1:21am, https://twitter.com/Gebran_Bassil/status/976373237939671040; Fatima, Twitter Response, March 21, 2018, 1:30am, https://twitter.com/krd_fatima/status/976375495704096773.

border town of Arsal. This operation, which was ostensibly designed to get rid of *Jabhat al-Nusra* and Islamic State (IS) militants, ultimately led to the expulsion of 9,000 Syrians from Lebanon to Idlib.¹⁵ Portrayed as a decisive victory against terrorists and an effective reduction of the illegal refugee population in Lebanon, this move may have helped Hizballah and its allies in the May elections. These measures also undermined the efforts of Sa'ad al-Hariri to cooperate with the West and UNHCR directives to solve the refugee crisis. Hariri lost support even among fellow Sunnis who doubted the Prime Minister's ability to quickly resolve the refugee issue. Should the refugee crisis continue to go unresolved, Syrian refugees could become restless and either demand more rights in Lebanon, or even join with Palestinians in solidarity and demand citizenship — a red line in Lebanese political discourse. (The last time a Lebanese politician mentioned granting citizenship to refugees was in the resignation speech of the Prime Minister Rashid al-Sulh in May 1975, weeks before the official outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War.¹⁶)

Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah has stated on multiple occasions that Lebanon should coordinate directly with Bashar al-Assad to repatriate Syrians immediately.¹⁷ In practice however, given an absence of international backing, Hizballah's fragile coalition partners may not agree to support another Hizballah operation to return refugees to Syria. It's also not clear whether the Asad regime is willing or able to repatriate the refugees currently in Lebanon. In any case, Hizballah is unlikely to immediately attempt a large-scale forced transfer of Syrian refugees, despite the desire across the political spectrum for a solution to the refugee crisis. Hizballah's stated plan is to coordinate with the Syrian regime, but that does not seem realistic in the near future. In that light, Hizballah and its foreign backers do not presently offer a concrete solution to the refugee crisis.

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¹⁵ Joel D. Parker, "[Sa'ad al-Hariri and the Tehran-Beirut Axis: the Case of Arsal](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes*, (Vol. 11, No. 14) August 13, 2017.

¹⁶ Tomas Michalak, "The Palestinians and the Outbreak of the Civil War in Lebanon (1975)," *Asian and African Studies* (Vol. 22, No. 1) November 2013.

¹⁷ "[Our homes are not for strangers': mass evictions of Syrian refugees by Lebanese municipalities](#)," *Human Rights Watch*, April 20, 2018.

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