

**Testimony of Tamara Cofman Wittes, Ph.D.  
Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy  
The Brookings Institution**

**before the  
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Hearing on Lebanon and Iraq After the Elections  
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Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members of the subcommittee, good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to share my analysis with you. I must begin, as always, by noting that I represent only myself before you today; the Brookings Institution does not take any institutional positions on policy issues.

The elections in Iraq and Lebanon earlier this month present a fragile but important counterpoint to a region in turmoil. They offer both risks and opportunities for American policy, and we must be wary of drawing strong conclusions from ambiguous results amidst very dynamic politics in both countries. That said, there are some positive developments worth nurturing in both Iraq and Lebanon. The United States must stay engaged, using diplomatic and economic tools and working together with regional partners who share our goals of promoting stability and tempering Iran's influence. We can encourage sovereignty amidst the region's swirling conflicts, support local democratic development, and over time encourage political shifts toward less sectarian and more effective and responsive domestic governance. The greatest risk for American policy toward Lebanon and Iraq right now would be to embark on blunt-force policies, either by walking away from the fight or by squeezing these fragile countries into unwelcome crisis. Such tactics would give away American influence, advantaging Iran further across the region.

In assessing these electoral outcomes, the committee has asked us to examine their impact on Iran's regional influence and the broader regional geopolitical competition between Iran and its adversaries. To place this in the context of US policy toward Iran: Secretary Pompeo's speech yesterday laid out a list of desiderata for changed Iranian policies that I think we can all agree are worthy goals. But a strategy links goals to means -- and yesterday's speech did not lay out any path by which the United States can actually move toward achieving the goals it seeks. Maximalist demands plus unilateral sanctions do not make up a strategy. I address strategy toward the broader confrontation with Iran below.

## Elections Are A Notable Counterpoint to Regional Trends

For Lebanon and Iraq, holding relatively peaceful elections in the face of stressful circumstances is itself a small triumph. After the people-power uprisings of the Arab Spring were hijacked by violence in Syria, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen; after Egypt's popular overthrow of the Mubarak regime was hijacked first by an elected president who betrayed democratic principles, then by a military coup and a renewed dictatorship; after resurgent monarchs and extremist militias have dominated and driven the region's trajectory for more than half a decade—after all this, a relatively peaceful and relatively open election is truly an event worth celebrating. And we have now seen three, because Tunisia held municipal elections during the same two-week period as Lebanon and Iraq's parliamentary balloting.

Amidst all the violence and zero-sum arguments, these three electoral exercises offer the Arab world a fragile but important counterpoint. Extremists claim that only violence can bring change; these elections promise another path. And seeing Lebanon and Iraq pull off free elections under such trying circumstances, it's harder for strongmen in other Arab states to argue that they can't afford the risk to stability of allowing their own peoples a choice in who governs them. I don't want to overstate this impact, but I do think it's important to recognize the fundamental power of citizens making a democratic choice, even in challenging and constrained circumstances.

## Growing Nationalism and Demands for Effective Governance

We also need to examine these elections in the light of local political dynamics. Ultimately, like other democratic elections, these reflect the views and priorities of voters, and we must not dismiss those sentiments if we are to understand the opportunities and risks these outcomes present for US interests.

In both Iraq and Lebanon, elections yielded low turnout.<sup>1</sup> Both those who voted and those who stayed home expressed impatience with established political movements who are more interested in dividing the spoils of government than in actually governing. In both of these divided societies, sectarian politicians have kept the peace in part by taking a “no-losers” approach to forming governments, whereby nearly every faction gets a place at the public trough that it can use to provide patronage to its followers. But this approach is facing some limits, as citizens feel increasingly secure from civil conflict and impatient with patronage politics, and increasingly prioritize basic government effectiveness over loyalty to their sectarian or tribal group. In both

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<sup>1</sup> Lebanese turnout was about 49%, as compared to 53% in 2009. Iraq's turnout was about 44% as compared to 60% in 2014.

Iraq and Lebanon, a sense of nationalism opposed to outside interference is also growing, and producing opportunities to weaken the hold of movements rooted in patronage and sectarian identity. Lebanese and Iraqi citizens trust their army and security forces more than they do other public institutions.

In both places, these trends offer the possibility that newer, more independent political forces may emerge -- but they also present the risk that, if they don't see progress, citizens could simply give up on electoral politics and on the government itself as a source of solutions to their day-to-day problems. The alternative to competitive electoral politics in Iraq and Lebanon is not likely to be mere apathy -- it's likely to be more violence. As the United States continues to confront instability across the region, it has a stake in supporting healthy political competition and coalition building, in supporting more effective and responsive governance that addresses the concerns of citizens, and in nurturing new political alternatives not defined by sectarian or militia affiliations.

### *Lebanon*

Lebanon's elections come nine years after the last parliamentary balloting, and five years after they were first scheduled. Between the last elections in 2009 and 2016, Lebanon suffered through a period marked by bombings and armed clashes between political factions allied with and opposed to Syria's Bashar al-Assad, and by political crisis and stalemate that left the country without a president for more than two years. The Syrian war next door, which sent over one million refugees into Lebanon, also led both regional powers and local extremists contending in Syria to try and export their fight to Lebanon. The crisis ended in October 2016 with a compromise between Hezbollah and Saad Hariri's Future Movement by which Hezbollah ally Michel Aoun became president and Hariri returned as prime minister.

The relative stability of Lebanon in the time since that deal was consummated led citizens to demand more effective governance, as evidenced in massive public protests over garbage disposal and the emergence of new citizen movements and independent politicians campaigning against corruption. It also brought modest gains for women's rights and visibility for Lebanon's LGBT community, which faced [an unfortunate setback this week as authorities closed down planned Pride Festival events](#).

As this bottom-up pressure mounted, all the traditional political movements had an interest in elections to renew and legitimate their leadership. They wrote a new electoral law that was like an elephant designed by committee: a hybrid of proportional representation, preferential voting, districts of varying size, and Lebanon's unique confessional allocation of parliamentary seats. The new law was designed to enshrine the power of established parties, and it largely worked as

planned. Thus, the post-election configuration of Lebanese politics, at least with respect to Hezbollah/Iran vs. Hariri/Saudi, is not really meaningfully different from the pre-election configuration.

The events that led to these elections, though, makes clear that the balloting was not a mere procedural exercise. Regardless of their political preferences, voters were highly focused on corruption, jobs, and health care. Even traditional parties had to address these practical concerns over government effectiveness and make new appeals to attract the nearly 800,000 new voters who have come of age since Lebanon's last parliamentary balloting nine years ago. And all of the parties, including Hezbollah, faced trouble getting their loyal voters to the polls. In Baalbek and in the southern Bint Jbeil district, the movement was publicly challenged by independent candidate lists -- and in Bint Jbeil, independent candidate Ali al-Amine proved troublesome enough that Hezbollah sent thugs to beat him badly just two weeks before Election Day.

Indeed, across the country, the escalating demands of Lebanon's citizens for effective government services and the rise of a newly energized civil society led to the emergence of an unprecedented number of independent candidates, who eschewed affiliation with patronage-based, confessional movements and in some places challenged them directly. Although more than 70 independent candidates made it onto ballots, the barriers posed by the electoral system and the high cost of campaigning meant that only one—a prominent female journalist from Beirut—won a seat in the parliament.

New movements in any democracy take time to see electoral gains—the more so in a system as clientelistic and fractured as Lebanon's. While the United States has for years hoped to see alternative Shia movements to Hezbollah and Amal emerge in Lebanon, such efforts remain marginal and face relentless intimidation and harassment from Hezbollah. Still and all, the emergence of trans-confessional, independent politicians and the continued pressure for improved governance mean that there is hope for change in Lebanon. Developments over the nine years since the last parliamentary elections strongly suggest that change in Lebanese politics won't come from above but rather from the grassroots.

### *Iraq*

Iraq's election coming so soon after the territorial defeat of ISIS produced some modest shifts in political outcomes. Leading up to the elections, polling showed that Iraqis perceived their society was more unified, and that sectarian divisions were improving. Economic conditions and corruption were top priorities for voters in choosing candidates. The voter turnout, though, was dramatically lower than previous elections -- which may reflect voter frustration with politics,

but could also reflect the high numbers of internally-displaced people across Iraq and a degree of confusion over new voting procedures.

The election campaign and results showed some impact of these pragmatic priorities amongst voters. The military success and the desire for effective government support in Mosul, the area hardest-hit by ISIS's brutal occupation, led Iraqi Sunnis there to prefer Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's alliance over traditional Sunni parties. But the biggest shift was the re-invention of Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's political identity, from a militant advocate of poor Shias' interests to the leader of a coalition focused on anti-corruption that included Christian and communist candidates. This broadening of Sadr's political appeal, plus what was reportedly an impressive ground game getting his loyal Shia supporters to the polls, led his coalition to the top with 54 seats.

[Pre-election polling](#) also suggested that the appeal of Islamist parties was declining in Shia areas, suggesting the possibility for politicians to find more success in coming years through cross-cutting coalitions that reflect pragmatic policies to meet citizen needs. That may not happen this year, as I discuss below. As in Lebanon, it may take time for politicians feel sufficient incentive to shift toward more responsive platforms. But Iraq has managed to hold elections on schedule and has undergone three peaceful transfers of power between governments; with sustained security and continued electoral exercises, Iraq's politics could begin to shift decisively away from the sectarian-patronage model.

### The Effect on Iranian Influence

In neither country, in my estimation, did the electoral outcome significantly shift the balance of power between Iran's allies and its adversaries. The battle to contain and push back Iranian influence is not lost, but neither is it near over. There are few short-term gains to be found in either Iraq or Lebanon, but walking off the playing field would itself be a victory for Iran and its proxies.

*In Iraq*, the process of government formation will be more important to determining Iran's role than the election itself was. Parties must compete to assemble any 165 members of the 329-seat parliament to nominate a candidate for prime minister and assemble a government. Early indications are that Moqtada al-Sadr is seeking a coalition with current prime minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance as the nucleus for a governing bloc that would leave strongly pro-Iranian movements outside the government. But government formation in Iraq is a tricky process, and subject to many twists and turns; moreover, as in Lebanon, party alliances can be fleeting and subject to change. There is an important role for outsiders in shaping the

environment in which political leaders make their calculations to coalesce in various ways. While the United States cannot determine the outcome of Iraq's government negotiations, it does have influence -- especially working in concert with Gulf Arab states who have assiduously courted Abadi, Sistani and Al-Sadr in the past months, and who are hoping to gain from closer economic ties to Iraq. A wise posture for the U.S. government would be to stay engaged and [be clear about the principles it expects](#) a new government to uphold -- continued counterterrorism efforts and security cooperation with Washington, maintaining Iraq's neutrality in regional conflicts, resolving conflicts with the Kurdish region, and advancing reforms to boost the economy -- and work with Arab partners to advance the vision of a sovereign Iraq integrated within the Arab world.

It's quite possible that Iraqi political leaders will conclude that the most stable and productive government for their purposes is another "unity" government in which many movements, including those linked to pro-Iranian militias, divide the spoils of government jobs and contracts amongst their loyal followers. This would not be an ideal outcome from the American perspective, but it's not markedly different from the status quo, and would somewhat constrain pro-Iranian factions by virtue of their desire to stay within the consensus necessary to keep the government together and their patronage streams intact. It would, however, continue to retard necessary reforms in Baghdad and could exacerbate voter alienation.

*In Lebanon*, the narrative of most Western media reports ([Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), and [Washington Post](#), for instance), that Hezbollah won these elections, is not quite right. Yes, Hezbollah and its ally Amal increased their seat total by two. Yes, Hariri's Future Movement lost one-third of its seats. But neither of these outcomes really alter the balance of power in Beirut, and the likely result is another government headed by Hariri and including Hezbollah.

It's more accurate to say that Hezbollah "won" the game of Lebanese politics (for now, because in Lebanon no victory is ever final), not on Election Day 2018, but in October 2016, when it worked with Hariri to end the stalemate that had left Lebanon with no president for two-and-a-half years. That compromise—in which Hezbollah ally Michel Aoun became president and Hariri reclaimed the prime ministry—ended a period of violence and political crisis. As was true in October 2016, so now: Hariri's leadership of Lebanon's government will depend on Hezbollah's acquiescence; and Hezbollah will continue to wield a veto over government decisions it does not see as in its interests.

It's worth noting that, about six months before the compromise was announced, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as part of King Salman's more assertive regional policy, cut aid to Lebanon's government and to Sunni leader Saad Hariri's Future Movement. In so doing, the Saudis essentially abandoned [the playing field](#) and left Hariri dependent on Hezbollah's consent to take

power. Last fall, Saudi Arabia's brash crown prince took this "my-way-or-the-highway" approach a step further, trying to force a confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah by kidnapping Hariri and coercing his resignation on live television. The gambit failed, and Hariri returned to his office in Beirut, further weakened and leaning further on Hezbollah. The failure of the Saudi approach during this period should instruct the United States in its approach now: walking away from Lebanon does not weaken Hezbollah, but it does weaken Hezbollah's adversaries.

Hezbollah's success in maintaining its veto over Lebanese politics, however, does not mean that Hezbollah faces no challenges to its hegemony, with its ally Amal, over Lebanon's Shia population. The movement's heavy engagement in Syria has cost it over 1000 battle dead, and weakened its focus on providing for local communities. In the Bekaa Valley and Baalbek, this political campaign showed some relative softening of support for Hezbollah, and showed clearly that the movement had to work harder than normal to mobilize its supporters to go to the polls.

Most importantly, looking forward, is that the old March 8th and March 14th, pro-Hezbollah and anti-Hezbollah coalitions from the 2005 and 2009 elections have fractured. The real political movement may emerge amongst the Christian parties. Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces movement was the upset success story of the election, more than doubling its seat total to fifteen with a [platform that explicitly challenges](#) Hezbollah's weapons. Meanwhile, Lebanese President Michel Aoun has stepped down from leading the Free Patriotic Movement, and the ambitious new party leader and foreign minister, Gebran Bassil, is being courted by Geagea and may loosen the party's alliance with Hezbollah.

### Impact of US Noncompliance With the JCPOA

As noted above, there is still not strategy from the Trump Administration to contain Iranian influence or halt its dangerous behavior, merely an intention to punish Iran with sanctions. Additional American sanctions will very likely deter international investment in Iran and weaken the Iranian economy -- but it will not do much to constrain the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from its regional activities. The IRGC has its own businesses that profit from no-bid contracts with the government worth billions of dollars. Its regional and international adventurism also present many opportunities for profit. One study [estimated](#) that during the period of President Ahmedinejad, the IRGC earned about \$13 billion per year in oil smuggling alone. Indeed, the IRGC faced no cash shortage when it brought foreign fighters and its own troops to Syria to bolster a beleaguered Bashar al-Assad at the height of international sanctions. So additional US sanctions will not likely do much to dampen Iranian regional adventures. Moreover, the weaker the government revenue stream becomes and the more domestic pressure

it faces, the more powerful the IRGC will become as the regime's last line of defense against domestic dissent as well as external enemies.

The Trump Administration's declaration of a maximum pressure campaign to reverse Iran's overall foreign policy approach is likely to be tested immediately by the Islamic Republic, probably by ratcheting up conflict in existing areas of tension around the region in ways that will discomfit our allies and test America's willingness to respond. All things considered, I suspect we might see that testing first in Yemen, where escalation is cheapest and Iran would suffer the fewest consequences from any retaliation in theatre. Syria is another possibility, although there Iran must carefully calibrate its actions to avoid an unwanted escalation of its confrontation with Israel. So far, Iran and Saudi Arabia have both preferred to maintain political stability in Lebanon and Iraq, having more to gain from political maneuvering than outright coercion -- but that could change.

What troubles me is that, at the same moment that it provokes this increased challenge, the Trump Administration seeks to walk away from important arenas like Syria, abandoning the playing field at a crucial moment. Either in terms of counterterrorism or in terms of containing Iran, it's hard to understand the recent decisions to establish an arbitrary deadline for the withdrawal of our special forces fighting ISIS, to freeze the \$200 million pledged for Syrian reconstruction earlier this year, to cut aid to areas in Idlib province liberated from ISIS, and to cut off the lifesaving assistance to the White Helmets. President Trump's determination to walk away from our hard-won gains in Syria cuts directly against the U.S. ability to shape the ongoing competition for influence in the Middle East and to support our partners in protecting their own security against Iranian depredations.

America's regional partners are resolute in their desire to confront the Iranian challenge, but they are understandably anxious about the Administration's commitment to stand with them. They see the lack of strategy as well, and their anxiety is deepened by the president's clear intent to withdraw both American forces and American economic support from areas where we are still not done fighting ISIS. Walking away leaves our local partners against ISIS in Syria without options, left to cut their own deals with Assad and Iran or, even worse, with Al Nusra.

A concerted strategy to reduce Iranian influence in the region, as [I laid out to you when I testified in November](#), is a long-term strategy. It would combine clear expectations with determined, integrated effort using military, intelligence, economic, and diplomatic tools and would seek to rally diverse international support for these elements:

- It would press for resolution of the bitter civil conflicts in Yemen and Syria where Iran has found ready purchase and has room to entrench itself further;

- It would secure the victory against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria through political and economic stabilization, because Sunni extremism and Shia extremism feed off of one another;
- It would mobilize international diplomacy, including through mechanisms like the UNSC, to expose Iranian violations of international laws and norms, and to punish specific behavior;
- It would leverage U.S. and partner country influence in places like Lebanon and Iraq to support alternatives to sectarian politics; and
- It would pursue tight intelligence and security cooperation with our partners to expose, interdict, and roll up Iranian activities.

Sadly, such a comprehensive strategy seems nowhere on the horizon.