

Instability follows final round of Lebanon elections

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The continuing instability of Lebanon was highlighted when, only two days after the fourth and final round of the parliamentary election, George Hawi, former leader of the Lebanese Communist Party, was blown up by a car bomb. The blast was virtually identical to one that killed journalist Samir Kassir some two weeks earlier. Kassir was a leader of the Democratic Left, a breakaway from the Communist Party. Both men were active in the anti-Syrian alliance that won a majority in the election, led by Saad Hariri—whose father Rafik, the former prime minister, was assassinated in February—and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt

Nobody accepts responsibility for the assassinations, but most commentators have assumed that Syrian intelligence agents, or the Lebanese security apparatus that Syria allegedly still controls, are responsible. The theory is that Syria is murdering its political opponents to show that instability will result without its continued occupation, after its troops were forced to leave Lebanon under pressure from the United States,

The anti-Syrian opposition regards the Lebanese President Emile Lahoud—whose term of office continues after the election—as being at the centre of a security apparatus still run by Syria. A special United Nations investigation team, led by Germany's top prosecutor Detlev Mehlis and including US policemen, has begun investigations into the killings. Already it has called in the head of the presidential guard brigade for questioning.

The United States is leading the campaign against Syria's alleged continued involvement in Lebanon as part of its drive for the disarming of Hezbollah, the pro-Syrian militia and political movement that dominates the South of Lebanon—dubbed “terrorists” by Washington—and for regime change in Damascus itself.

Following her visit to the Middle East at the weekend, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice accused Syria of involvement in the assassination and told them to “knock it off.” Repeating Washington's claim after Kassir's killing that there exists a Syrian hit-list targeting Lebanese leaders, she said, “Yes their military forces, their visible forces have gone, but they clearly are still acting in Lebanon and are still a force that is not a stabilizing force there. They have got to stop whatever they are doing there that is causing destabilization of the environment.”

It is, however, far from certain that Syria is the culprit. Khalil Hadadeh, the current general secretary of the Lebanese Communist Party, accused “intelligence instruments and Israel of such a series of aggressions.” Hawi was well known for his support of the Palestinian cause during the Lebanese civil war and his opposition to the Israeli army invading Lebanon in 1982 and presumably was fully aware of the role of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad in carrying out political assassinations. Before his killing, according to his stepson Rafi Madoyan, “George met with Detlev Mehlis because he is very knowledgeable about the internal political situation.”

Even newly elected MP Michel Aoun, the populist anti-Syrian nationalist who managed to win much of the Christian vote away from the Hariri list in the third round of the election, said, “Baabda [the presidential palace] shouldn't be blamed every time a person is hit. Lebanon has become exposed to the whole world.” However, in the intrigues and horse-trading that preoccupy the Lebanese elite, Aoun may well be supporting the president to further his own ambitions.

The final round of the elections that took place in North Lebanon only emphasized the sectarianism that dominates Lebanese politics. Despite Rice's claims

that the United States could take credit for promoting democracy in the Middle East—“the overall sense that this is a region that is now unlocking in terms of democratic reform ... is in part attributable to US policy”—the evidence is to the contrary.

The Hariri-Jumblatt alliance won all 28 seats, based on a list that was dominated by Sunni Muslims. Apart from the sectarian nature of the Lebanese voting system, European Union observers noted that there are no restrictions on financing election candidates, and that they received many allegations of votes being bought.

Overall, in the 128-seat parliament the Hariri-Jumblatt alliance now has 72 seats won in constituencies where Sunni or Druze candidates could dominate the list. Aoun and his allies took 21 seats primarily with Christian support, and the Shia parties Hezbollah and Amal won 35.

None of the parties stood on a political programme, although Hariri has said he is in favour of more free-market policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund given the indebtedness of the Lebanese economy. It is far from clear whether other leaders will support privatization policies involving the sacking of thousands of public sector workers, given the patronage they depend on in the state sector.

It is also unlikely that the government will readily accept the key demand from the United States that Hezbollah should be disarmed. Many support the continued presence of Hezbollah’s militia as a deterrent to Israeli invasion, given the weak state of the Lebanese armed forces.



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