



COUNTRY
BACKGROUND
SERIES

Lebanon

The U.S.-Lebanon relationship is one of enormous strategic importance. Washington sees an independent Lebanon as an effective counter to the expanded influence of Syria and Hezbollah. Lebanon has relied heavily on economic and political support from the U.S. in order to secure its sovereignty and stability. As Syria removed its military personnel during the Cedar Revolution of 2005, the possibility of real political autonomy emerged. The new political environment would be defined by two camps: the pro-West March 14 alliance and the opposition pro-Syria March 8 coalition, which includes Hezbollah. A seven-month deadlock

over who would succeed President Emile Lahoud triggered Hezbollah's occupation of Sunni West Beirut, eventually finding a resolution in the recently-brokered Doha Agreement. Consensus choice, General Michel Sleiman, was appointed to the presidency and a unity cabinet formed after weeks of intense negotiations. Hezbollah's newfound veto power coupled with the diminished political capital of March 14 has led to a tense situation and threatened prospects for consensus building.

I. General Interest

The relatively warm relations between the U.S. and Lebanon span several decades. Since its independence in 1943, Lebanon has emerged as a regional anomaly in its acceptance of constitutional democracy. Lebanon is currently seen by many U.S. policymakers as a potentially stabilizing buffer between Syria and Israel, and a bulwark against an [Iran-Hezbollah-Syria bloc](#).¹

Between 1992 and 2005, annual U.S. trade exports to Lebanon averaged nearly [\\$440 million per year](#).² Since 2006, however, exports have increased substantially, averaging nearly \$900 million. U.S. aid in 2007 topped [\\$200 million](#)³ to assist Lebanese rebuilding efforts after the Israeli-Hezbollah War. The Bush administration also supplied the Lebanese government [with arms](#)⁴ during its conflict with the Sunni militant group, Fatah al-Islam, in May 2007.

Lebanon is classified by Freedom House as "[partly free](#)"⁵ and has generally allowed far more freedom of expression than in other parts of the region. However, the country has a history of [state intimidation and prosecution](#)⁶ of journalists critical of the government. The long-term stability of both Lebanon and the region are tied to the former's prospects for successful democratic governance. Heightened sectarian conflict, which remains a real risk, will continue to threaten Lebanon's efforts to pursue substantive political reform.

II. Overview of US-Lebanon Relations

As Soviet influence expanded in the region, the rise of an independent Lebanon provided the [Eisenhower administration](#)⁷ an important Cold War partner during the 1950s. The [Reagan administration](#)⁸ became heavily involved af-

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ter Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 to root out Palestinian militants. The U.S., along with European allies, demanded Israeli withdrawal through the United Nations Security Council and eventually contributed peacekeeping troops as part of a multinational force. It also helped negotiate the exit of Yasser Arafat and fighters from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). After 241 servicemen were killed by a bomb attack on the U.S. Marine Corps Barracks in 1983, the Reagan administration decided to withdraw its troops.

In February 2004, Syria pressured Lebanon to amend its constitution in order to extend the term of pro-Syrian president, Emile Lahoud. The U.S. and France responded by sponsoring United Nations Security Council [Resolution 1559](#),⁹ calling for Lebanon's political and territorial sovereignty. The Bush administration praised the 2005 elections and lent its support to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the March 14 coalition, which won 72 of 128 parliamentary seats. However, it [responded negatively](#)¹⁰ to Hezbollah's gaining a significant foothold in parlia-

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ment and its new role in the cabinet. Hezbollah ministers acquired the energy and labor portfolios, while fellow Shiite party Amal received three cabinet posts.

At the end of Lahoud's term in November 2007, the March 14 and March 8 coalitions could not agree on a successor, leading to a seven month deadlock. During the stalemate, U.S. policy focused on isolating Syria and providing military support to the Lebanese government. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Advisor Steven Hadley met with March 14 leaders Saad Hariri, son of the slain prime minister Rafik Hariri, and Samir Geagea, leader of Lebanese Forces, a leading party in March 14, to discuss the deadlock. Upon the formation of a unity government, the State Department [announced](#)¹¹ it would not deal with Hezbollah's one cabinet member.

III. Major Political Groups

Islamist Groups

[Hezbollah](#)¹³ was founded in 1982 in response to Israel's crossing into southern Lebanon. The group's [transition](#)¹⁴ into the political realm began with the 1990 Taif Agreement, which laid out the post-civil war governmental structure. Hezbollah has made significant political inroads in an environment where Shiites have been systematically under-represented and rank among the poorest members of the country. The organization enjoys a wide base of support, spanning both religious Shiites supportive of their resistance efforts and middle class secular Shiites who desire more political say. Amal, a Shiite political movement allied with Syria which fought Hezbollah in the 1980s, would align with Hezbollah under the banner of March 8. While Amal's weaponry was incorporated into the Lebanese military at the end of the civil war, Hezbollah continued to [double as an armed militia](#).¹⁵

Hezbollah's [institutional role in the government](#)¹⁶ has helped provide further cover for its military efforts. Under the "Quartet Agreement" during the 2005 elections, Hezbollah agreed to deliver the Shiite vote for 12 candidates of the pro-West March 14 in exchange for guarantees that they could keep their weapons. The organization is an integral part of the March 8 coalition that also includes Christian General Michael Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement.

Hezbollah Representation in Parliament (# of seats)

1992	1996	2000	2005
8	7	9	14

Under the Taif Agreement, a two-thirds vote is needed to hold a quorum and pass major decisions in the cabinet. Amal and Hezbollah withdrew from the government in 2006 after demanding more than a third of the total cabinet seats in order to acquire veto power. In November 2006, the bloc threatened to bring down the government by inciting mass protests but later withdrew its threat. Amal leader Nabih Berri's role as parliamentary speaker allowed March 8 to suspend parliament in order to prevent a vote on the president. In May 2008, the coalitions reached an agreement mediated by the Arab League in Doha, resulting in Sleiman's appointment and an agreement on principles. Hezbollah was widely perceived as the "winner" of the [Doha Agreement](#)¹⁷ as it was able to retain its weapons. In addition, the opposition bloc gained 11 cabinet seats, giving it veto power.

Sunni Islamist organizations have also wielded [significant political influence](#),¹⁸ particularly after Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. During the 2005 elections, the March 14 coalition sought the support of these groups, such as the nonviolent Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, to secure a parliamentary majority. The coalition rewarded supportive Sunni Islamists by extending amnesty to detained militants.

Secular Groups

Most of Lebanon's leading political parties are secular in orientation. These include the three leading parties in March 14 – the Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party, and Lebanese Forces – as well as March 8th's Free Patriotic Movement. Given the nature of Lebanon's confessional system, secular parties have generally relied [on sectarian followings](#).¹⁹ The Future Movement has a largely Sunni following; the Progressive Socialist Party is supported by the Druze; and Lebanese Forces is Maronite Christian. The Free Patriotic Movement, however, has attained a Christian and Muslim following due to its [alliance](#)²⁰ with Amal and Hezbollah.

IV. Political Reform

Perceptions of Political Reform and U.S. Democracy Promotion

American efforts to promote democracy in Lebanon have conflicted with its goal of minimizing Hezbollah's influence. The perception of the U.S. endorsing a political system that undervalues the Shiite population has likely

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played a role in the widespread belief among Lebanese that U.S. interests are primarily security driven.

Popular opinion of the United States²¹ has been negative overall. According to a 2006 Zogby poll, 69% of Lebanese stated that the U.S. was one of the two biggest threats to their security, topped only by Israel; 64% stated that their view of America was either highly or somewhat unfavorable; and 61% believe that democracy is not the real objective behind U.S. democracy promotion efforts. The Hezbollah-Israeli war contributed to this negative perception – a 2006 Gallup Poll²² found that 64% of Lebanese said their opinion of the U.S. worsened after the conflict. In addition, the war also resulted in increased sympathy²³ for the Shiite population in general and Hezbollah in particular.

Political Institutions

Lebanon is a parliamentary republic,²⁴ defined by a confessional structure that requires the president be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shiite Muslim. In this framework, the parliament selects the president who in turn appoints the prime minister. Under the Taif Agreement,²⁵ the cabinet and parliament are required to seat an equal number of Christians and Muslims. Lebanon's judiciary also reflects this sectarian nature, with personal status courts divided among the religious groups.

The country's governmental structure has historically reflected a deep disconnect from the make-up of the population. The Taif Agreement has continued this tradition, resulting in the systematic under-representation of the Shiites who comprise the largest proportion of the population. Lebanese Christians, who are an estimated 30-40% of the populace, have disproportionately greater power given that they are allotted half of all parliamentary and cabinet seats. Lebanese election law also requires that voters cast ballots in their ancestral homes in order to maintain the sectarian makeup of districts.

Vote buying has been endemic in national elections while political control of media outlets has led to widespread abuse, including the practice of politicians bribing journalists.²⁶ In spite of this, an overwhelming majority of Lebanese believed²⁷ the 2005 elections were free and fair.

V. Prospects for Reform

One of the outcomes of the Doha Agreement²⁸ was that it broke down the 14 district framework that was largely

perceived as an extension of Syrian control into 26 electoral districts. The redistricting, however, did not include a move towards proportional representation²⁹ and is widely seen as producing little political change.

The Fouad Boutros Commission, established to address electoral reform, presented draft legislation in 2006 that would create an independent election commission, combat vote-buying, ensure voter secrecy, and regulate the use of private television stations. The most drastic change would allow for proportional representation in 51 of the 128 parliamentary districts. Due to the major parties' interest in preserving and enhancing their political power, passage of the Boutros legislation, which would significantly alter the electoral landscape, remains unlikely.

Several factors point to increased sectarian tension and dimmed prospects for substantive reform. A controversial 2005 law that gerrymandered Lebanon's districts³⁰ has only reinforced sectarian divisions. 2008 has seen numerous incidents of violence between sects, particularly in the north between Sunni Islamist backers of March 14 and Shiite supporters of Hezbollah. Furthermore, the Doha Agreement shifted the balance of political power. The March 14 coalition lost significant political leverage after being perceived as the loser in Doha. Meanwhile, the opposition's 11-vote veto power in the cabinet will allow little room for legislative compromise.

VI. Congressional Policy and Foreign Assistance

Key Legislation

In October 2007, Saad Hariri met with Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY) and other members of the House Middle East Subcommittee to secure political support. This visit resulted in the passage of a House resolution³¹ condemning the Syrians for political interference. H. Res 1194³² and 1201³³ were introduced during the presidential stalemate in May 2007, calling for an end to the deadlock. Congress allocated \$45 million in aid to Lebanon as part of the 2008 Foreign Operations Act.³⁴ The 2009 version³⁵ appropriates over \$67 million, far from the \$140 million requested³⁶ by the White House. However, both numbers represent substantial increases from the average of \$32 million appropriated between 2000 and 2007.

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Policy Outlook

Members of Congress condemned³⁷ the deployment of American ships to the Lebanese coast as a needlessly provocative gesture toward Iran. Other administration critics³⁸ have voiced concern that U.S. policy will turn Lebanon into a battleground for a proxy war³⁹ with Iran and its allies. Conversely, some policy analysts have argued that sufficiently arming⁴⁰ the Lebanese government provides the best insurance against Iran and Syria's use of Hezbollah as a surrogate. The Bush administration has also continued its policy of supporting March 14 while refusing to deal with Hezbollah and March 8. A critical question is whether the U.S. will have to engage with the Lebanese opposition bloc and help facilitate talks between the two camps⁴¹ in order to help move Lebanon toward real political progress.

There has been a degree of bipartisan consensus on Lebanon-related issues. There is a general consensus, shared by both the White House and Congress that a greater amount of financial assistance to Lebanon is necessary during an increasingly difficult transition phase for the country.

While the U.S. and European nations appear committed to helping Lebanon in its ongoing efforts to secure political stability, the potential for looming conflict remains high, either internally among clashing political factions, or with its neighbors, particularly Syria and Israel. The Doha Agreement, while a significantly flawed process, has at least forced the country's political forces to compromise. Whether such compromises can develop momentum into something more lasting remains an open question. Efforts like the Boutros Commission are positive, but will need to be coupled with real political will and more constructive involvement from Lebanon's Western allies.

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The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East.

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