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The Lebanese Presidential Election: Setting the Stage



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An Intelligence Assessment

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May 1982

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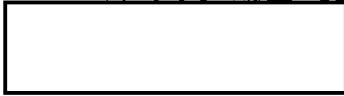
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The Lebanese Presidential Election: Setting the Stage



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An Intelligence Assessment


*Information available as of 7 May 1982
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This assessment was prepared by 
Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis. Comments
and queries are welcome and may be directed to
the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESA, 


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This report has been coordinated with the Directorate
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**The Lebanese Presidential
Election: Setting the
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Key Judgments

The presidency is Lebanon's most important remaining symbol of national unity, and Muslims and Christians alike are looking to the presidential election this summer as the country's last chance to achieve national reconciliation and avert partition. The official campaign has not yet begun, but the looming Syrian-Phalange deadlock is likely to jeopardize the election and lead to renewed violence.



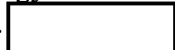
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The campaign has already developed into a contest between the Syrians and the Christian Phalange-dominated Lebanese Front. So far, both are holding to inflexible positions, and neither appears to subscribe to the widely held belief that they will have to compromise on a candidate. Without a dialogue between the two sides, an attempt by Damascus to impose a pro-Syrian candidate or the refusal by the Phalange to tolerate anyone except its own candidate is likely to result in new Syrian-Phalange fighting, possible partition, and an increased risk of Israeli-Syrian conflict in Lebanon.



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The Phalange wants the election to serve as the basis for restoring traditional Maronite political dominance and for reducing Syrian and Palestinian influence in Lebanon, but few Phalangists appear to believe that such an outcome is likely. The Phalange's campaign strategy will largely aim at blocking the election of a pro-Syrian candidate.



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The Syrians will try to use the election to forge a Lebanese coalition amenable to Syria's direction and will support a candidate who will agree to normalize bilateral ties between the two countries, concede a larger political role to Lebanese Muslims, and use the authority of the government to reduce the Phalange's military and political power base. At a minimum, Damascus will seek to prevent the Phalange from maneuvering within the election process to restore Maronite dominance over Lebanon or to carry out a partition of the country and establish a ministate dependent on Israel.



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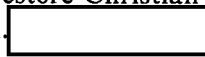
The United States has emerged in the eyes of most Lebanese and Arab leaders as a key player in the campaign, and some Lebanese leaders believe that Washington will have to "select" a candidate and help oversee the process to ensure that the election is held. Phalange leaders know that they do not have the military strength to challenge the Syrians over the

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presidency, and they will look to the United States to intervene to help them stave off a pro-Syrian candidate. The Syrians will view a US role that is not closely coordinated with them and does not ensure the severance of Israeli-Phalange ties as another sign of a US-Israeli-Phalange plot to reduce Syrian influence, restore Christian dominance, and restrict Palestinian activity in Lebanon.



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The Lebanese Presidential Election: Setting the Stage [Redacted]

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Lebanon's presidential election is scheduled to take place between 23 July and 23 August. The official campaign has yet to begin, but the election issue has been the focus of Lebanese domestic politics since last fall when hopes for a national reconciliation promoted by the Arab Conciliation Committee on Lebanon began to fade.¹ Most major Lebanese factions and political leaders have publicly staked out their positions on the election, but few have named their preferred candidates for fear of exposing them to opposition fire. Although statements by leading Muslims and Christians continue to betray the deep-seated confessional mistrust that led to the civil war of 1975-76, most Lebanese view the presidency as an important symbol of national unity and appear to want the election to take place under the terms of the constitution. [Redacted]

Syria, whose troops have controlled most of the country since they intervened in the civil war in 1976, is widely viewed as the major player in the election. The Syrians had hoped that the election of President Sarkis in 1976 would serve both to end the fighting and as a basis for national reconciliation. They soon became discouraged by what they perceived as Sarkis's inability to confront the militant Maronite factions as they grew increasingly opposed to the Syrian presence in Lebanon and his unwillingness to press for major political concessions for Muslims. They were also disappointed by his reluctance to ally Lebanon more closely with Syria. By early last year it was clear that the Syrians had written Sarkis off and were looking toward this summer's election to install a new man before undertaking new political initiatives in Lebanon. [Redacted]

¹ The Arab Conciliation Committee was formed in 1976 to help facilitate national reconciliation in Lebanon after the civil war ended. It was reconvened last summer after the heavy Syrian-Phalange fighting in Zahlah and Beirut. It currently consists of the Foreign Ministers of Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia as well as the Secretary General of the Arab League. [Redacted]

² Under the terms of the unwritten National Covenant of 1943, the presidency is reserved for the Maronites, the prime ministry for a Sunni Muslim, and the position of speaker of parliament for a Shia Muslim. [Redacted]

The Contending Parties

Syria's goals in Lebanon have not changed since it intervened in the civil war in 1976. Damascus wants a stable Lebanon with Christian-Muslim power more evenly balanced and closely tied to Syria so that Syrian military access to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, which Syrians consider a likely avenue of Israeli attack, is assured. The Syrians also want to keep the Palestinians in Lebanon on a short leash to prevent them from accepting a settlement with Israel that does not include a return of the Golan Heights to Syria or embroiling Syria in a war with Israel that is not of its own choosing. [Redacted]

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Above all, however, the Syrians want to prevent the creation on their western border of a potentially hostile, Palestinian-influenced, radical Muslim state or a Christian state dependent on Israel. They intervened in the civil war in 1976 to prevent an alliance of Lebanese Muslim leftists and Palestinians from defeating Christian forces. That done, the Syrians shifted the focus of their policy in Lebanon to preventing the principal Maronite groups, led by the Phalange, from establishing a ministate allied with Israel. [Redacted]

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We believe the Syrians see the election of a new Lebanese president this summer as a key element in attaining their goals. [Redacted] they want a president who will be more amenable to their guidance than Sarkis has been. They will expect him to allow them a hand in rebuilding the Lebanese Army and to take a firm position against the Phalange-dominated Lebanese Front. They will expect the new president to be willing to use the Syrian-manned Arab Deterrent Force (ADF) to establish government control over the Phalange-controlled Maronite heartland. [Redacted]

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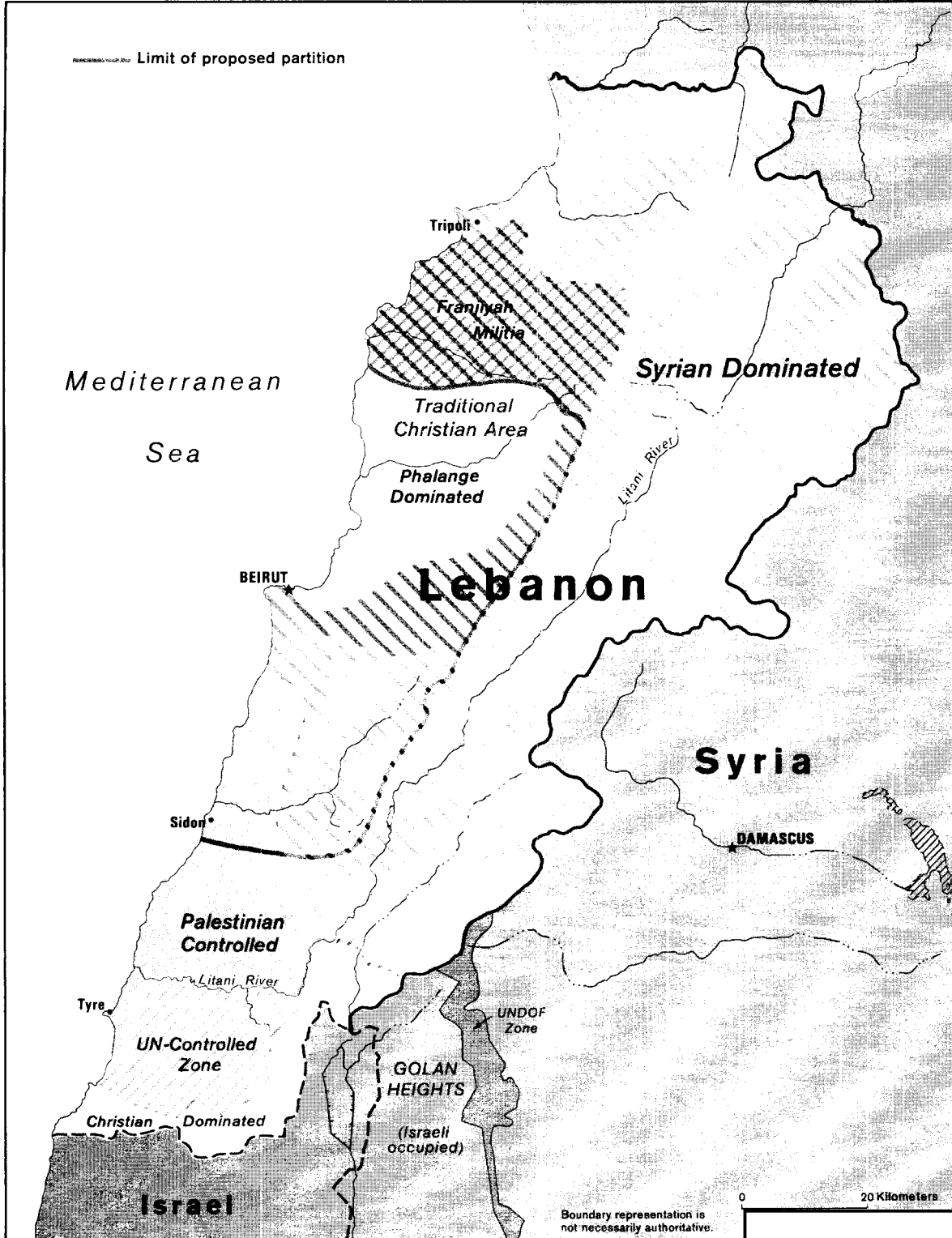
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Phalange Proposal for Partition



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The *Christian Lebanese Front*, led by Phalange militia chief Bashir Jumayyil, will provide the main opposition to Syria's candidate for the presidency. According to senior Phalange officials, Phalange strategists fear that the Syrians intend to use the election to strip the Lebanese Front of its military and political power by proposing a candidate who would outlaw the Phalange and employ Syrian troops against it. The Phalange has threatened to block the election if such a candidate is likely to win, and it insists that the election should not be held so long as Syrian troops remain in Beirut. [redacted]

We believe that Jumayyil would like to have a strong-willed Maronite elected president who would use the authority of his office to restore Maronite dominance over Lebanon. He would look to such a president to press Damascus for a complete withdrawal of Syrian troops and to reach a new agreement with the Palestinians that would establish tight control over their actions. According to senior Phalange officials Jumayyil believes that if the government can end Palestinian guerrilla activity against Israel, it could gain Israeli acquiescence to extending its authority throughout southern Lebanon, including the border enclave controlled by former Lebanese Army major Saad Haddad. [redacted]

Phalange officials indicate that Jumayyil would like to form a coalition with Lebanese Muslims from the more conservative elements in the Druze and Shia communities as well as from the Sunni political establishment that would support a Front candidate and Phalange policies toward the Syrians and the Palestinians. In return, the new president would agree to a broader Muslim role in the Lebanese political power structure. [redacted]

It is not clear what concessions Jumayyil is prepared to offer. In a pamphlet published in late 1980 entitled "The Lebanon We Want To Build," leading Christian politicians close to or members of the Front presented a confederation plan under which major confessional areas of the country would have a wide range of autonomous powers within the framework of a unified state. Although some older Muslim politicians have warmed to the idea of decentralization as an answer to Lebanon's problems, most Muslims fear that any scheme for autonomous regions is merely a precursor to partition. [redacted]

Lebanon's *Muslims* are split between conservatives who largely want to preserve Lebanon's confessional structure and radicals who want the election to serve as a transition to a secular, socialist state. [redacted]

[redacted] many who would like to see the selection of a moderate who would restore the authority of the presidency and lead the country toward national reconciliation fear that the hardline positions of the Phalange and the Syrians will lead to new violence and the breakdown of the election process. Although many Muslims share Christian disgruntlement with Syrian influence in Lebanon, in our opinion most view the Syrians and, to a lesser extent, the Palestinians as necessary protection against the Phalange. Because Syrian troops occupy almost all Muslim areas of Lebanon, we believe that most Muslims realize they cannot afford to oppose Syrian policy on the election. [redacted]

Interested Bystanders

The *Palestinians* want to retain maximum freedom of action in Lebanon and view the approaching election, like any other potential major change in the Lebanese political scene, with some unease. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) will attempt to stay out of the campaign, but we believe it clearly prefers the election of a neutral or moderate candidate who would allow the Palestinians' current freedom of movement in Lebanon to continue. The PLO would view with concern the election of a dynamic president, whether pro-Syrian, pro-Phalange, or independent, and considers any expansion of central government authority as coming at Palestinian expense. The PLO fears that the election of a candidate sympathetic to the Phalange would be used against them by the Israelis and suspects that a pro-Syrian president would move to bring them under tighter Syrian control. [redacted]

We believe the *Israelis* would like to see the election of a strong-willed president who would reduce Syrian influence in Lebanon, disarm the guerrillas, and restrict Palestinian activity as a prelude to signing a peace treaty with Israel. They will probably settle for a renewal of President Sarkis's term as a second-best outcome. [redacted] the Israelis believe that Syria intends to dominate the election in order to consolidate and formalize its role in Lebanon and turn it into another confrontation

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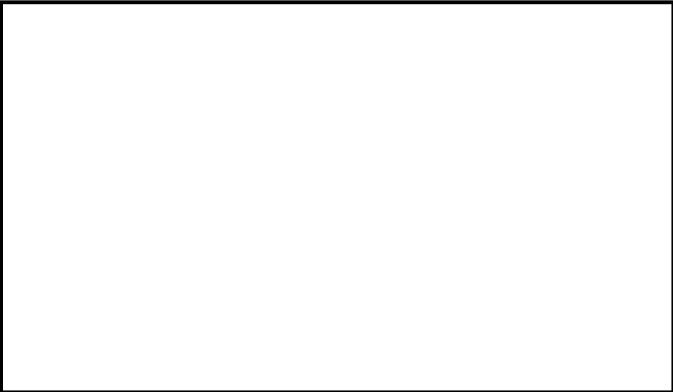
Requirements for Election

The Lebanese presidential election is governed by Article 49 of the constitution, which says that "the President of the Republic shall be elected by the Chamber of Deputies by secret ballot and by a two-thirds majority of the votes. After the first ballot, an absolute majority will be sufficient." [redacted]

on subsequent ballots to win. An effort to block a candidate in this case would take 31 votes on the first ballot. Of the 92 deputies, the Lebanese Front can probably count on about 30 votes. The Syrians can probably control 50 to 60 votes. [redacted]

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Lebanese parliamentary elections, which are scheduled every four years, have not been held since 1972 because of security conditions. The current body extended its tenure last year until June 1983. Seven of its 99 members have died, prompting a debate about the definition of a quorum. Those who favor a quorum based on the full, 99-member body argue for a "strict" interpretation of Article 34, which stipulates that "the Chamber shall not be validly constituted unless the majority of its lawful members are present." Those who believe a quorum should be based on the 92 surviving deputies argue that Article 34 can only be interpreted on the basis of living members since security conditions have prevented elections to replace those who have died. [redacted]

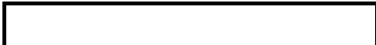


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Based on 99 deputies, a candidate would have to receive 66 votes on the first ballot or 50 on subsequent ballots to win. With only 92 living deputies, it would therefore take only 27 votes to block a candidate on the first ballot. If the vote is based on 92 deputies, which according to some Lebanese deputies has been generally accepted in parliament, a candidate would need only 62 votes on the first ballot or 47

The venue of the balloting will be important. The Lebanese parliament building, located in the former commercial district near the confrontation line between East and West Beirut, has not been used since the civil war, and the deputies currently meet in "Mansur Palace," once the home of one of their number. It is also located near the confrontation line, however, and most factions in Beirut can affect security conditions in the area. [redacted]

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state. In our opinion the Israelis can be expected to press the United States to help the Phalange ward off the imposition of a Syrian-backed president and to provide military assistance to the Phalange if the campaign leads to new fighting with the Syrians. [redacted]

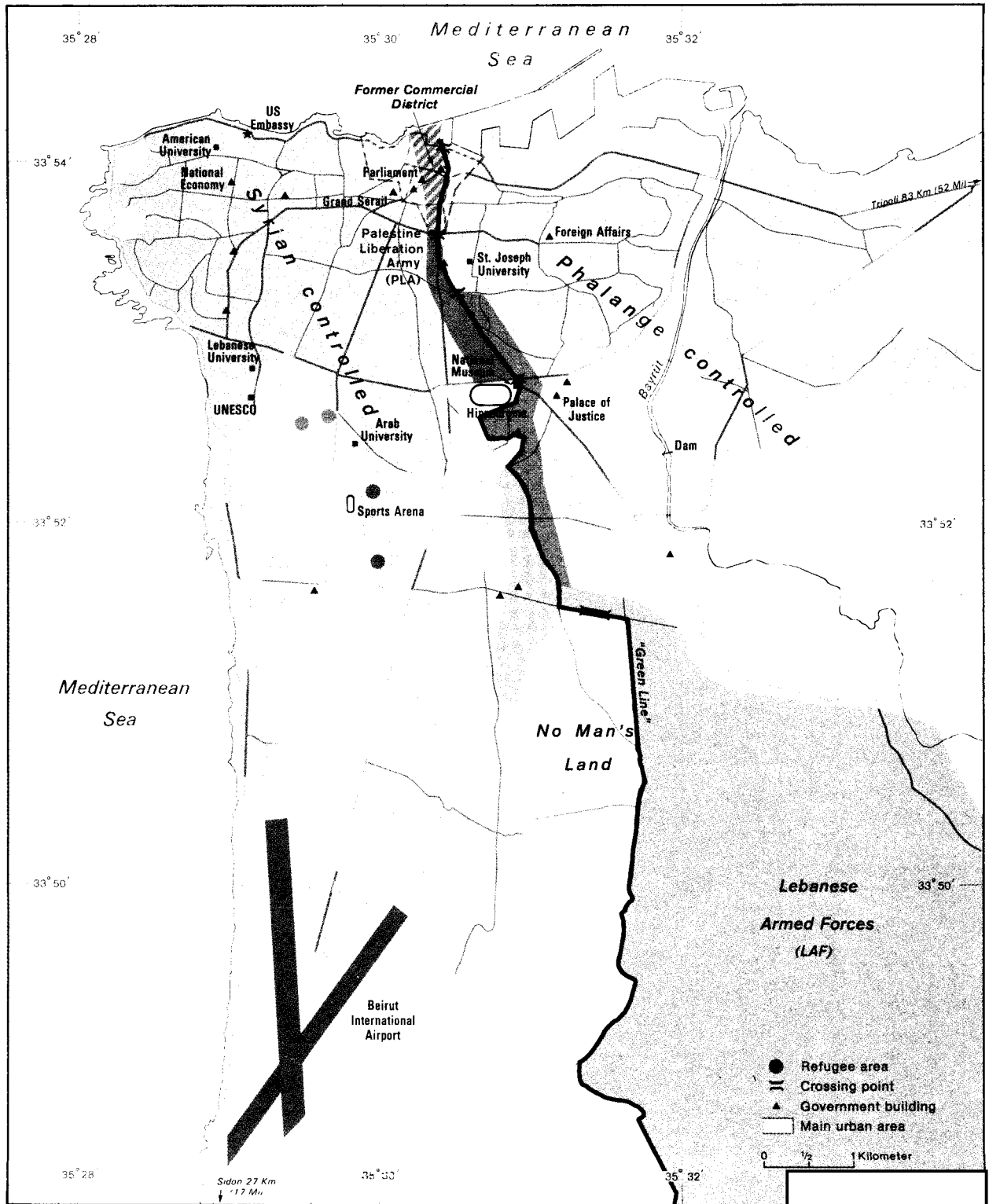
Damascus holds most of the cards, but [redacted] they increasingly blame Lebanese politicians for not taking meaningful steps toward reconciliation. We believe the Saudis are unhappy with the prospect of a Syrian-dominated election. They show, however, little willingness to confront Damascus on the issue and, like other moderates, will increasingly look to the United States to broker a compromise. [redacted]

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We believe that the Saudis, like other moderate Arab states, would like the election to serve as a basis for reducing Syrian influence in Lebanon and promoting Muslim-Christian reconciliation. They recognize that

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Beirut: Areas of Control



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Syrian Strategy for the Election

The Syrians are trying to form a coalition of Lebanese Muslim and Christian leaders such as former Prime Minister Rashid Karami, Druze chieftain Walid Junblat, Shia leader Nabih Barri, and Phalange rival and former President Sulayman Franjiyah, around whom they would organize their electoral campaign. We believe they will attempt to use this coalition to isolate the Phalange as "unrepresentative" and will depict the pro-Syrian alliance's candidate as having widespread support in both the Muslim and Christian communities. [redacted]

Damascus has always opposed "Arabizing" or "internationalizing" the Lebanese problem, and we believe that the Syrians will attempt to prevent the introduction of other outside influences into the election process. Syrian leaders have already made clear to other key Arab states [redacted] that they expect them either to support Syria's candidate or stay out of the election altogether. They will similarly oppose efforts to establish election commissions or other international bodies designed to guarantee fairness in the election. [redacted]

We do not believe that internal difficulties in Syria will persuade Syrian President Assad to accept a compromise in Lebanon unless the resulting unrest threatens his imminent ouster. Syrian policy toward Lebanon was not altered substantially during the sustained clashes in Aleppo between mid-1979 and mid-1980 nor during the disturbances in Hamah earlier this year. [redacted]

To support their contention that the Phalange represents only a segment of Lebanon's Christians, the Syrians will probably seek to assemble the necessary two-thirds of parliament for a first-ballot victory. They took similar steps in 1976 when they sought to isolate the Muslim left by electing Sarkis with the largest majority possible. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Phalange Strategy

Phalange strategists are concerned that, if the election is held, the Syrians will try to outmaneuver them by presenting a stalking horse who is anathema to them with a view toward "compromising" on a weaker candidate who will still acquiesce in most Syrian conditions. Senior Phalange officials suggest that, in such a situation, Jumayyil fears that Muslim and independent Christian deputies, hoping to avoid a Syrian-Phalange showdown, would eagerly choose to interpret the Syrian offer as a conciliatory gesture and proceed to ratify the "compromise" candidate. [redacted]

The Phalange, therefore, may move to block the election by preventing a sufficient number of pro-Syrian deputies from assembling in the hope that this would force Syria to accept a genuine compromise candidate or lead to a crisis that would prompt outside intervention. Such a strategy would almost certainly require kidnappings, killings, and other forms of intimidation and could lead to Syrian retaliation. [redacted]

In trying to block the election, the Phalange would be playing upon fears among Lebanese politicians that a delay could hasten partition by leading to a so-called constitutional vacuum that would exist if no election were held before the end of President Sarkis's term on 23 September. Under such circumstances, unless a constitutional amendment was passed extending Sarkis's term, the government would be run by the Council of Ministers until an election could be held. [redacted]

Some of Jumayyil's opponents suspect, however, that his strategy for delaying the election through the end of Sarkis's term is the result of a tacit agreement with Sarkis to appoint a Christian prime minister before he leaves office to safeguard the Front's interests. Although this would run counter to the unwritten National Covenant of 1943, hardline Maronites could

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be expected to argue that, in a government of ministers, the Prime Minister is the head of state and, therefore, should be a Christian. [redacted]

[redacted] opponents of the Phalange will attempt to counter such a strategy by calling for the election process to begin early in the period prescribed in the constitution to give the deputies as much time as possible to assemble a quorum before Sarkis's term ends. Such an early election could be dangerous for the Phalange by setting the stage for a Syrian effort to assemble a quorum and ratify their candidate quickly before the Phalange can mobilize its assets and focus international attention on the situation. [redacted]

Moreover, if the Syrians believe that the Phalange can prevent a quorum from assembling in Beirut, we believe they may try to move the venue of the election to an area firmly under Syrian control. Speaker of Parliament Kamil al-Asad, who sets the date for the election, is being wooed by the Phalange because of the venue question, but he has long been supported by the Syrians, and his pronouncements on the election echo the Syrian line. [redacted]

An attempt by the Lebanese Front to employ legal tactics or the threat of partition to block or postpone the vote could prompt Damascus to proceed with the election in an area under Syrian control. If the Syrians could assemble the deputies necessary for a quorum, they could maintain that actions taken to block the election were illegal and could be expected to press other Arabs to recognize their candidate as President of Lebanon. This would enable them to brand the Lebanese Front as "outlaws" and give them grounds for military action, if necessary, against Phalange territory. [redacted]

Alternative Scenarios

A Preelection Coup. Some Lebanese Muslims fear that hardline Maronites might use the possible election of a Syrian-controlled president as an excuse to

⁴ There is a precedent for the appointment of a Christian prime minister as a caretaker. Bishara al-Khuri appointed Fuad Shihab prime minister when he resigned in 1952, and Shihab acted as temporary head of government until parliament elected Camille Shamun President a few days later. [redacted]

have elements of the Lebanese Army carry out a coup against the Sarkis government. They would argue that "the Army could not stand by" while the Syrians imposed a "puppet" as the next president. Under this scenario the new military government would suspend the constitution and postpone the election. [redacted]

There is no evidence that the Phalange or its sympathizers within the Army are planning such a coup. Phalange leaders, nevertheless, maintain close ties with the Maronite leadership of the Army and can depend on considerable support within the military for their cause. [redacted]

Partition. Although Phalange spokesmen pay lipservice to a united Lebanon and deny they seek partition, some have already issued thinly veiled threats that the election of an unacceptable candidate will lead to partition. A major element of Jumayyil's election strategy appears to be to play upon Lebanese Muslim and Arab fears of the creation of a separate Christian state to force them to compromise on the presidency. [redacted]

Since the end of the civil war the Phalange has gradually taken steps to give credence to the idea of a separate state by assuming government functions or establishing parallel services throughout the Maronite heartland. Recently Jumayyil ordered the reorganization of the Lebanese Forces, largely composed of Phalange militiamen, along the lines of a regular army. As the Phalange has tightened its hold over the Maronite heartland, it has also gained control over rival groups within the Front. [redacted]

Basically, the Phalange concept of partition appears to call for the creation of a largely Christian state encompassing most of the Maronite heartland north of Beirut and the Shuf and Aley regions south of the city to Sidon and Jazzin. In return, the Syrians would be allowed to annex northern Lebanon and the Biqa Valley. The Phalange would guarantee that its territory would not be used as a base for anti-Syrian activities. [redacted]

⁵ The Lebanese Front is an umbrella organization consisting of the Phalange, the National Liberal Party, the Order of Maronite Monks, Guardians of the Cedars, and Tanzim. [redacted]

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Requirements for Extension

An extension of President Sarkis's term would require an amendment to Article 49 of the constitution that states that "a president may not be reelected except after a break of six years." Adopting such an amendment requires passage by a two-thirds vote in parliament. Any move to extend Sarkis's term would have to have the support of the Syrians, who could prevent a quorum of deputies from assembling if they chose.

The Syrians will almost certainly oppose—by military means if necessary—any effort by the Phalange to establish a de facto Christian state. They have reacted vigorously to efforts by Jumayyil to expand the area under his control since the civil war and have effectively cordoned off the Maronite heartland with elite special forces and a loosely based alliance of anti-Phalange Lebanese militias. The Syrians would also cite a unilateral step by the Maronites to establish a state as giving the Syrian-manned Arab Deterrent Force—as a recognized force of the central government in Beirut—the right to take military action against the secessionist area.

There is a precedent for amending Article 49. In 1948 Bishara al-Khuri, Lebanon's first President after independence and one of the architects of the National Covenant, persuaded parliament to allow him to serve a second, consecutive term. Nonetheless, tampering with the constitution and granting a president more than his allotted six years has proved to be a dangerous flashpoint in Lebanese history.

Extending President Sarkis's Term. As the presidential campaign unfolds, more attention is being given to a one- or two-year extension of President Sarkis's term as the compromise most likely to head off a confrontation between the Phalange and the Syrians. Although almost all Lebanese factions oppose such a move, many observers believe this could change if the alternative was renewed civil war.

"manage" rather than try to solve Lebanon's internal problems—is widely interpreted by Lebanese political observers as rejection of an extension of Sarkis's term as well as of "neutral" candidates. The Phalange, however, may prove more amenable to extending Sarkis's term than the Syrians. Over the last several months senior Phalange officials have indicated that they believe Sarkis has become more sympathetic to their position, particularly in light of Syria's refusal to allow the Arab Conciliation Committee to promote a national dialogue in Lebanon. In our opinion Bashir Jumayyil realizes that accepting an extension of Sarkis's term would not only buy time but would allow him considerable room to maneuver before a rescheduled election could take place.

Damascus has remained silent on the issue, but the vigorous opposition of Syria's Lebanese allies strongly suggests that the Syrians also are cool to the idea. The Syrians clearly prefer a new president more amenable to their direction. They are likely to accept an extension of Sarkis's term only as a last resort to prevent a major outbreak of fighting or if they conclude that a continuation of the internal political deadlock is preferable to the prospect of major changes in the political landscape.

Sarkis is adamantly opposed to an extension of his term and has made his feelings widely known. He is tired of the strains of the presidency and frustrated by his inability to achieve national reconciliation. He has

The Phalange's official line toward the presidential campaign—opposition to the election of a "colorless, tasteless, meaningless" candidate who would only

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threatened to resign on several occasions, coming closest to doing so during the heavy Syrian-Phalange fighting in mid-1978. It is unclear whether Sarkis can be persuaded to change his mind, although he is clearly a Lebanese nationalist and wants to avoid a resumption of civil war. [redacted]

Sarkis has intimated that he plans to leave Lebanon at the end of his term in September. If he perceives pressures building for an extension, he might leave Lebanon before the end of his term and resign from abroad. Such a development would force parliament to recognize the Council of Ministers as an interim government. [redacted]

Outlook and Implications for the United States

Both the Syrians and the Phalange want the election to serve as the basis for a major political realignment in Lebanon—the Syrians to gain control over the Phalange and reduce Israeli influence in Lebanon and the Phalange to reduce Syrian influence and gain control over the Palestinians in Lebanon. At this point, neither side has shown much interest in a compromise. Syrian leaders have dropped hints to other Arab leaders that they intend to dominate the election, while Phalange militia leader Bashir Jumayyil continues to maintain that a Syrian-backed candidate is unacceptable. [redacted]

Neither the Phalange nor the Syrians are likely to warm to prospective candidates who show themselves independent of both sides, and a compromise, if possible, will most likely have to be fashioned around a weak, neutral candidate or a transitional president who would preside for a limited time while new attempts to reconcile Muslims and Christians took place. But the obstacles are formidable. At the least, a

transitional president would have to meet the minimum requirements of the Phalange, which would look upon his limited term as additional time to maneuver against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. The Syrians would probably have to receive guarantees from such a president that he would obtain Phalange agreement to sever ties with Israel. [redacted]

Both the Syrians and the Phalange will be carefully watching US policy toward the election. Phalange leaders calculate that their main hope for staving off the imposition of a pro-Syrian president lies in persuading the United States to play a major role in overseeing the process and perhaps guaranteeing a "fair" election. Therefore, a large part of Jumayyil's election strategy will focus on attempting to involve the United States in the campaign. Jumayyil may calculate that this can best be done by manipulating the security situation to bring on the threat of Israeli intervention against Syria. [redacted]

The Syrians undoubtedly realize that the few options the Phalange has to prevent a Syrian candidate from winning depend largely on outside intervention. Thus, a primary Syrian concern as the election approaches will be to derail Phalange efforts to involve others such as the United States or the Saudis in the election process. [redacted]

The Syrians already believe that the US position in Lebanon has changed to encompass a closer relationship with the Phalange. They are likely to interpret US interest in the election outcome as foreshadowing US intervention on behalf of the Phalange and the Israelis. The Syrians may take advantage of their ability to create tensions in Lebanon to persuade the United States that they, not the Phalange, are the key players whose interests must be considered. [redacted]

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