



# Lebanon: Background and U.S. Policy

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## Summary

Lebanon's small geographic size and population belie the important role it has long played in the security, stability, and economy of the Levant and the broader Middle East. Congress and the executive branch have recognized Lebanon's status as a venue for regional strategic competition and have engaged diplomatically, financially, and at times, militarily to influence events there. For most of its independent existence, Lebanon has been torn by periodic civil conflict and political battles between rival religious sects and ideological groups. External military intervention, occupation, and interference have exacerbated Lebanon's political struggles in recent decades.

Lebanon is an important factor in U.S. calculations regarding regional security, particularly vis-à-vis Israel and Iran. Congressional concerns have focused on the prominent role that Hezbollah, an Iran-backed Shiite militia, political party, and U.S.-designated terrorist organization, continues to play in Lebanese politics and regional security. Congress has appropriated over \$1 billion since the end of the brief Israel-Hezbollah war of 2006 to support U.S. policies designed to extend Lebanese security forces' control over the country and promote economic growth.

The civil war in neighboring Syria threatens to destabilize Lebanon. Over 110,000 Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon and reports suggest that regional supporters and opponents of Syrian President Bashar al Asad are using Lebanon as a transit point and staging ground in a wider regional conflict. The assassination of a leading Lebanese security official on October 19, 2012, has renewed accusations by some Lebanese observers of Syrian sponsorship of attacks against Lebanese leaders. The attack sparked civil unrest and calls by Lebanese opposition parties for the resignation of the current cabinet, which is controlled by pro-Asad forces.

The question of how best to marginalize Hezbollah and other potentially anti-U.S. Lebanese actors without provoking civil conflict among divided Lebanese sectarian political forces remains the underlying challenge for U.S. policy makers. In the wake of the October assassination, the Obama Administration has endorsed calls for leadership change prior to planned May 2013 parliamentary elections. On October 31, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Elizabeth Jones visited Lebanon and met with Lebanese officials to encourage that "a peaceful transition be formulated without creating a political vacuum."

This report provides an overview of Lebanon and current issues of U.S. interest. It provides background information, analyzes recent developments and key legislative debates, and tracks legislation, U.S. assistance, and recent congressional action. It will be updated to reflect major events or policy changes.

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## Background

Since achieving political independence in 1943, Lebanon has struggled to overcome a series of internal and external political and security challenges. Congress and the executive branch historically have sought to support pro-U.S. elements in the country, and in recent years the United States has invested over \$1 billion to develop Lebanon's security forces. Some Members of Congress have supported this investment as a down payment on improved security and stability in a contentious and volatile region. Other Members have criticized U.S. policy and sought to condition U.S. assistance to limit its potential to benefit Lebanese groups that are hostile to the United States.

The Lebanese population is religiously diverse, reflecting the country's rich heritage and history as an enclave of various Christian sects, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Alawites, and Druze. In order to prevent their religious diversity from fueling political rivalry and conflict, Lebanese leaders have attempted with limited success since independence to manage sectarian differences through a power-sharing based democratic system. Observers of Lebanese politics refer to these arrangements as "confessional" democracy.

Historically, the system served to balance Christian fears of being subsumed by the regional Muslim majority against Muslim fears that Christians would invite non-Muslim foreign intervention.<sup>1</sup> Lebanese leaders hold an unwritten "National Covenant" and other understandings as guarantees that the President of the republic be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shiite Muslim. Although Christians were an overall minority in Lebanon, the large Christian community benefitted from a division of parliamentary seats on the basis of six Christians to five Muslims. This ratio was adjusted to parity following Lebanon's 1975-1989 civil war to reflect growth in the Muslim population.

Sectarianism is not the sole determining factor in Lebanese politics.<sup>2</sup> The confessional system at times has produced alliances that appear to some to unite strange bedfellows, including the current governing coalition that links the Iran-backed Shiite militia, political party and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization Hezbollah together with leftist parties and pro-Syrian Christian factions.<sup>3</sup> While the reality of religious sectarian rivalry persists, it is also true that some political leaders support the preservation of the confessional system to preserve their own personal interests. These factors, combined with the tensions that have accompanied regional

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Michael Suleiman, "The Role of Political Parties in a Confessional Democracy," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1967; Ralph E. Crow, "Religious Sectarianism in the Lebanese Political System," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1962, pp. 489-520; Malcom Kerr, "Political Decision-Making in a Confessional Democracy," in Leonard Binder (ed.), *Politics in Lebanon*, Wiley and Sons, New York, 1966, pp.187-212; Farid el Khazen, "Political Parties in Postwar Lebanon: Parties in Search of Partisans," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 2003, pp. 605-624; Paul Salem, "The Future of Lebanon," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 6, 2006, pp. 13-22; and, Arda Arsenian Ekmeji, *Confessionalism and Electoral Reform in Lebanon*, Aspen Institute, July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> As one academic author put it in the 1960s, "While it is an exaggeration to hold that all things political in Lebanon are fundamentally religious, it is nevertheless true that any explanation of Lebanese politics will be incomplete unless the role of religious attitudes and organizations are taken into account." Crow, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Hezbollah politicians won 10 seats out of 128 in parliament in the 2009 national elections, and Minister of State for Administrative Reform Mohammed Fnaysh and Minister of Agriculture Hussein al Hajj Hassan are members of Hezbollah. The U.S. government holds Hezbollah responsible for a number of kidnappings and high-profile terrorist attacks on U.S., European, and Israeli interests over the last 30 years.

conflicts and ideological struggles, overshadow limited progress toward what some Lebanese hold as an alternative ideal—a non-confessional political system.

The consistent defining characteristic of U.S. policy during the Bush and Obama Administrations has been a desire to weaken Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon. Parallel U.S. concerns focus on corruption, the weakness of democratic institutions, the future of Palestinian refugees, and the presence of Sunni extremist groups. The latter threat was illustrated by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) 2007 confrontation with the Sunni extremist group Fatah al Islam, which resulted in the destruction of much of the Nahr al Bared Palestinian refugee camp. The threat continues to be reflected in current reports of arms trafficking and participation by Lebanese Sunnis in support of extremist groups fighting in Syria. However, the most prominent, capable and dangerous U.S. adversary in Lebanon remains Hezbollah.

Congress has appropriated over \$1 billion in assistance for Lebanon since the end of the 34-day Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 to support successive Administrations' policies of strengthening Lebanese security forces and promoting economic growth. Some Members of Congress have expressed support for the goals and concerns outlined by U.S. policymakers, but have questioned the advisability of continuing to invest U.S. assistance funds, particularly at times when Hezbollah's political coalition has controlled the Lebanese cabinet.

U.S. engagement nominally seeks to support the development of neutral national institutions and drive change that will allow Lebanon's 4.4 million citizens to prosper, enjoy security, and embrace non-sectarian multiparty democracy. In practice, U.S. policymakers have sought to walk a line between maintaining a neutral posture and marginalizing those in Lebanon who are hostile to the United States, its interests, and its allies. Some Lebanese—particularly Hezbollah supporters and others that reject calls for non-state actors to disarm—have decried U.S. policy as self-interested intervention in the zero sum games of Lebanese and regional politics. Other Lebanese welcome U.S. support, whether as a means of fulfilling shared goals of empowering neutral national institutions or as a means to isolate their domestic political rivals. Some groups' views of U.S. involvement fluctuate with regional circumstances.

U.S. policymakers have struggled to overcome serious obstacles imposed by the divisive undercurrents of Lebanese political life and the external pressures of regional strategic rivalries. Similar dynamics have long characterized U.S. policy debates about Lebanon. After Lebanon emerged from French control as an independent state in the 1940s, the United States moved to bolster parties and leaders that offered reliable support for U.S. Cold War interests.<sup>4</sup> The influx of Palestinian refugees following Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967 further complicated the regional and domestic scenes. Palestinian refugee camps (see **Figure 4** below) became strongholds for the Palestine Liberation Organization, staging areas for cross-border *fedayeen* terrorist attacks inside Israel, and ultimately targets for Israeli military retaliation. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a slow drift toward civil war, as the United States provided support for the Lebanese Armed Forces “to improve the army's capability to control the fedayeen” in a policy that foreshadowed current U.S. concerns and approaches.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The United States intervened militarily in Lebanon in 1958 in response to fears of the overthrow of the pro-U.S. government of President Camille Chamoun. New leaders elected during the four-month U.S. military operation and their successors proved unable to chart a course for the country that avoided further civil conflict.

<sup>5</sup> Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Henry Kissinger) to President Richard Nixon, “Actions to Bolster Moderates before Arab Summit,” December 23, 1969.

Lebanon's civil war erupted in 1975 over unresolved sectarian differences and the pressure of external forces, including the Palestinians, Israel, and Syria. Hundreds of thousands were killed and displaced over 14 years of brutal war among a bewildering array of forces with shifting allegiances. Syria sent military forces into Lebanon in 1976; they remained until 2005. Israel sent military forces into Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982; they remained in southern Lebanon until 2000. The United States deployed forces to Lebanon in the early 1980s as part of a multinational peacekeeping force: they targeted anti-U.S. forces and withdrew after 241 U.S. personnel were killed in the 1983 bombing of a U.S. military barracks in Beirut.

U.S. policy toward Lebanon since the end of the civil war has been shaped by a desire to see the country move toward the vision outlined by Lebanese leaders in 1989 at Taif, Saudi Arabia, where they met to reach a national agreement to end the fighting. Among the goals enshrined in the Taif Agreement were the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Lebanon, the disarming of non-state groups, and the development of strong national security institutions and non-confessional democracy. Successive U.S. Administrations have embraced the Taif principles, while acting to limit opportunities for U.S. adversaries in Lebanon and maintain a strong U.S. commitment to Israel's security.

Syria's security presence in Lebanon was acknowledged at Taif, but withdrawal negotiations called for in the agreement did not occur until Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Hariri's assassination and the mass national demonstrations that followed marked a defining political moment and led to the emergence of the pro-Asad "March 8" coalition and the anti-Asad "March 14" coalition that now dominate the political scene (see **Figure 2** below for profiles of each coalition). The intervening years have been marked by conflict, political gridlock, and further assassinations of anti-Syria figures. Domestic actors and external players such as Syria, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States and others have all struggled for influence. Each coalition has held power, although attempts at unity government have proven fruitless, with both sides periodically resorting to resignations, mass protests, and boycotts to hamper their rivals.

The central security question for Lebanon since the Syrian departure has been the future of Hezbollah's substantial military arsenal and capabilities, which rival and in some cases exceed those of Lebanon's armed forces and police. Debate on Hezbollah's future and Lebanon's national defense posture intensified after Hezbollah provoked the 2006 war with Israel, which brought destruction to large areas of Lebanon. Following an attempt in 2008 by government forces to assert greater security control in the country, Hezbollah used force to confront other Lebanese factions, illustrating the lengths to which its leaders are willing to go to defend their prerogatives and position. These issues dominate Lebanese debates and are rooted in decades-old struggles to define the political system and regional orientation and to establish sovereign national security institutions.

Hezbollah has traditionally defined itself and justified its paramilitary actions as legitimate resistance to Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory and as a necessary response to the relative weakness of Lebanese state security institutions. However, Israel's withdrawal from Lebanese territory in May 2000 and the strengthening of the Lebanese Armed Forces and Internal Security Forces with international and U.S. support since 2006 have undermined these arguments and placed pressure on Hezbollah to adapt its rhetoric and policies. Hezbollah increasingly has pointed to disputed territory in the Shib'a Farms area of the Lebanon-Syria-Israel tri-border region and Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory as important justifications for its posture (see **Figure 3** below).

Hezbollah's Lebanese critics share its objections to Israeli military incursions in Lebanon and have long emphasized the need to assert control over remaining disputed areas with Israel, such as the Shib'a Farms, the Kfar Shouba Hills, and the northern part of the village of Ghajar. However, current Hezbollah policy statements suggest that, even if disputed areas were secured, the group would seek to maintain a role for "the resistance" in providing for Lebanon's national defense and would resist any Lebanese or international efforts to disarm it as called for in the 1989 Taif Accord that ended the Lebanese civil war and more recently in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006).

Hezbollah enjoys considerable but not uniform appeal among members of the Lebanese Shiite constituency, which is widely assumed to have become a larger percentage of the Lebanese population than it was when the current proportional arrangements were established. In recent years, Hezbollah candidates have fared well in municipal elections, winning seats in conjunction with allied Amal party representatives in many areas of southern and eastern Lebanon. Lebanon has not conducted a national census in decades largely because of the sensitivity of confessional power-sharing arrangements. The current civil war in neighboring Syria heightens tensions surrounding all of these issues, and presents difficult choices to Lebanese and U.S. decision makers.

## **Assessment**

Lebanon's fractious political system remains deadlocked. To date, Lebanese leaders have proven unable and unwilling to make a transition to a less sectarian democratic system. Competing factions that represent religious sects, social groups, and local elites remain divided over domestic policy and further define themselves in terms of their opposition to or alignment with outside forces, most notably the government of President Bashar al Asad in Syria. Lebanon's political struggles are now taking place in the shadow of the Syrian civil war, which has hardened positions between opposing factions and threatens to destabilize the country. As of November 5, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that over 110,000 refugees have entered Lebanon and many require assistance.

The war and the October 2012 assassination of Internal Security Force (ISF) intelligence director Brigadier General Wissam Hassan has placed Lebanon on a political and strategic knife's edge. Hassan was killed in a Beirut car bombing reminiscent of the 2005 Hariri assassination. The anti-Asad March 14 coalition is now actively calling for pro-March 8 Prime Minister Najib Miqati's resignation, while some critics suggest that the prospect of a political vacuum in the midst of volatile regional conditions could invite a return to widespread civil conflict prior to the planned May 2013 parliamentary elections.

Prime Minister Miqati has resisted calls for his resignation and he and President Michel Sleiman have called for national dialogue. The Obama Administration has stated its view that in light of the assassination and resulting tensions, Lebanese leaders should now negotiate a change in leadership to govern the country prior to the upcoming elections. On October 31, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Elizabeth Jones visited Lebanon and met with Lebanese officials to encourage that "a peaceful transition be formulated without creating a political vacuum."

Like the current government, any transitional or "neutral salvation government" would face difficult choices under very tense political circumstances. Since mid-2011, nearly every issue that



has come before the March 8-led cabinet has devolved into a standoff, at times pitting members of either coalition against the prime minister. Difficult issues remain unresolved, including an agreement on a national defense strategy, a plan for disarming Hezbollah and other non-state groups, and the adoption of an electoral law for the May 2013 elections. As faction leaders continue to grapple for advantage, Lebanese citizens are demanding improved public services and more competent governance while warily eyeing the abyss next door in Syria. In light of these circumstances, the national elections scheduled for 2013 show little prospect of bridging the communal divisions in Lebanese politics. However, they could grant a clearer ruling mandate to the victors.

Regardless of electoral arrangements or outcomes, the stakes of the conflict in Syria threaten to overwhelm the already complex domestic political dynamics among the Lebanese. Hezbollah's alliance with Syria and with Iran is an important guarantor of its strength in Lebanon. If Asad falls and Hezbollah's key conduit to its Iranian lifeline is severed, its calculations and those of its enemies could change drastically. Some Lebanese Sunnis welcome the possible disruption of the Syrian-Hezbollah alliance and the potential empowerment of Syria's Sunni majority. However, the war in Syria appears to be enabling the rise of extremists and Islamist groups whose interests and goals may prove threatening to Lebanon. Some Christians and other religious minorities in both countries view the Asad regime, the current violence, and the possible empowerment of Sunni Islamist groups with trepidation.

As a result of the conflict in Syria, Lebanese security forces have confronted increased weapons smuggling by Syrian rebels, incursions by Syrian troops, and sectarian clashes inside Lebanese cities. These challenges place them squarely on the key dividing lines in domestic and regional politics. The choices that leaders make with regard to the Syrian crisis and the use of state security forces to protect Lebanese sovereignty and quell domestic unrest could shape the future of U.S. security assistance and relations with Lebanon. Recent events have galvanized some anti-Syrian nationalists, but the Lebanese are divided over how best to respond to the Syrian conflict. For the foreseeable future, Lebanon is likely to remain an arena for sectarian and geopolitical competition, with political paralysis and insecurity as the result.

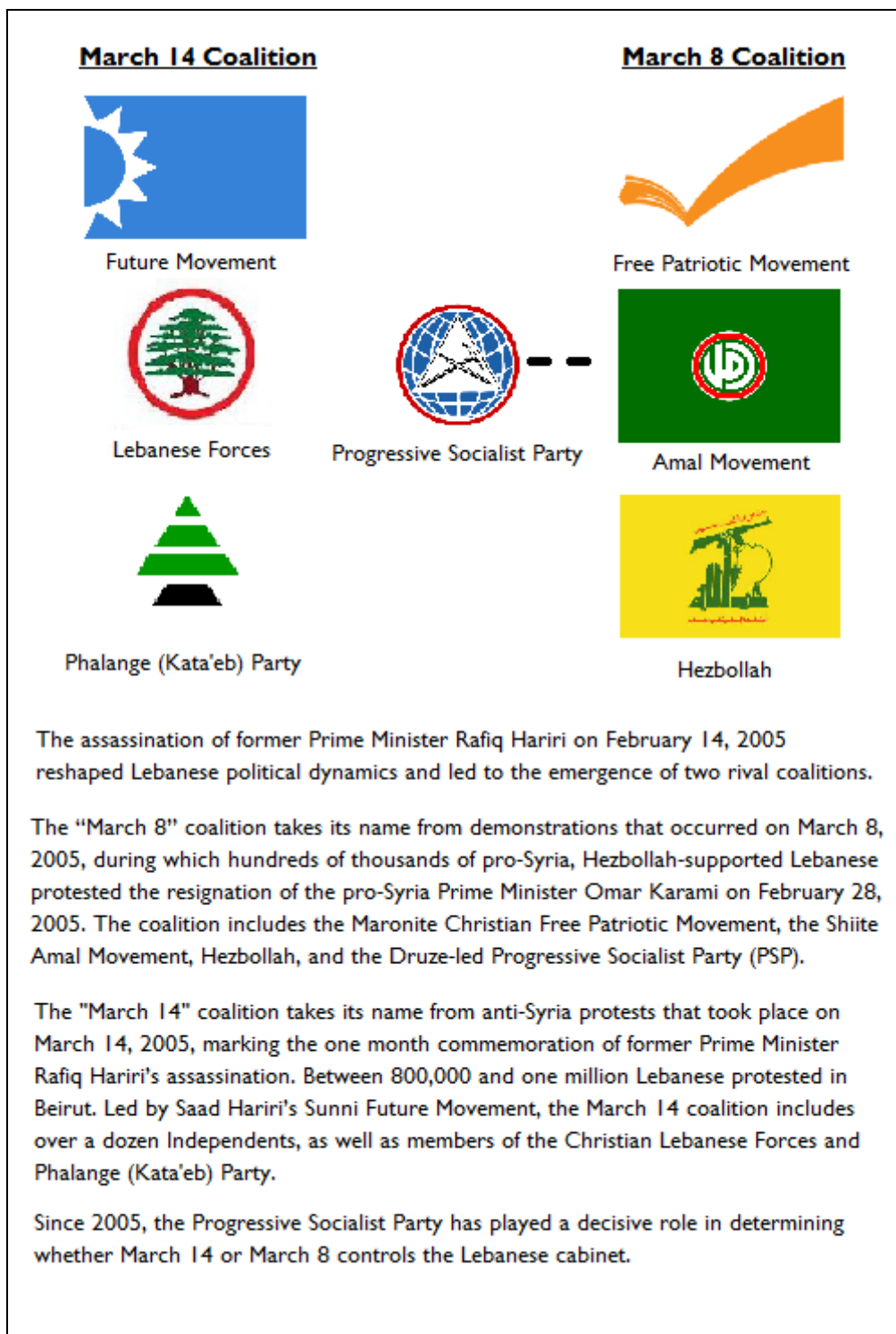
Figure 1. Lebanon at a Glance



**Source:** Prepared by Amber Hope Wilhelm, Graphics Specialist, Congressional Research Service.

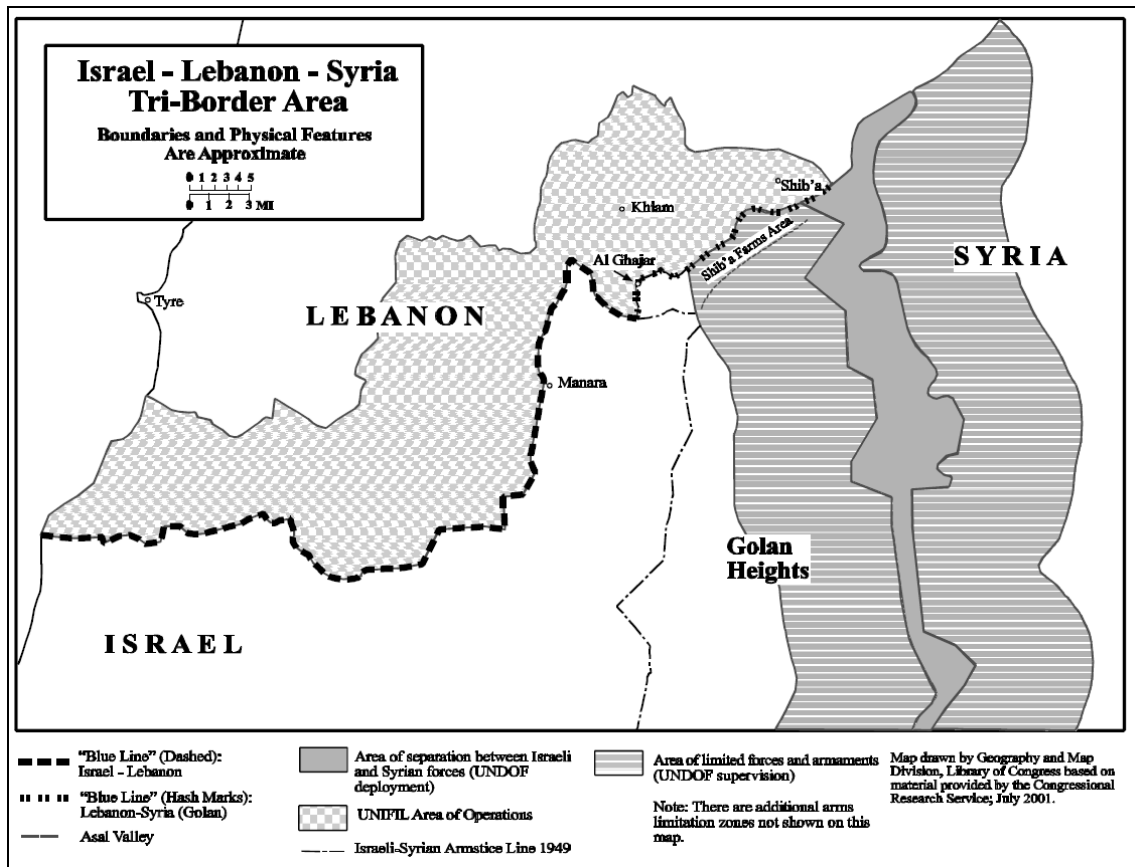
## Figure 2. Lebanon's Political Coalitions

Includes Parties with Largest Number of Seats in Parliament



**Source:** Congressional Research Service.

Figure 3. Israel-Lebanon-Syria Tri-Border Area



Source: Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, July 2001

**Figure 4. Location of Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon**



**Source:** United Nations Relief Works Agency/Congressional Research Service.

## Recent Developments

### Security, Leadership, and Syria

In January 2011, the March 8 coalition withdrew from a national unity government, ostensibly in opposition to then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri's pledge to cooperate with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigation into the 2005 assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Najib Miqati, a wealthy Sunni businessman and former Prime Minister, cabinet minister, and member of parliament, was nominated to replace Saad Hariri as Prime Minister.<sup>6</sup> Miqati struggled to form a government during early 2011, while unrest in neighboring Syria ratcheted up political tension in Lebanon.

Although Miqati reportedly sought to appoint a cabinet of technocrats and cast himself as a unifying figure, the cabinet he named in June 2011 is dominated by the pro-Asad, Hezbollah-aligned March 8 coalition, which holds 18 of the 30 seats. Hezbollah figures hold two of the March 8 coalition cabinet seats.<sup>7</sup> Independents hold the remaining 12 seats. No cabinet positions were allotted to members of the predominantly Sunni, anti-Asad March 14 coalition, including members of Saad Hariri's Future Movement. Walid Jumblatt, head of the Druze-led Progressive Socialist Party, switched his allegiance from the March 14 to the March 8 coalition, providing March 8 with crucial support to break the political stalemate. Some Lebanese politicians suggest that Syria increased its efforts to influence the cabinet negotiations in the hopes of engineering a cabinet dominated by its supporters and minimizing the risk that an anti-Asad Lebanese government would bolster the Syrian opposition. Jumblatt's subsequent outspoken critiques of Asad have complicated cabinet dynamics by splitting March 8's supporters on the central question of the Syrian uprising.<sup>8</sup>

The Lebanese government has stated that its official policy on the Syrian uprising is one of "disassociation," which in practice has amounted to walking a fine line of non-intervention while protecting Lebanese sovereignty and interests.<sup>9</sup> On November 5, Prime Minister Miqati reiterated that "Lebanon is firmly resolved not to take anyone's side in Syria. This has to do with our own stability and security so Lebanon is not in any way interfering in Syria's internal affairs. We hope that the international community will understand Lebanon's position in this extremely difficult and delicate moment."<sup>10</sup> This position has been consistent since 2011. Although Lebanon sat on the United Nations Security Council in 2011, Lebanon did not vote in favor of resolutions criticizing the Syrian regime. Lebanon abstained from voting on the October 2011 U.N. Security

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<sup>6</sup> Current Prime Minister Miqati replaced Omar Karami as Prime Minister from April 2005 through July 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Minister of State for Administrative Reform Mohammed Fnaysh and Minister of Agriculture Hussein al Hajj Hassan are members of Hezbollah.

<sup>8</sup> On January 3, 2012, Jumblatt called on Russia and Iran to reassess their positions on Syria and convince Asad that "fundamental regime change is the only solution for the unrest." He also has urged the Syrian Druze community not to support Syrian state security forces in attacks against protesters and civilians.

<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Miqati reportedly said in late March, "No one will succeed in luring us into changing our disassociation policy be it internally or externally.... Lebanon's position from what is happening around us is clear and firm—to respect the right of peoples to freedom without intervention." "Lebanon will not budge from dissociation policy: Mikati," *Daily Star* (Beirut), March 29, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> AFP, "Lebanon resolved not to take sides in Syria: PM," November 5, 2012.

Council resolution condemning the crackdown in Syria.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Lebanon did not vote for Syria's suspension from the Arab League or opt to send delegates with the Arab League observer mission to Syria.

Border security remains a preeminent concern, particularly because the border between Syria and Lebanon is not demarcated in many places and the Israel-Lebanon border has not been agreed. Syria, Israel, and some Lebanese and Palestinian groups have at times disregarded Lebanese government sovereignty, and U.N. reports suggest that violations of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1559 (2004), 1680 (2006), and 1701 (2006) continue.<sup>12</sup> Syrian officials agreed to participate in a committee to demarcate the border with Lebanon in 2008, but did not appoint a representative. Fighting along the border involving Syrian military forces continues, and Syria has laid antipersonnel landmines along several sections of the Lebanese border since October 2011.<sup>13</sup> Syrian officials state that the mines and border operations are designed to deter arms smuggling, although most observers argue that the mines seek to prevent refugees from fleeing into Lebanon and fighters from returning to Syria.<sup>14</sup>

The Lebanese Armed Forces deployed to northeastern Lebanon in February 2012 in an attempt to improve security in the area. Some March 14 coalition members criticized the deployment as seeking to defend the Asad government, while some March 8 supporters and others applauded it as a signal of Lebanon asserting sovereignty and maintaining its disassociation policy. Serious armed clashes in the northern city of Tripoli and the tit-for-tat kidnappings of Lebanese Shiites in Syria and Syrians and Turks in Lebanon escalated the situation in July and August 2012.<sup>15</sup> As detailed above, Miqati's government now faces opposition calls for its resignation, and the U.S. government has called for a negotiated leadership change to see Lebanon safely to new parliamentary elections expected in May 2013.

## **Assassination and Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)**

The October 2012 killing of Brig. Gen. Wissam Hassan has brought the threat of Syrian spillover and the issue of political assassinations to the forefront of national politics. In recent months, a string of reported assassination attempts targeting several anti-Asad politicians had already created controversy. In early 2012, a sniper attack was reported against the March 14-aligned leader of the Lebanese Forces bloc Samir Geagea. In July 2012, March 14-aligned independent Boutros Harb reported a failed attempt to plant explosives in his office building. In August, former information minister Michel Samaha was arrested on charges of aiding a wider plot to

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<sup>11</sup> Nawaf Salam, Lebanon's Special Envoy to the U.N., stated that "Lebanon is committed to defend the sovereignty of (Syria) and the unity of its people ... but in order to protect Lebanon's unity and stability, it abstains from voting." "Lebanon's Stance on U.N. Syria Vote Creates Controversy," *Naharnet*, October 6, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> In June 2012, the U.N. Secretary General cited a number of reported violations along Lebanon's borders, including reports of arms trafficking to Syria and "almost daily intrusions into Lebanese airspace by Israel Defense Forces." See U.N. Document S/2012/502, Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006), June 28, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Syria is not a party to the 1997 Landmine Ban Treaty. The United States also is not a party.

<sup>14</sup> In late March 2012, Syria submitted a letter to the United Nations Security Council citing seizures of "weapons, explosives and explosive devices smuggled from Lebanon to Syria by certain Lebanese political forces linked to terrorist groups funded and armed from abroad." For an example of an opposing view of the logic of Syrian operations, see Mitchell Prothero, "Assad's Lebanese Invasion," *Foreign Policy*, December 22, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "In Lebanon, Kidnapping by Clans Raise Alarm," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2012.

assassinate Lebanese figures. Many Lebanese view the ISF's role in the assassination investigations and Samaha's arrest as having motivated as yet unidentified parties to assassinate Wissam Hassan. Suspicion has fallen broadly on the Asad government and its Lebanese allies, and the killing has precipitated renewed confrontation over the future of the Miqati cabinet.

Throughout this period, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)—formed to investigate the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and others—has remained controversial. On June 30, 2011, the STL indicted four members of Hezbollah on charges of assassinating Hariri. Hezbollah disavowed the allegations and has refused to turn over the named individuals. Many observers had expressed concern that the STL would derail Miqati's government in 2011, particularly given Lebanon's financial obligation to pay dues to the STL and Hezbollah's objection to contributing these funds.<sup>16</sup> However, Miqati announced on November 30, 2011, that Lebanon would adhere to its financial obligations to the STL, and the subsequent payment of these dues did not lead to a government collapse.

On February 1, 2012, the STL Trial Chamber announced its intention to try the four accused in absentia because of their inability to find them. The STL credited the Lebanese government's "multiple attempts ... to find the accused at their last known residences, places of employment, family homes and other locations."<sup>17</sup> The STL pretrial judge rejected a prosecutor request to add a new charge to the indictment on procedural grounds in March 2012. The trial of the four accused is presently scheduled to begin in March 2013 and may further complicate the political environment in the immediate run-up to the May 2013 election. STL registrar Herman von Hebel has stated that "the al Hassan case is in the hands of the Lebanese authorities," and the STL could only have jurisdiction if the Lebanese government and the U.N. Security Council decided to refer the case.

## **Electoral Law and 2013 Elections**

The key domestic political issue at present is the draft electoral law for 2013 parliamentary elections. The 1926 constitution established Lebanon as a parliamentary republic. Citizens elect the parliament for four-year terms, and the parliament in turn elects the president for a non-renewable six-year term. The president chooses a prime minister and appoints a cabinet subject to the confidence vote of parliament. Before each parliamentary election an electoral law is enacted. Recent laws have preserved an equal balance of parliamentary seats between Muslims and Christians and outlined specific seat quotas for religious sub-sects.<sup>18</sup>

The current law was adopted in 2008 and establishes a winner-take all system across 26 districts, known as *qada*. In August 2012, after several rounds of disagreement, the cabinet endorsed a proposal calling for the introduction of a proportional representation system over 13 larger districts. Supporters of the draft argue that it will encourage parties to extend beyond political or sectarian strongholds and run more nationally oriented campaigns. The Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party, and some minority parties have expressed opposition to the

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<sup>16</sup> Article 5 of the Annex to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1757 requires Lebanon to pay 49% towards the costs of the STL. The payment due from Lebanon in 2011 was \$32 million.

<sup>17</sup> Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Decision to Hold Trial in Absentia, Case STL-11-01, February 1, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the 2008 law specified seats for Sunni, Shiite, Druze and Alawite Muslims as well as among Christians for Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Evangelical, and Christian minorities. See International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *The Lebanese Electoral System*, March 2009.



proportional representation system and the cabinet draft, as they fear it will undermine their ability to achieve representation in parliament and maintain influence over cabinet formation.<sup>19</sup> It remains to be seen whether the parliament will adopt the draft, and consideration of other electoral law reform proposals is likely to continue. Among the features in the cabinet draft of the law that may be acceptable to all parties is the proposed establishment of a new independent election oversight and administration body. However, this would raise questions regarding how compliance with the independent body's rulings would be enforced.

## **Other Domestic Issues**

Lebanon's domestic political scene in 2012 has been characterized by a series of confrontations over a minimum wage increase, administrative appointments, budget legislation, electricity sector policy, and drafting of new electoral legislation for the 2013 national election. The Free Patriotic Movement and others in the March 8 coalition challenged Miqati's wage proposals and his authority to appoint technocrats to a series of administrative leadership positions. March 8 members argued that long-established practices of ministerial discretion and proportional communal representation in administrative appointments should prevail. In February, these disputes led to the resignation of Labor Minister Charbel Nahas and the temporary suspension of cabinet meetings in light of what Miqati described as their lack of productivity.<sup>20</sup> The 2012 budget was finally adopted in July. Lebanon's parliament had last enacted a national budget in 2005. Budget debates in 2011 and 2012 focused on the legality and use of government funds that were spent from 2006 through 2011 beyond the annual level authorized in 2005.<sup>21</sup> Temporary electricity outages continued to highlight the need for infrastructure investment, although the cabinet and the prime minister remained divided over rival proposals.

## **U.S. Assistance and Issues for Congress**

Following Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and the war between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, the George W. Bush Administration requested and Congress appropriated a significant increase in U.S. assistance to Lebanon. Since 2006, the United States has granted over \$1 billion in assistance to Lebanon, with the following goals:

- Supporting the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 1559 and 1701;
- Reducing sectarianism and unifying national institutions;

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<sup>19</sup> Future Movement leader Saad Hariri has said "this draft law is unacceptable and will not pass." Hussein Dakroub and Hasan Lakkis, "Hariri Vows to Block Cabinet's Electoral Law," *Daily Star* (Beirut), August 8, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Miqati released a forceful statement in December 2011 that set the stage for the early 2012 confrontations and drew criticism from some March 8 coalition members. He said, "The institution of the premiership, which is tasked with the responsibility of leading the executive authority in the country, is not and will not be an institution of a sect or confession. Rather, it is an institution for all Lebanon and for all its sects and people. Any attempt to put it in a narrow confessional framework is a losing attempt and will not achieve its purposes. Also, any attempt to weaken the prerogatives of the premiership, either by directly targeting the institution or by devising political precedents in or outside the Cabinet, will be absolutely rejected by those who are keen on the respect of the Constitution, with me at the forefront."

<sup>21</sup> During this period, the March 14 coalition controlled the cabinet outright or led a national unity government, and March 8 MPs prevented the passage of new budget legislation as a means of asserting influence over their rivals.

- Providing military equipment and basic supplies to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF);
- Providing support to the Internal Security Forces (ISF) for training, equipment and vehicles, community policing assistance, corrections reform, and communications; and
- Increasing economic opportunity.

A major feature of current U.S. assistance is a five-year (2010-2014), \$1.1 billion plan to modernize and equip the LAF. The Obama Administration and some Members of the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress have supported the continuation of this assistance. In the short term, some of the continued funding is intended to help secure Lebanon's borders, which are now an important factor in Syrian-Lebanese relations. Over the long term, U.S. officials hope that building an apolitical, competent state security apparatus will improve internal stability and public confidence in the LAF and ISF. Such public confidence in theory could create space for the Lebanese government to address more complex, politically sensitive issues ranging from political reform to developing a national defense strategy.

The more fundamental, if less often acknowledged hope among some U.S. officials and some Members of Congress is that building up the LAF will eventually enable the Lebanese government to contain, or even potentially dismantle, Hezbollah's military capabilities. Similar hopes were advanced in the 1970s, but U.S. assistance proved unable to sufficiently empower the LAF to take action against the Palestinian *fedayeen*. The political consequences of LAF confrontations with the Palestinians contributed to the outbreak of civil conflict, which in turn led to foreign intervention in the civil war that followed. At the same time, some Members have worried that by improving the capabilities of Lebanese security forces, the United States may be indirectly benefitting Hezbollah, particularly to the extent that Hezbollah members or sympathizers are present in security forces or to the extent that Hezbollah's participation in the Lebanese government gives it influence over security sector decisions and resources (see below).

The Administration's assistance request for FY2013 includes programs for border security, special operations forces, and police training; prison reform; improving the competitiveness of the IT sector; and encouraging growth among small and medium size enterprises. The FY2013 Continuing Appropriations Resolution (P.L. 112-175) carries forward conditions on interim FY2013 spending for Lebanon from the FY2012 appropriation (P.L. 112-74).<sup>22</sup> Those conditions include the submission of a report on the use of U.S. assistance by the LAF, a "detailed spend plan" for the year's funds, and regular notification of the Appropriations Committees of planned obligations of funds for Lebanon programs.

Additional FY2013 funds could benefit Lebanon if Congress appropriates funding for the Administration's request for a \$770 million Middle East North Africa Incentive Fund (MENA-IF). As of October 2012, the House Appropriations Committee had declined to include funding for the MENA-IF initiative in its version of the FY2013 Foreign Operations appropriations bill

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<sup>22</sup> The continuing resolution provides funds for U.S. foreign assistance accounts in amounts indexed to the FY2012 appropriations legislation (P.L. 112-74). Spending levels from FY2012 accounts for Lebanon were set through consultation between the executive branch and Congress rather than specified directly in legislation, with the exception of assistance to support certain scholarships to Lebanese academic institutions. As such, established inter-branch consultation and notification practices will remain the primary mechanism for determining the use of any interim FY2013 funding for Lebanon under the continuing resolution. P.L. 112-175 expires March 27, 2013.

(H.R. 5857). The Senate Appropriations Committee included \$1 billion for the MENA-IF, an increase over the Administration's request (S. 3241).

**Table 1. U.S. Foreign Assistance to Lebanon, FY2009-FY2013**

Regular and supplemental foreign operations and defense appropriations; current year \$U.S. in millions

Account	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012 (Estimate)	FY2013 (Request)	Total
ESF	67.50	109.00	84.73	84.73	70.00	415.96
IMET	2.28	2.50	2.48	2.38	2.25	11.89
I206	49.24	23.00	0	NA	NA	72.24
FMF	159.70	100.00	74.85	75.00	75.00	484.55
INCLE	6.00	20.00	19.50	24.00	15.50	85.00
NADR	4.60	6.80	4.80	5.05	4.70	25.95
I207	10.00	NA	NA	NA	NA	10.00
Total	299.32	261.30	186.36	191.16	167.45	1,105.59

**Source:** U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations. This document includes funds from the following accounts: Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Assistance (INCLE), International Military and Education Training (IMET). Funding for 'I206' refers to the Department of Defense Global Train and Equip program, authorized by Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 (P.L. 109-163), as amended. Funding for 'I207' refers to the Department of Defense Security and Stabilization Assistance program, authorized by Section 1207 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 (P.L. 109-163), as amended.

## Legislation in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress

Developments in Syria and Lebanon, and any changes they create in Hezbollah's strategic position, appear likely to inform future debates about the scope and conditions of U.S. assistance. As a result of increasing Hezbollah participation in the Lebanese government since 2011, some Members of Congress have questioned the advisability of funding U.S.-sponsored initiatives in Lebanon at current levels, particularly in an era of pressing U.S. budgetary constraints.

In June 2011, Representatives Berman, Issa, Boustany, and Rahall proposed H.R. 2215, the Hezbollah Anti-Terrorism Act (HATA), designed to limit certain types of assistance to the LAF while Hezbollah is part of the governing coalition in Lebanon. The bill did not preclude supporting programs that foster democracy and rule of law, educational funding, or LAF training through International Military Education and Training (IMET). Representative Berman later offered HATA as an amendment to H.R. 2583, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, which was reported by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs (H.Rept. 112-223). Congress enacted the underlying condition that prohibited U.S. assistance to the LAF if it were controlled by a terrorist organization in annual appropriations legislation (see below). While some Members support greater conditionality on aid to the LAF, others suggest that the best way to weaken Hezbollah is to provide a military and security counterweight by continuing to assist the LAF.

In December 2011, P.L. 112-74, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012, provided that the \$100 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds appropriated in FY2012 for the LAF may not be allocated to the LAF if it is controlled by a foreign terrorist organization (such as Hezbollah). LAF command rests with General Jean Kahwaji, who is not a Hezbollah member.

Fayez Ghosn of the March 8 aligned Marada Movement currently serves as Defense Minister. In February 2012, Ghosn met with Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi, who offered Iranian weapons to Lebanon's military. On April 1, Ghosn warned that arms smuggling to Syria from Lebanon was increasing. He called on European countries to follow through on pledges of support for the LAF and indicated that Iranian assistance was "ready."

## Outlook

Conditions in Lebanon are fragile and the country's stability is jeopardized by the fighting in Syria. At the same time, some in the Administration and Congress view the Syrian uprising as an opportunity to weaken Hezbollah, as well as its key patron, Iran, and limit Hezbollah's ability to assert itself in Lebanese affairs. It remains to be seen whether a weakened Hezbollah would be amenable to increased cooperation with its sectarian rivals. Since 2006, Hezbollah and its allies have viewed U.S. assistance programs as a thinly veiled attempt to build proxy forces to target them. During this period, some Members of Congress have argued that the LAF and ISF should act more forcefully to limit weapons smuggling to Hezbollah, if not to confront Hezbollah directly. The Obama Administration, like its predecessor, has sought to underscore that the intent of U.S. support is to build national institutions in Lebanon that can impartially confront a range of security challenges, of which there is no shortage at present.

In the current context, actions of the LAF and ISF to assert Lebanese sovereignty and limit weapons smuggling both to and from Syria add a new complication to this policy question. Members of Congress may choose to debate whether or not the United States should continue to support the LAF and ISF if those forces mobilize to limit the activities of Syrian opposition groups in Lebanon or the movement of weapons, supplies, personnel, and funds from Lebanon into Syria. Similarly, one could argue that the assassination of ISF intelligence director Hassan, the resulting civil unrest, and the calls for an interim transitional government demonstrate the importance of continued or expanded U.S. assistance. These debates may become even more relevant and controversial if the next U.S. Administration moves further in the direction of pushing for political change in Lebanon or approving the provision of material support to armed elements of the Syrian opposition.

Overall, the prevailing political balance in Lebanon continues to reflect fundamental communal divisions and different perspectives on events in neighboring Syria. These divisions and differences show little sign of abating, and will likely intensify as the conflict in Syria continues or spreads to Lebanon. Some Lebanese leaders signal that they want to move beyond the sectarian politics that have paralyzed the country, while others seek to perpetuate the confessional system to defend or advance personal or communal interests. Cross-cutting popular demands related to weak economic conditions and government services could create greater pressure for change if political bickering prevents progress on issues like electricity supplies and unemployment. On some domestic issues, Prime Minister Miqati had displayed a willingness to challenge political power brokers and prevail, most notably with regard to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon dues payment in late 2011 and a series of administrative decisions in early 2012.

President Sleiman, Prime Minister Miqati, and the commanders of Lebanon's security forces have sought to prevent instability in Syria from threatening Lebanon. Until recently, they viewed a cautious, quiet position as a necessary preventive measure, even as various Lebanese factions and external parties held and advanced positions clearly at odds with one another. Lebanon's rival political coalitions accuse each other of jeopardizing the country's security by choosing sides in

Syria's conflict as each contemplates the potential change in sectarian power dynamics that could be ushered in by prolonged conflict or regime change in Damascus. Hezbollah and its Shiite and Christian allies fear that an empowered Syrian Sunni majority will undermine their interests and empower their domestic rivals. The March 14 coalition seeks to undermine its competitors by linking them to the violent oppression of the Asad government, even as questions rise about the tactics and long-term intentions of some fellow Asad opponents among Lebanon's small but potentially disruptive Sunni Islamist community.

U.S. decision makers face a delicate series of choices as the Syrian conflict escalates and Lebanese leaders seek advantage in the wake of the Hassan assassination and in the run up to expected 2013 elections. Congress could influence U.S. policy in the short run through its consideration of outstanding requests for FY2013 foreign assistance for Lebanon as well as through its broader evaluation of the future direction of U.S. policy toward Lebanon and Syria.

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