

**REPORT**

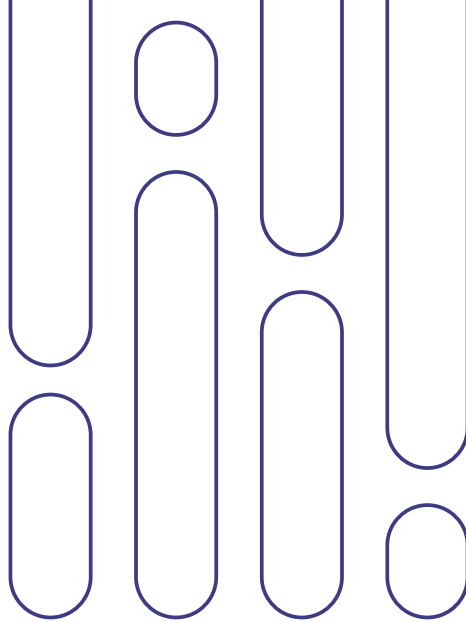
# **Lebanese Parliamentary Elections 2022: Limits of Possible Changes in the Political Arena**

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## **Contents**

<b>The Parliamentary Elections: Political and Legal Contexts .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Distribution of Electoral Districts and the Most Important Competitor .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Indications and the Implications of the Election Results .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Lebanese Political Scene and the Challenges of the Post-Parliamentary Elections .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>The Future of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon's Political Arena .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>18</b>

Despite fears of cancelation or postponement, the Lebanese parliamentary elections were held on Sunday May 15, 2022 while the Lebanese diaspora started to vote from May 6 to May 8, 2022. The elections were marked by a noticeable decrease in voter turnout both inside and outside Lebanon and unexpected losses and wins. One needs to analyze the implicit political significance of the election results; unpack their contexts, review their indications and implications, assess their noticeable impact on the Parliament's structure and the striking blow inflicted on the factions of the Iran-backed Hezbollah. The report finally forecasts Lebanon's political situation in light of the recent changes in the balance of power in the newly elected Parliament.

## **The Parliamentary Elections: Political and Legal Contexts**

The significance of holding parliamentary elections has been evident for nearly four years against the backdrop of a power vacuum and in light of the following four considerations:

### **Deteriorating Economy and Popular Discontent**

The latest elections were held amid a massive economic collapse, with the World Bank describing it as the worst in the world since 1950. More than 80 percent of the Lebanese people live below the poverty line. The lira, Lebanon's national currency, lost 90 percent of its value against the US dollar. The unemployment rate exceeds 30 percent. Needless to say, the country suffers from a lack of liquidity, harsh restrictions on daily cash withdrawals, and power outages. As a result, the Lebanese people have become quite desperate and increasingly discontent

and have been anxious to seize the opportunity of the parliamentary elections to ensure that there is change in their country; change in the political parties that are tasked to transform the country, leading it from a state of collapse to reconstruction.

### **Declining Trust in Political Elites and Internal Suspicions**

Many suspected that that the elections might not be held on time. Some warned that the ruling elites wanted to hold onto power and might hinder/delay the elections or at least attempt to extend the term of the previous Parliament for a couple of years. These doubts and fears stem from the country's parliamentary history; the Parliament extended its term twice: in 2009 and 2018. The election results play an integral role in determining the future of Lebanon; the Parliament elects the president of the republic, a post that has been essential in all of Lebanon's political crises. It seems that Lebanon inevitably suffers a new political crisis whenever the president is elected or faces a host of security incidents that risk the stability of state institutions.

### **Regional and International Attention**

The parliamentary elections in Lebanon drew massive regional and international attention as their results impact, in a way or another, the future of many regional issues, especially those related to Iran's influence in the region. There was much hope pinned on the election results as they were seen as being instrumental in removing Lebanon from Iran's orbit of influence and reducing its threats to Arab interests— as highlighted in the Jeddah Declaration in December 2021 (also known as the Jeddah Agreement) and to save Lebanon's and Kuwait's initiative in January 2022 to restore ties between Lebanon and the Gulf states. The Gulf states renewed their focus on Lebanon; Gulf diplomats

returned to Beirut. The West deemed the 2022 elections as the last hope to initiate political and economic reforms in order to save Lebanon from the current crisis it is facing. Western leaders, therefore, resorted to [threaten to impose sanctions](#) on the parties that sought to postpone the elections; namely the Lebanese National Movement (LNM).

### **Iran's Concerns**

Hezbollah was concerned about facing again a dramatic loss like the one it experienced in Iraq. Before holding the elections, Hezbollah's concerns were evident in the speeches of its secretary general and the party's allies. Their remarks reflect heavy political and sectarian tensions. Using media outlets, they placed pressure and spread fear among the Lebanese people, especially among the party's foes. Iran's concerns were reflective of "anti-Iran occupation" discourse apparent in the language of the Lebanese Forces and independent candidates. Their anti-Iran discourse may impact Iran's influence and grip over Lebanon's parliamentary and political life.

Hezbollah was also concerned about the rising voices within the party itself against its policies. The party's allies were another source of growing concern as they doubted the possibility of the LNM winning again the Christian majority in the parliamentary elections, given the rising popular agitation against the movement's leader. The movement's popularity has declined drastically among Christians. Hezbollah thus feared it would lose its prominent political Christian cover provided by the LNM in past years.

To mobilize and preempt the potential decline, Hezbollah's leaders used all means available: sectarian intimidation to secure the support of the Shiite community; launching accusations

that foreign hands triggered the October 17 Protests. Sectarian mobilization was also evident in the speeches of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who described Lebanon’s elections as a “referendum on the resistance front.” He reportedly donated \$25 million to ensure its victory.

## The Distribution of Electoral Districts and the Most Important Competitor

The 2022 parliamentary elections in Lebanon included 1,043 candidates with 103 electoral lists and [15 electoral districts \(see Table 1\)](#).

**Table 1:** Areas of Electoral Districts

Region/Governorate	Number of Electoral Districts	Number of Seats
Southern Lebanon	3	23
Northern governorates	3	28
Baqaa	3	23
Mount Lebanon Governorate	4	25
Beirut	2	19

The 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament are distributed according to religion/sect (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** The Distribution of Seats in the Lebanese Parliament

Religion/Sect	Number of Seats
Shiites	27
Sunnis	27
Druze	2
Alawites	2
Maronites	34

Greek Orthodox	14
Greek Catholic	8
Armenian Orthodox	5
Armenian Catholic and	1
Evangelicals	1
Other Christian minorities	1

The election competition heated up between the conventional/traditional parties; Hezbollah and its allies from one side and the front that opposes Hezbollah; they are not united and are in competition with each other. The most prominent parties of the opposing front were the Lebanese Forces and the Fouad Siniora backed lists/factions following Hariri's withdrawal and calls to boycott the elections. The Forces of Change were not united and suffered from intra-rivalry in many districts; unexpectedly, they were scattered, unorganized within unified lists in all of the electoral districts.

### **Hezbollah and Its Allies**

Hezbollah ran the election under the slogan “we stay, we protect, and we build.” Its announced lists were a mix of traditional faces that had previously represented the party in the Parliament and new faces marked with financial and banking experience which indicated that the party pays attention to the current economic crisis in the country. Before starting the elections, the party managed to reach a compromise between the Amal Movement and the LNM after the leaders of the two parties had suffered tensions and differences. Hezbollah intended to avoid any possibility of losing seats in the Parliament due to its unresolved disagreements as well as to prevent the opposition from

penetrating the unity between itself and the other two parties.

### **Traditional Christian Parties**

The elections saw intense competition between candidates of traditional Christian parties such as the LNM, the Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb Party, the Marada Movement, and a host of other opposition parties and figures. The Lebanese Forces ran the elections with candidates who were its current representatives in the Parliament and also had new internal candidates or drew candidates from its local allies in many districts. It intended to take advantage of the rising popular discontent over the failure of the LNM's alliance with Hezbollah and the two parties' economic and political mistakes that have led the current Lebanese crisis to deteriorate further. The Kataeb Party ran the elections with new and traditional candidates in addition to engaging the youth. Old members of the Kataeb Party separated from the party and participated in the elections on new rival lists under the slogan of change and challenged the traditional political class.

### **Sunni Parties**

Lebanon's leading political figures did not partake in the elections. The leader of the most prominent Sunni party, the Future Movement, announced that he would not participate nor vote in the elections. The Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora stated that they would not seek re-election— however, Siniora supported the formation of Beirut's electoral lists in Sunni majority areas such as “Beirut Confronts.” Despite the absence of such influential figures, secondary Sunni leaders participated in the elections. The most prominent Sunni lists were the following: The list of “People's Will” sponsored by Faisal Karami Jihad al-Samad, “Lebanon for



Us” list formed by lawmakers from the Future Movement such as Mustafa Alloush and Sami Fatfat, and “Save the Homeland” list formed by al Ashraf Rifi, formed in close cooperation with the Lebanese Forces.

### **The Forces of Change and Independent Candidates**

Candidates from the Forces of Change, formed in the aftermath of the October 17 Protests, competed in all electoral districts against traditional elite politicians. Furthermore, there was intra-competition between the candidates whose names were on opposing lists. The lists that reflect the Forces of Change and those elements that compete against each other include “Beirut My City” and “We Can” in Beirut, northern governorate and Baqaa. The lists also competed in southern districts that were expected to be exclusive for the two Shiite parties; Amal and Hezbollah.

## **The Indications and the Implications of the Election Results**

The election results and the distribution of seats revealed the following findings:

### **The Shift in the Balance of Power and the Absence of the Majority and Minority in the New Lebanese Parliament**

The poll results showed that Hezbollah and its allies won 61 seats, down from 10 seats in the 2018 elections (the party had 71 seats). However, the sovereign forces: The Lebanese Forces and The Progressive Socialist Party had 51 seats and the Forces of Change won 15 seats distributed in different constituencies. The analysis of the distribution of seats in the new Parliament

indicates that Hezbollah lost the majority that it used to have in the previous elections. This does not mean that the other parties obtained the majority. Ultimately, no party obtained the parliamentary majority to have the decisive voice in decision making. As a result, the Lebanese Parliament is divided between two major teams; each one of them includes different political factions/parties and various alliances. The third team does not belong to a specific political camp and constitutes only 10 per cent of the total parliamentary representatives. This party includes individuals who are not members of one political camp although it ran the elections as one party under the slogan of change and to fight against the carrying of weapons and political corruption.

## **Changes in Hezbollah's Political Environment and Alliances**

### ***The Continued Dominance of Hezbollah***

Although the election results in 2022 revealed a decline in Shiite participation, the two Shiite parties Hezbollah and Amal Movement managed to uphold their electoral weight. They won 28 seats, quite similar to the 2018 election results. Therefore, both parties will continue to dominate the Shiite community in Lebanon.

### ***A Serious Loss for Hezbollah's Allies***

The final results indicated Hezbollah's allies and Iran suffered an evident electoral setback. The Free Patriotic Movement lost its weight as the largest Christian bloc in Parliament after it had won 20 seats in the previous elections— while its rival party; the Lebanese Forces won 20 seats. The party (the Free Patriotic Movement) failed to get its allies, Sunnis, and Druze to the

Parliament. The most notable losers of the party's allies were the Syrian Social Nationalist Party's candidates and Druze and Sunni candidates — who are close to Damascus — such as the Druze politician Talal Asalan. He had been a lawmaker in Parliament for over 30 years, since 1992. As a result, Hezbollah and its allies lost the majority that they used to have in the Lebanese Parliament.

### **Increase in Anti-Hezbollah Forces' Representatives**

The results of the Lebanese elections were significantly unexpected. In particular, anti-Hezbollah forces successfully achieved a breakthrough in the Parliament. The anti-Hezbollah forces won 67 seats. This indicates that there is a real desire among large segments of the Lebanese to turn the tables on the ruling political and partisan system and that the elections were driven by a new vision which was not evident in any of the previous elections. However, in the past, playing on sectarianism had succeeded in getting people to turn out and vote but not in the present elections.

### **Low Voter Turnout**

Voter turnout in the parliamentary elections was 41 percent, 8 percent less than the percentage registered in the 2018 elections, which was about 49.7 percent. This percentage was the lowest in the history of the Lebanese elections since 1992 (voter turnout was about 29.6 percent only). This indicates a general decrease in voter participation because the Lebanese people have lost trust in the ruling elites, either the traditional elite or the Forces of Change, and the political forces failed to convince the Lebanese street to vote.

## **The Growing Pressure on Iran's Project in the Region**

The results of the Lebanese parliamentary elections impose further regional pressures on Iran at the present time. These pressures on Iran and their multiplying effects coincide with important regional and internal developments such as:

### ***Rise in the Anti-Iran Front***

These results reflect the same message as the results of the Iraqi elections that the Iraqi and Lebanese have started to embrace an anti-Iranian position because Tehran is viewed as fueling the internal crises in their countries. As a result, popular discontent against Iran has increased, limiting its ability to shape the political path in these two countries.

### ***Mounting Protests in Iran***

The results of the Lebanese elections coincided with turmoil in Tehran and growing protests over the economic decisions taken by the Iranian government. These protest, like the previous ones, initially erupted against the economic actions of the Iranian government and their growing repercussions on living conditions. However, over time, the aforementioned protests took on a political nature. The narrative of the previous protests reemerged, with protesters basically accusing Tehran of continuously draining the country's resources on its expansion efforts and supporting its alliances in Lebanon, Syrian , Iraq and Yemen with money, arms and equipment at the expense of the poor. The protest movement against the living conditions in Iran coincide with the blows Tehran has suffered in Iraq and Lebanon in light of the electoral results. The Iranian people consider these protests as an opportunity to express their rejection of the policies that have impoverished them, and led to the country's resources being squandered to finance Iran's arms in the region and turn them into victims of the leadership's Wilayat al-Faqih project.

## ***Growing Warnings of Iran's Presence in Syria***

The Russian-Ukrainian war raised Iran's interest to regain its presence in the region, fill the vacuum left by Russia's preoccupation with the war, and prove that it is a regional dominant power. This concern about Iran filling the vacuum in Syria was evident in several statements, the most recent of which was made by Jordan's King Abdullah II. He confirmed that the Russian presence in southern Syria was a source of calm and reiterated his warning about the repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Syria, especially that the vacuum will be filled by Iran due to the Russian preoccupation in Ukraine. He warned about the possible escalation of problems on the border. These statements coincided with the growing calls inside the United States not to remove the IRGC from the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. However, the delisting of the IRGC is one of Iran's demands to agree to a new nuclear deal during the negotiations that stalled in Vienna in March 2022. Undoubtedly, these aforementioned developments put more pressure on the Iranian government and its arms in the region.

## **The Lebanese Political Scene and the Challenges of the Post-Parliamentary Elections**

The results of the Lebanese parliamentary elections may impose many challenges on the Lebanese scene in many ways, as follows:

### **Complexities of the Upcoming Constitutional Deadlines**

After the election results, Lebanon is facing important constitutional decisions: the election of the speaker of the Parliament, the prime minister and the new president of the republic to succeed President Michel Aoun, whose constitutional term will expire at the end October 2022.

### *Election of Parliament Speaker*

The problem of electing the new president is that even if the two Shiite parties were able to re-elect Nabih Berri as speaker of the house for a second term, the elected blocs— the Lebanese Forces, the Free Patriotic Movement or even the Kataeb Party — will never vote for him due to their profound political differences. So, the two Shiite parties only have the representatives from the Amal Movement to reelect the speaker of the Parliament which is held by a Shiite Muslim customarily. By winning the Shiite seat in the Parliament, the two Shiite parties will prevent any one to make it to the presidency of the Parliament. Therefore, the options to re-elect Berri are limited. The Forces of Change and the other political forces that differ with the Shiite parties are at an impasse. As a result, to achieve their ends, the Shiite parties will be forced to enter difficult negotiations to achieve political parliamentary consensus.

### *Forming a New Government*

The constitutional complexity will unfold due to the possible complexity of forming the new government given the wide divisions in the Lebanese Parliament and the differences between the winning forces regarding the nomination of the speaker of the Parliament. Therefore, the current prime minister is expected to continue conducting the business of the government. The other difficulty is related to the selection of the government's program and the distribution of ministerial portfolios among the new parliamentary blocs. Some forces may hold onto some ministries, hindering therefore the formation of the government. In the same context, the formation of the last government took 13 months of negotiations involving three potential premiers. This worsened the economic and financial crisis and

disrupted political and administrative reforms.

### ***Election of President***

The appointment of the president of the republic, who is supposed to be elected by the new Lebanese Parliament, will be as complicated as the formation of the previous presidencies, especially as the Free Patriotic Movement gave up the largest Christian bloc to the Lebanese Forces. Therefore, the conduct of the forthcoming presidential election as scheduled in October 2022 naturally has a low chance. According to previous experience, Hezbollah sought to disrupt the election of the president of the republic when it did not have the majority by boycotting cabinet sessions and forcing one third of Parliament representatives to abstain from attending parliamentary sessions to disrupt its convening. Thus, the election of the new president of the republic will be a highly fraught process. Lebanon will have a new presidential vacuum, especially as the balance of the current forces tilt toward anti-Hezbollah forces.

### **Hezbollah's Adherence to Language of Threats**

The issue of (Hezbollah) weapons was one of the headlines of the election campaigns of the opposition forces. Therefore, this issue will be raised strongly during the coming period. However, a major breakthrough is unlikely to be achieved in this file because Hezbollah uses this card to lobby for its positions and decisions inside Lebanon and to threaten its opponents if a deadlock is reached. Mohammed Raad, the head of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, alluded to the opposition by [saying](#) "if you reject a national government, you are leading Lebanon to the abyss." His remarks suggests that Hezbollah is ready to use its armed militias against its opponents if the party is not included as an influential component in the new government.

## **Limited Political Leverage**

Despite the fact that the results of the elections did not grant Hezbollah and its allies a comfortable majority, they revealed multiple, inconsistent and hybrid blocs that bring together traditional parties and politically distinct groups from outside Lebanon's traditional partisan alignments. These new, changing and independent forces will not have any real political weight if they refuse to cooperate with the rest of the parties that seek to disarm political parties in the government. They will not be able to take decisive decisions independently due to the changing nature of the traditional alliances inside the Parliament. Given these considerations, this Parliament is unlikely to influence the political scene in Lebanon.

## **The Future of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon's Political Arena**

The party's leaders, including the secretary general and assistant secretary, have more than once stressed the importance of these elections and acknowledged the results. In addition, the party and Tehran reiterated their acceptance of the results of the voting process. However, the defeat of the Iranian project does not mean that the danger has passed but it is growing. The party will not comply with the decisions of the new Parliament because it refuses to accept the will of the people as expressed by the parliamentary elections. In addition, the party has two important cards inside Lebanon. Firstly, the use of arms after it failed in the elections. It only believes in elections for its own self-centered goals rather than for coexistence with other parties nor does it respect the Lebanese state. Secondly, the party is



likely to employ its traditional “blocking one third” which it has used during the past years. Accordingly, the Lebanese political landscape and the possible role of Hezbollah can be predicted in light of the following scenarios:

### **First Scenario: Consensus for Concessions**

Due to the absence of a parliamentary majority for any particular party or alliance, this scenario expects a consensus between certain parties; Hezbollah will reach an agreement with the Lebanese Forces Party to form the next government. This depends on the development of the regional situation and the possible Saudi-Iran understandings. This will allow both parties to pursue cooperation, along with dialogue under international and possibly French supervision to create a parallel understanding. However, even if this path is chosen, the negotiations between the various forces in regard to government formation are expected to take time, especially as they will be linked with the presidential election. This requires a consensual candidate who is not available now. The international mediator will probably suggest a candidate from outside the political class, or Hezbollah will attract the votes of some independent lawmakers to form a consensual government. However, it is unlikely that Hezbollah will be able to achieve this end, given the divergent political perspectives of the independent lawmakers who only agree on opposing the poles of power in the country.

All anti-Hezbollah parties may agree to form a government, thwart Hezbollah’s blocking efforts and coordinate national political positions and plans in preparation for the upcoming constitutional decisions in order to set up the new Lebanese political project. This project will begin at home and be connected with the regional and international situation in order to help Lebanon get out of the regional conflict cycle and bring it to

the phase of positive neutrality. This scenario is unlikely at the present time because of partisan influences inside the institution of the Lebanese state and the efforts made by the rest of the parties to avoid any security confrontation with Hezbollah and its allies as happened between 2005-2009.

### **Second Scenario: The Card of “Blocking Third”**

Hezbollah may play another game that the party has mastered over the past years: the policy of creating a vacuum and disrupting institutions at all levels by showing off its arsenal of weapons to repeat the Iraqi scenario. The party seeks to achieve political gains in government portfolios, the presidential elections, or any benefits from an expected regional deal in the next stage. Hezbollah had used this latter card to affect the government formation and the presidential elections. It may try to hinder the election of the president and the government formation until it reaches its desired compromise and ensures that its preferred candidate is the president. If this happens, the promising results of the 2022 elections may not lead to the desired reform in Lebanon’s state institutions. This scenario is most likely amid the difficulties in converging opposing views and the sharp divisions among the political parties.

## **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the results of the parliamentary elections revealed that Hezbollah lost on three fronts. First, the Free Patriotic Movement (which is no longer able to secure the necessary Christian cover with the same momentum and popularity). Second, the front line that emerged from the elections i.e., the Forces of Change and the Lebanese Forces, the latter seem unwilling to make any concessions or accept any obligatory settlement

after it managed to move from the streets to the government. Third, the loss of the decisive voice in the three presidential candidates.

However, given the aforementioned considerations, the prospect of radical change in the political landscape is unlikely due to the penetration of the ruling political class in the Shiite and election landscape. Iran and its party are still able to place the Lebanese situation under the international and regional settlement which they believe will be in their interest inevitably. To foster its ambitions, the international forces tend to placate Tehran in the next stages by concluding the nuclear deal and related interests. These powers need to deescalate tensions in the Middle East as long as the Ukraine war still rages on as there is no specific time to put an end to it. Due to the increased popular protests against the deterioration of the economic situation, Iran is in need of foreign cards to improve its position at home and dialogue with Riyadh and to strengthen its positions inside the region which has been witnessing global shifts.

