

The US-Israeli supported March 14 Alliance Wins Lebanon's Parliamentary Elections

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The results of Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections are in. And defying expectations, the U.S., Israel, and Saudi-backed "March 14" Alliance managed to maintain its majority in the Chamber of Deputies and claim victory. This came as a relative surprise since many had predicted the "March 8" Alliance of Hezbollah, Amal, and the Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun would ultimately triumph.

Of parliament's 128 seats, split evenly among Muslims and Christians, March 14 won 68 and March 8, 57. Three independent candidates will apparently be siding with the former giving them a total of 71; a net gain of one over the previous 70-58 distribution.

Twenty-seven seats in parliament are allocated to Shia Muslims and as expected, all went to the March 8 Alliance. Similarly, of the 27 allotted to Sunni Muslims, all went to March 14. It was the Christian vote therefore - particularly the Maronite one - which ultimately tipped the balance in favor of the pro-Western coalition to the delight of the U.S. and their Arab allies.

Lost in the jubilation among the supporters of Saad Hariri, head of the largest party in the March 14 Alliance and its de facto head, was that the Hezbollah-led opposition handily won the popular vote. It can be factually stated that the majority of Lebanese did *not* vote for the March 14 group. Although certainly not insignificant, due to the distribution of seats based on electoral district, this does not change the outcome of the contest.

So how did March 14 do it?

The reasons are multifactorial, but primarily involve heavy-handed American interference, Israeli threats and salient domestic political endorsements:

- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was the first high-profile U.S. administration official to swoop into Beirut , remarkably calling for no “foreign interference” in the upcoming elections while simultaneously intimating that American support for the country will be contingent on the proverbial “moderate voices” emerging victorious. It may have been an exceptionally short visit, but it was time enough to deliver the intended message.

- Next came Vice President Joseph Biden, who visited in May. He candidly stated the U.S. would “ ... evaluate the shape of our assistance programs [to Lebanon] based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates.”

- President Obama’s generally well-received June 4 address to the Muslim world in Cairo quite intentionally highlighted Lebanon’s Maronite Christian minority in remarks on the “richness of religious diversity” (despite the fact no single religious sect in Lebanon actually forms a majority).

- As if the President, Vice-President, and Secretary of State were not enough, in the waning hours prior to the poll, it was Deputy Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman’s turn. In a decidedly condescending manner, he appealed to the “intelligence” of the Lebanese people and implored they recognize the election’s outcome will “ ... naturally affect the world’s stance towards the new Lebanese government and the manner in which the United States and Congress deal with Lebanon .” He further went on to say they should be “smart enough” to understand the ramifications of not siding with America ’s preferred coalition.

- Israeli conducted large-scale military maneuvers on the border with Lebanon in the days prior to the elections, while previously forewarning of the possible deleterious consequences should the Hezbollah-led alliance win. No doubt the memory of Israel ’s 2006 onslaught remained fresh in the minds of many.

- In a May speech, Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah referred to the day a year back when his men swept through West Beirut (after Prime Minister Fouad Siniora’s cabinet declared the group’s strategic telecommunications network illegal) as “glorious.” It was a poor choice of words, although the intent was to refer to its outcome: the Doha Accords. This ended the political stalemate between March 8 and March 14 and paved the way to fill a vacant presidency:

“I tell the Lebanese, in particular Sunnis and Shias, that the May 7 events put an end to war in Beirut . The May 7 events safeguarded Lebanon ’s institutions and forced all Lebanese parties to go back to the [national] dialogue, which led to the election of President Michel

Suleiman.”

The events of that day were particularly bitter for the Hariri faction, and Nasrallah’s unnecessary reminder surely gave them the opportunity needed to exploit it prior to the vote.

· The influential Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir also chimed in, warning his community on election eve of the potential threat to “ Lebanon ’s character and Arab identity” should a certain coalition win. The racist admonition was a clear endorsement of the March 14 Alliance .

For the critical undecided, swing Maronite voters torn between the two coalitions (each of which has prominent Maronite representation) or those uneasy with a Hezbollah partnership, the above factors led them to “play it safe” and cast their lot with March 14. This was enough to decide the election.

The weeks and months ahead will see intense deliberations and negotiations between the two camps as a cabinet and government are formed. At issue will be whether the opposition’s “one-third plus one” veto-power in the cabinet as outlined in the Doha Accords will be honored; the selection of a new prime minister (and if Saad Hariri, will he relinquish his Saudi citizenship?); the matter of Hezbollah’s arms; and what new reforms, if any, the government will adopt (the only platform March 14 seemed to run on was that it was not March 8).

Lebanon ’s June elections, albeit changing the status quo ante very little, were a lively exercise in democracy in a hotly-contested, yet fair vote. An important component of any democracy however, is the presence of a vigorous and engaged opposition; one able to keep the ruling majority accountable and answerable for their actions.

Of that, Lebanon is assured.

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