

Lebanon Elections: As Good as It Gets?

by Jeffrey Steinberg

June 13—There is no doubt that the outcome of the June 7 Lebanese parliamentary elections, maintaining the status quo—almost down to the individual parliamentary vote—were significantly impacted by an extensive outside covert effort, principally involving an estimated \$400 million in Saudi funds, used to airlift Lebanese voters in, from around the world, to vote for the incumbent “March 14” slate. While polls on the eve of the vote suggested that the opposition March 8th Movement, including the Shi’ites of Hezbollah and Amal, and the Maronite Christian party of Gen. Michel Aoun (ret.), would win a narrow victory, the switch of a handful of seats, largely in Christian precincts, shifted the outcome.

Sources throughout the region have confirmed that Saudi intelligence (Saudi Arabia is predominantly Sunni) played a central role in herding an unknown number of diasporan Lebanese back home to vote. These voters had been fed horror stories about what would happen if the Hezbollah coalition won a majority. And just days before the vote, *Der Spiegel*, a conduit for British intelligence black propaganda, published a false story, claiming that UN investigators had concluded that Hezbollah was behind the 2005 assassination of the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Even UN officials denounced the story as a hoax, but the impact was felt nevertheless.

The Saudi intervention was complemented by a striking *lack* of interference in the elections from Syria and Iran—each for different reasons. Several months before the vote, the head of Saudi intelligence, Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz bin Saud, traveled to Damascus to meet with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, beginning a process of Saudi-Syrian rapprochement, after a long war of words between the two Sunni Arab states. An element of that rapprochement was reportedly a Syrian agreement not to overtly interfere in the Lebanese elections. The Saudis made no parallel pledge.

In the case of Iran, a combination of lower oil prices,

draining the country of resources for conducting costly foreign operations, and upcoming hotly contested elections, reduced the Iranian involvement.

These factors were probably decisive in shaping the election outcome. But they do not tell the full story.

Since the time of the Hariri assassination, continuing through the 2006 Israel invasion, there has been a non-stop outside effort to replay the 1975-90 Lebanese Civil War. This time, however, leaders of a majority of communities and factions in the country concluded that it would be unacceptable for the country to be plunged, once again, into chaos and conflict. A national consensus, incorporating both the Hariri-led March 14th movement, and the March 8th opposition, including Hezbollah, has emerged, and appears to have a reasonable chance of holding. Prior to the elections, sources in Lebanon report, an understanding was reached among all the major factions, that a national unity government, modeled on the agreement last year at Doha, Qatar, would be continued—regardless of the electoral outcome. That agreement is likely to shape the new Lebanese government.

Even Hezbollah leader Sheikh Nasrallah made this point clear, when, the day after the electoral results were announced, he fully endorsing the outcome, praising the Lebanese people for conducting a free and fair election, and pledging to support the new government. It is known that Nasrallah and Saad Hariri (Rafik’s son) had conferred prior to the elections and reached this understanding.

A fair conclusion? The Lebanese vote has left the political structure intact, with a degree of stability that could be described as “as good as it gets,” under the current conditions of global financial-economic collapse, and a legacy of British Sykes-Picot interference in the affairs of every nation in the region.

Furthermore, President Obama’s special Middle East envoy George Mitchell, and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, traveled to Beirut and Damascus, immediately after the election results were announced. There are good prospects of a normalization of U.S.-Syrian ties, coming out of the visits, and Syria can play a pivotal role in backing any serious effort at achieving regional peace. That the sharp divide within the Sunni Arab camp has been reduced by the start of a Saudi-Syrian rapprochement, further points to the fact that things could have gotten a lot worse. Call it a holding action, but in today’s world of chaos and the threat of war, a holding action is not a bad thing.