



## Security Situation Surrounding the Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon May 19, 2009

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### Introduction

The upcoming Lebanese Parliamentary elections are arguably among Lebanon's most decisive moments in recent history the outcome of which could radically change the Lebanese political landscape and determine its political direction for many years to come.

With the two main competing camps, the pro-Syrian/Iranian March 8<sup>th</sup> camp and the pro-sovereignty March 14<sup>th</sup> camp, having so much at stake, tensions in the country are very high. The main concern, however, stems from the fact that one of these parties, The March 8<sup>th</sup> group headed by Hezbollah, is heavily armed and capable of wreaking-havoc on the electoral process through violent tactics. Given Hezbollah's history of acting with impunity and using violent means to their ends justifies these security concerns.

These facts have undoubtedly heightened international and domestic concern over the security situation around Lebanon's upcoming elections. A number of international agencies have undertaken initiatives to monitor the security environment and there have been several statements and positions by foreign governments warning of potential security threats, and insisting that the elections run in a perfectly safe environment.

While there appears to be a genuine interest on the part of the Government of Lebanon (*henceforth GOL*) to provide a safe and secure atmosphere for the elections, much more needs to be done. This report addresses the security situation surrounding the parliamentary elections and attempts to present a concise assessment of the security issues and the key players. It concludes with a set of recommendations to the concerned parties.

## **Current state of security**

The current state of security in Lebanon remains, at best, unpredictable. The security landscape is marred by armed factions and militias who repeatedly threaten the Lebanese Government and people with their readiness to use violent means to their ends as they had done on repeated occasions in recent years. Adding to this volatile situation is the fact that the Governmental security forces lack the optimal means and, more importantly, the sufficient political backing to deal with such challenges.

### ***Non-Governmental Armed Groups***

Significant parts of Lebanon remain under the control of organized armed militias including Hezbollah, Amal, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and various Palestinian groups. Specifically:

1. Hezbollah maintains armed presence in at least seven out of 26 election districts, mostly in the South, Baabda, Beirut and the Beqaa Valley. Hezbollah has several thousand fighters equipped with a variety of weapons including rockets of different ranges, anti-aircraft guns, land mines, in addition to assault rifles and RPGs.
2. Other militias, allied with Hezbollah in the March8 camp including Amal, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and other smaller groups are also armed as evidenced by their involvement during the infamous May 2008 events when they assisted Hezbollah in the attacks on Beirut.
3. Radical Palestinian groups loyal to Syria are active on Lebanese soil, particularly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), Fatah Intifada, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. They run several military bases along the Lebanese-Syrian borders as well as within and around some of the Palestinian refugee camps. Palestinian factions loyal to Syria are about 1100 fighters strong and their armament is comprised of light and medium-size weapons in addition to some artillery and rocket-launchers. Many of them are well-trained and organized and also enjoy multi-faceted support from Syria and Hezbollah. A prime example of such factions is the PFLP-GC which is headquartered in Damascus and headed by a Syrian Army officer.

### ***Governmental Armed and Security Forces***

The Governmental Armed and Security forces include mainly the Lebanese Armed Forces (*henceforth LAF*) and the Internal Security Forces (*henceforth ISF*). In addition, a number of related security intelligence bodies operate in the country, often with overlapping mandates.

1. The LAF personnel is about 70,000 strong organized in 11 fighting brigades and 9 special forces regiments. The LAF weaponry is similar to that of a regular army with tanks and artillery units, but lacking any significant air force. The LAF is the main body officially in charge of the security on Lebanese territory.
2. The ISF is about 24,000 strong and is the main agency charged with maintaining civil order. They are organized in regional and central units with one special intervention force. The ISF operates under LAF Command when in joint security missions.

3. The four different intelligence apparatuses are the Military Intelligence of the LAF, the Intelligence Branch of the ISF, the Surete Generale and the State Security Directorates. The most capable and by far the best equipped is the LAF's Military Intelligence (MI).

While much effort is being expended into readying the Lebanese armed, security, and intelligence forces to deal with the situation on the ground during the election period, there is still warranted concern regarding the allegiances of these forces. Numerous key officers within the LAF and especially the military intelligence (MI) are known to be aligned with, or at least sympathetic to, Hezbollah and their allies, particularly Michel Aoun. It is estimated that about 80% of the crucial posts in the MI and about 50% of those in the LAF combat units are controlled by officers aligned with the March8 camp. The positioning of these officers in those key positions was a strategic move implemented by the Syrians during their occupation of Lebanon, and intended to secure their [Syrian] control over the full scope of the Lebanese establishments.

Following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the GOL was unsuccessful in purging the LAF, the ISF, the MI and other security services from officers with questionable allegiances. This has significantly hindered the GOL's capacity to confront the allies and proxies of the Syrian Regime in Lebanon. Besides the battle of Nahr-el-Bared, where the LAF and the ISF retaliated to direct attacks on their troops, the Lebanese Armed and Security Forces have failed to properly deal with the major security incidents that shook Lebanon in the past four years.

One of the major failures of governmental security and armed forces took place on May 7, 2008 when Hezbollah militiamen occupied Beirut and surrounded governmental institutions and homes of rival politicians. Scores of civilians were killed or injured in the brutal attacks and damage to private and public property as well as the economy in general ran in the order of billions of dollars. Throughout the duration of these attacks, the LAF and ISF stood on the sidelines. Even more disconcerting were the numerous reports of members of the Lebanese army and internal security forces actually facilitating the acts of aggression committed by Hezbollah and their allies.

## **Recent security-related events**

Several events took place since the beginning of 2009, which regrettably highlight the failures of the GOL to deal with security issues. Below are some examples of these incidents:

- The kidnapping of Joseph Sader, Middle East airlines IT engineer, by armed elements on February 12, 2009 in the vicinity of Beirut International Airport, a neighborhood controlled by Hezbollah. The fact that Sader was abducted on the airport highway and not some obscure location demonstrates the audacity of the perpetrators and the significance of this security breach.
- Repeated acts of aggressions against members of the "Lebanese Option Gathering", an independent Shiite movement headed by Ahmad El Assad who is himself an open critic of Hezbollah, in Southern Beirut Suburbs, Northern Beqaa and the South. Notably, all these areas are under Hezbollah's strict security control. There has been no less than ten attacks against members of this group within the past 3 months involving mostly torching of cars and throwing of hand grenades at their houses.
- The capture of Israeli spy rings by the Internal Security Forces, while commendable, took place in cooperation with, if not under the auspices of, Hezbollah. With Hezbollah carrying out the surveillance, arrest, and initial interrogation of suspects, there is an implicit admittance on the part of the government that Hezbollah is the de facto state security organization for Lebanon.

- Attacks carried out against M14 members are also widespread. The most significant attacks took place on February 14, 2009 during the commemoration of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Many individuals and groups participating in the popular rally that day were harassed and assaulted on their way to or from the rally by supporters of Hezbollah. Several were injured, and two people lost their lives.
- Attacks on the offices and homes of M14 members occurred in different Lebanese regions this year. On February 16th, a grenade was thrown at the Lebanese Forces Party office in Sin El Fil, Beirut; on February 19th, two grenades were tossed at two offices that belong to the Lebanese Forces Party in the town of Kfour, northeast of Beirut, and two bombs were found on February 20th outside the office of a Kataeb Party official in Dbaye; and, more significantly, is the finding of a explosive device on March 24th near the residence of former president Amin Gemayel, a key member of the March 14 group.
- Clashes between the Lebanese Armed Forces and armed gangs in the Beqaa wanted for smuggling drugs, stealing cars and various other crimes, in areas under the Hezbollah's control. After the initial assault on these gangs' strongholds, the LAF had to stop their operation, apparently by orders from Hezbollah. In the meantime, the key leaders of these gangs escaped to Syria.
- There is credible evidence that various factions within the M8 group are actively distributing weapons and ammunitions to their supporters in different regions of Lebanon during the past few weeks. Some of these groups include the Arab Democratic Party of Ali Eid in Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli; the Al Marada of Suleiman Franjeh, in Koura; The Socialist Arab Union party, in the villages of Kfardnis and Rachayya in the Beqaa; and the Syrian National Socialist in Hasbaya and Rachaya. There are also accounts of weapons distribution in Akkar, Tripoli and the Beqaa by elements of Hezbollah.
- It is important to note here that reports on groups from the M14 camp distributing weapons to their followers are inaccurate. There are Islamic militants, Salafists under the leadership of Hicham Mikara and Bilal about Samra who are distributing weapons to their followers. These groups are not affiliated with M14.

## **Government of Lebanon security position**

The GOL has demonstrated a strong willingness to protect the electoral process and encourage voters to engage in this process as evidenced by the numerous statements issued by the highest authorities.

President Sleiman indicated on repeated occasions that the government is doing its best to deliver a safe electoral environment. He asked the army to treat everybody equally and to have a zero-tolerance policy with any attempts at undermining security. Furthermore, President Sleiman issued reassuring and encouraging messages to the expatriates who will be traveling to Lebanon to cast their ballots - "I cannot see why the elections will not be held on time. I call on Lebanese leaving abroad to cast their ballots because Lebanon needs them," he said.

Minister of Interior Baroud on the other hand had issued several reassuring statements on the government's determination to ensure a safe environment for the elections. He had also repeatedly reiterated that a comprehensive security plan was adopted by the Central Security Council in preparations for the parliamentary elections and that around 30,000 soldiers and security officers will work as part of the national security plan to "[provide] security to balloting centers before and during the elections."

Commander of the LAF, General Kahwaji insisted that the LAF stand at equal distance from all parties and that “it [LAF] puts its best efforts to secure the proper security atmosphere” for the elections. “No one is allowed to breach security during the upcoming parliamentary elections,” he added. But General Kahwaji went on to note that “As long as foreign and domestic parties aim to run in the elections, any possible security breach will not disrupt election day.”

## **Consequences of security situation on elections’ outcome**

There are concerns among March 14, and the general Lebanese population, that the M8 groups could resort to violence in case they feel they might lose the elections. Failure to ensure a secure atmosphere could lead to the following consequences:

1. Hezbollah will impose its candidates in the six districts under its total control; Sour (Tyre), Zahrani, Marjeyoun, Nabatieh, Bint Jbeil and Baalback-Hermel, allowing them to secure 28 seats in the parliament.
2. Hezbollah could also influence, through intimidation tactics, the outcome in the Baabda district due to its proximity to Hezbollah’s stronghold in Beirut’s Southern district.
3. In the Christian districts where the votes will determine the concluding result of the national elections, sporadic security incidents would discourage or prevent M14 supporters from going to the polls.
4. Expatriates, most whom are believed to be supporters of the M14 camp, would cancel their travel arrangements.

## **Recommendations**

While the responsibility of ensuring free and fair elections lies primarily with the GOL, several other entities could provide invaluable support to the success of the process. In this section, we attempt to provide practical recommendation to the GOL and other concerned parties, mainly the Local and International Monitoring agencies and the US and international community:

- ***The Government of Lebanon***

1. Must develop and implement a major security plan focusing on the elections, and which would ensure:
  - Efficient Intelligence and information gathering: Using all available Intelligence resources and networks to uncover and react to any attempt at undermining security, as well as creating a system to allow urgent reporting from citizens and groups on security information.
  - Rapid intervention: A key aspect of the security plan since any minor dispute could rapidly escalate into a major clash particularly in the mixed M14-M8 districts.
  - Protection of candidates, polling stations, delegates, etc.: This is necessary in view of the aggressions against some candidates and parties, and the real danger they encounter in opposing certain groups.
  - Sufficient deployment of troops: On major roads and critical infrastructures, including airport; and more importantly in the more sensitive and highly contested districts.

- Centralized coordination and command: The ISF and LAF forces should be under one command with one senior officer in charge. Communication and coordination between all units on the ground should be highly efficient.
  - Proper conduct of security personnel: LAF and ISF commands should issue very strict instructions ensuring that security and military personnel do not take sides with any party.
2. Must ensure that sufficient human and technical monitoring systems are in place to detect any security infractions in or around the polling stations.
  3. Must arm the LAF and ISF with the necessary mandates that would allow them to move quickly and efficiently to control any security situation in any geographic location, especially the ones under the control of armed militias.
  4. Must fully and forcefully implement a zero-tolerance policy towards any attempts to undermine security in any part of the country.
- ***The Local and International Monitoring Agencies<sup>1</sup>:***
    1. Must have assured access to all geographic locations in Lebanon before, during, and after Election Day. The presence of these independent monitoring agencies at and around the polling stations would allow them to report on any security infractions as well as serve as a possible deterrent.
    2. Should provide timely announcements on any security breaches, witnessed or “reported and confirmed,” to the GOL, the international community as well as local and international media.
  - ***The US and the International Community:***
    1. Should Stress to the Lebanese officials, particularly the President, Prime Minister, Members of the Cabinet, Commanders of Armed and Security Forces, the need to implement broad and drastic security measures to ensure free and fair elections in Lebanon and offer US technical advice where needed.
    2. Should assist the Government of Lebanon, as well as Lebanese and non-Lebanese NGOs in ensuring the safe and lawful progression of the upcoming parliamentary elections by offering technical aid in monitoring, reporting, and assistance in resolving any possible threat to the running of the elections.
    3. Send clear messages to the Syrian Regime insisting on non-interference in Lebanese elections.
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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed list of the monitoring agencies involved with the 2009 parliamentary elections, please refer to LIC document “Monitoring the 2009 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections” on WWW.LICUS.ORG