
The Lebanese Elections in Context **Event Summary**

On the morning of Monday, June 1, 2009, the Aspen Institute's U.S.-Lebanon Dialogue Program convened a panel discussion on the upcoming Lebanese elections and their potential implications for Lebanon, U.S.-Lebanon relations, and the wider region. *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius moderated the discussion between National Democratic Institute's Middle East director Les Campbell and long time *Al-Hayat* columnist Raghida Dergham.

Aspen's Executive Director for Middle East Programs Toni G. Verstandig chaired the event and introduced the discussion by highlighting the importance of Lebanon both as a political and cultural crossroads in the Middle East region and as a key U.S. ally. Noting the new push by the Obama administration for a comprehensive regional peace, Verstandig questioned where the elections would place Lebanon relative to that effort.

David Ignatius opened the panel discussion by hearkening back to a column he had written announcing the "post-American era" in Lebanon, in response to the absence of overt U.S. mediation in brokering the Doha agreement in May of 2008. Ignatius remarked that in fact Lebanon is never truly "post anything," and that robust U.S. interest is still evident today in the high level American diplomatic visits and close involvement with building the Lebanese army. He noted that Lebanon, poised between East and West, has always embraced ambiguity, and that while the U.S.-Iranian rivalry overhangs Lebanon, it is simply the last in a continuous series of conflicts and crises to overhang this small country. Ignatius challenged the panelists to consider whether these elections might mark a change in that history. He ended by returning to Verstandig's question of how Lebanon would fit within a comprehensive peace initiative, noting even Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's public support for a Lebanon peace track.

The Micro-view: Opportunities for Reform

Les Campbell couched his remarks in terms of his recent election monitoring trips to Lebanon under the NDI aegis. Campbell remarked that elections are often not the most important element in burgeoning democracies, and in Lebanon specifically they would primarily serve as a starting point for further negotiations over the formation of the next government. Campbell did not see any large political shift on the horizon for Lebanon, and predicted a continuation of the present power sharing arrangement or something very close to it regardless of the elections' results. He was also skeptical of March 14 claims that they would refuse to participate in a government if the opposition won a majority, opining that this was an attempt to "raise the stakes" for undecided voters in the run up to the election. Campbell also saw a strong likelihood for the present coalition blocs to rearrange as their internal divisions adjusted to the election results and new political map.

Campbell saw the elections as most importantly an opportunity to push forward on further democratic reforms. He reported finding a strong and growing movement and culture for reform, building out of the domestic campaigns to reform the electoral law. He noted that, for the first time, domestic groups were participating as elections observers; Campbell saw great potential for these groups to continue trying to hold their government accountable after the elections. He applauded the essential reforms already implemented as important steps in building a culture of reform. Of special note was the recent completion of the Constitutional Council, the body charged with settling electoral disputes, as a significant victory for the democratic process. Campbell lamented the absence of standardized pre-printed ballots as the most serious weakness in the electoral system, however.

Campbell finished his remarks by noting the difficulties encountered by NDI in remaining outside the political fray in Lebanon. NDI's pre-elections statement referencing Hezbollah's arms as problematic for a credible democratic process caused controversy and brought some accusations of partiality. Campbell warned against the urge in Washington to strongly support "our guys" even in the face of Iranian or Syrian support for the opposition, cautioning that such efforts backfire more often than not. He saw instead a likely U.S. move toward supporting the Lebanese president Michel Sleiman and continuing support for Lebanon's state institutions.

The Macro-view: Regional Tug-of-War

Raghida Dergham approached the discussion from a wider regional view of the situation, and with a good deal more concern than Campbell evinced. Dergham warned that, contra Campbell, an opposition victory in the polls could well lead to a radical change in Lebanon's regional position and orientation. She predicted that, given Lebanon's position as the "regional laboratory," even a small victory for the opposition would be cast by Syria and Iran as a repudiation of Saudi Arabian and Egyptian regional leadership, as well as March 14's allies in the West. She also warned that, should Lebanon fall under the full control of an emboldened Hezbollah-led coalition that Lebanon could be "lost to Iran," and all but impossible to get back.

Dergham saw Lebanon as the arena for continued regional rivalries, noting the influx of Saudi and Iranian money during the election period as well as high profile visits from U.S. officials, including Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Dergham explained that Iran considers Lebanon the "crown jewel" in its drive for regional prominence, and criticized what she saw as half-hearted and conflicted efforts by the U.S. to support the Lebanese Army in the face of the strong Iranian support for Hezbollah. Though she cautioned that an opposition win was by no means guaranteed, she warned that such an event would allow both Iran and Israel to "change the subject" away from peace talks by fomenting conflict along the Blue Line.

Dergham opined that the only ways for the U.S. to undermine Iran's "logic of Resistance" was to force Israel to the peace table and take away any pretext for violence, or to force a deal on Iran that would draw a line at any interference in Lebanon. She urged the U.S. to consider carefully what its plans would be in the event of an opposition win and what that would mean for its position in the Middle East.

The U.S.-Lebanon Dialogue Program is policy program at the Aspen Institute, in partnership with the Lebanon Renaissance Foundation, intended to elevate the debate on Lebanon within the policy establishment in Washington, DC.