

# The West & Gulf Couldn't Sway These Lebanese Elections

Western media got interested in this month's Lebanese election hoping "their" candidates would win. It became a different story when Hizbullah gained the most, explains As'ad AbuKhalil.

By As'ad AbuKhalil *Special to Consortium News*



The recent Lebanese parliamentary election generated a lot of publicity in Western media. To be sure, free elections are rare in the Middle East, and Western media get excited over the prospects of success for what they dub as "pro-Western" candidates or coalitions anywhere. Also because foes of Israel and the U.S. were in the running, Western media become automatically invested in the outcome. This time, Western media decided that Hizbullah won "a majority of seats" in the election—as the headline of *The Financial Times* had it. The results were certainly a blow to Western and Gulf regimes who invest—politically and financially—heavily in Lebanese elections.

We can't really talk about free elections in the Middle East—or anywhere else in the developing world for that matter. Not because people there don't want them but essentially because Western governments and Gulf regimes won't allow it. To be fair, the U.S. is clearly in favor of free elections, but only when the results guarantee a victory for its puppets. Thus, when Hamas won the legislative elections of 2006 (which the U.S. had been insisting on), the U.S. not only refused to recognize the free expressions of the Palestinian people but the U.S. worked on a covert operation to undermine the results and to overthrow Hamas in Gaza.

Historically, the U.S. (among other outside parties, chiefly Gulf regimes) intervened heavily in Lebanese elections through the provision of cash payments to its favored right-wing, anti-communist candidates. For instance, the 1947 election lives on as one of the most corrupt in Lebanese history, and former CIA agent, Wilbur Eveland, wrote about his adventures of driving to the residence of then president, Kamil Sham'un, with a load of cash to ensure that the

right-candidates win. But the cash wasn't really necessary because Sham'un forged the election anyway and arranged for the defeat of his opponents.

In 1968, the U.S. was most likely behind the rise of the far-right coalition of "the tripartite alliance," which included the Phalanges, who swept through the election and, in few years, would—with U.S. help—trigger the Lebanese civil war. (New U.S. archival materials show the extremely close relations between those parties and U.S. and Israel).

But the U.S. and Saudi Arabia surpassed all previous foreign intervention in Lebanon in the 2009 election, when they threw close to a \$1 billion to sway the vote on the side of the March 14 coalition, which included the Muslim Brotherhood and right-wing groups—all dubbed "pro-Western" by U.S. media. The victor was arranged although the election was very close: no one side was able to rule without veto power by the other side.

In this election, the Saudis didn't spend as much as previously probably because they thought it wouldn't much difference since a new electoral system had changed the rules. But Western and Gulf governments convened a special economic conference in Paris to prop up the leadership of Sa'd Hariri, who claimed in the wake of the conference that he would be create no less than 900,000 jobs.

#### Elections in 'Democracies'

Elections in democratic political systems are merely some of the people selecting representatives who speak on behalf of "all the people." The propaganda about the virtue of elections is highly exaggerated in order to provide the political system with much more political legitimacy than warranted.

In the U.S., there is still a clear agenda to suppress wide political participation. The U.S. is one of the few countries in the world which holds the vote on a working day—and in the winter where much of the East coast is buried under rain and snow. Furthermore, the U.S. requires voter registration, when most democracies don't. The low

voter turnout in the U.S. is by design, and not by default. If the U.S. were to adopt a proportional representation system—which both parties won't allow because they enjoy holding the exclusive monopoly over political representation—voter turnout would increase. Most world democracies have—at least partially or at some level—adopted proportional representation.

The leftist coalition during the Lebanese civil war years, the Lebanese National Movement, proposed political reforms in 1975. They included—among other things—the adoption of proportional representation at the national level, with Lebanon designated as one electoral district. The political class rejected that because they preferred the single-member district (at a small local level) since it facilitates the utilization of cash in swaying voters. Also, Lebanese national proportional representation wouldn't fit well with regional sectarian leaderships.

The May 6 Lebanese election took place nine years after the previous one. Regional conflicts and Lebanese internal turmoil gave sectarian leaders the excuse to postpone the elections repeatedly. Sectarian leaders also had a hard time agreeing on a new electoral law. But the election of Gen. Michel Aoun to the presidency in 2016 expedited the process of finally holding a ballot. His parliamentary bloc had been vociferous in calling for new elections. After long months of acrimonious negotiations, the sectarian leaders agreed on a new electoral law.

Hizbullah and the progressives in Lebanon called for a proportional representation system, while Hariri and his allies fought against it. Hizbullah was willing to risk losing a few seats in return for the election of some of its allies from different sects, while Hariri knew that his broad coalition in parliament would lose substantially because most of his Christian MPs were elected in specially-designed districts where the majority Muslims vote for Christian and Muslim MPs.

The design of electoral districts is not a simple matter in Lebanon because the system has to balance different political interests with a

sectarian arithmetic formulae (which is incorporated into the political system of the country). For example, the top posts of government (presidency, speakership, and prime ministership) are distributed among Maronites, Shi`ites, and Sunnis respectively.

Elections to the 128-seat Lebanese parliament must split seats evenly between Christians and Muslims though Muslims surpassed Christians demographically long before the 1975 civil war. It is estimated that Christians are now no more than a third of the population. There is a quota for Christians in the Lebanese parliament that keeps up the pretense that they are half the population no matter how different the demographic reality. In fact, the Lebanese state refuses to conduct a census for fear of upsetting Christians. The last census was conducted in 1932.

So Lebanese leaders agreed on a new electoral law that would mix the proportional representation system with the single-member district. They arrived at a law which divided Lebanese governorates as electoral districts but then gave the voter the choice to rank one candidate on the electoral list as his/her "favored" candidate, which basically prioritized sectarian preferences of voters. The whole purpose of proportional representation was defeated.

The law was quite complicated and the low voter turnout (around 49 %, less than the 2009 election) seems to confirm that many voters and even Interior Ministry experts did not fully understand the rules. The low turnout can also be explained by the low level of enthusiasm among voters and the diminished sense of expectations for change. Furthermore, sectarian leaders in Lebanon suppress the vote by not allowing 18-year-olds to vote. If they did it's estimated that it would substantially increase the Muslim voters—especially Shi`ites.

*Part Two will look closely at the election's winners and losers and what it means.*

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**Arabia (2004). He also runs the popular [blog The Angry Arab News Service](#).**

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Thank you,

**Sam and Nat Parry**

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## Spooks Spooking Themselves

As the role of a well-connected group of British and U.S. intelligence agents begins to emerge, new suspicions are growing about what hand they may have had in weaving the Russia-gate story, as Daniel Lazare explains.

By **Daniel Lazare** *Special to Consortium News*



With the news that a Cambridge academic-cum-spy named Stefan Halper infiltrated the Trump campaign, the role of the intelligence agencies in shaping the great Russiagate saga is at last coming into focus.

It's looking more and more massive. The intelligence agencies initiated reports that Donald Trump was colluding with Russia, they nurtured them and helped them grow, and then they spread the word to the press and key government officials. Reportedly, they even tried to use these reports to force Trump to step down prior to his inauguration. Although the corporate press accuses Trump of conspiring with Russia to stop Hillary Clinton, the reverse now seems to be the case: the Obama administration intelligence agencies worked with Clinton to block "Siberian candidate" Trump.

The template was provided by ex-MI6 Director Richard Dearlove, Halper's friend and business partner. Sitting in winged chairs in London's venerable Garrick Club, according to *The Washington Post*, Dearlove told fellow MI6 veteran Christopher Steele, author of the famous "golden showers" opposition research

dossier, that Trump “reminded him of a predicament he had faced years earlier, when he was chief of station for British intelligence in Washington and alerted US authorities to British information that a vice presidential hopeful had once been in communication with the Kremlin.”

Apparently, one word from the Brits was enough to make the candidate in question step down. When that didn't work with Trump, Dearlove and his colleagues ratcheted up the pressure to make him see the light. A major scandal was thus born – or, rather, a very questionable scandal.

Besides Dearlove, Steele, and Halper, a bon-vivant known as “The Walrus” for his impressive girth, other participants include:

- Robert Hannigan, former director Government Communications Headquarters, GCHQ, UK equivalent of the NSA.
- Alexander Downer, top Australian diplomat.
- Andrew Wood, ex-British ambassador to Moscow.
- Joseph Mifsud, Maltese academic.
- James Clapper, ex-US Director of National Intelligence.
- John Brennan, former CIA Director (and now NBC News analyst).

### **In-Bred**

A few things stand out about this august group. One is its in-bred quality. After helping to run an annual confab known as the Cambridge Intelligence Seminar, Dearlove and Halper are now partners in a private venture calling itself “The Cambridge Security Initiative.” Both are connected to another London-based intelligence firm known as Hakluyt & Co. Halper is also connected via two books he wrote with Hakluyt representative Jonathan Clarke and Dearlove has a close personal friendship with Hakluyt founder Mike Reynolds, yet another MI6 vet. Alexander Downer served a half-dozen years on Hakluyt's international advisory board, while Andrew Wood is linked to Steele via Orbis Business Intelligence, the private research firm that Steele helped found, and which produced the anti-Trump dossier, and where Wood now serves as an unpaid advisor.

Everyone, in short, seems to know everyone else. But another thing that stands out about this group is its incompetence. Dearlove and Halper appear to be old-school paranoids for whom every Russian is a Boris Badenov or a Natasha Fatale. In February 2014, Halper notified US intelligence that Mike Flynn, Trump's future national security adviser, had grown overly chummy with an Anglo-Russian scholar named Svetlana Lokhova whom Halper suspected of being a spy – suspicions that Lokhova convincingly argues are absurd.

In December 2016, Halper and Dearlove both resigned from the Cambridge Intelligence Seminar because they suspected that a company footing some of the costs was tied up with Russian intelligence – suspicions that Christopher Andrew, former chairman of the Cambridge history department and the seminar's founder, regards as "absurd" as well.

As head of Britain's foreign Secret Intelligence Service, as MI6 is formally known, Dearlove played a major role in drumming up support for the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq even while confessing at a secret Downing Street meeting that "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the [regime-change] policy." When the search for weapons of mass destruction turned up dry, Clapper, as then head of the National Imagery and Mapping Agency, argued that the Iraqi military must have smuggled them into neighboring Syria, a charge with absolutely no basis in fact but which helped pave the way for US regime-change efforts in that country too.

Brennan was meanwhile a high-level CIA official when the agency was fabricating evidence against Saddam Hussein and covering up Saudi Arabia's role in 9/11. Wood not only continues to defend the Iraqi invasion, but dismisses fears of a rising fascist tide in the Ukraine as nothing more than "a crude political insult" hurled by Vladimir Putin for his own political benefit. Such views now seem distressingly misguided in view of the alt-right torchlight parades and spiraling anti-Semitism that are now a regular feature of life in the Ukraine.

The result is a diplo-espionage gang that is very bad at the facts but very good at public manipulation – and which therefore decided to use its skill set out to create a public furor over alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

### **It Started Late 2015**

The effort began in late 2015 when GCHQ, along with intelligence agencies in Poland, Estonia, and Germany, began monitoring what they said were "suspicious 'interactions' between figures connected to Trump and known or suspected Russian agents."

Since Trump was surging ahead in the polls and scaring the pants off the foreign-policy establishment by calling for a rapprochement with Moscow, the agencies figured that Russia was somehow behind it. The pace accelerated in March 2016 when a 30-year-old policy consultant named George Papadopoulos joined the Trump campaign as a foreign-policy adviser. Traveling in Italy a week later, he ran into Mifsud, the London-based Maltese academic, who reportedly set about cultivating him after learning of his position with



Trump. Mifsud claimed to have “substantial connections with Russian government officials,” according to prosecutors. Over breakfast at a London hotel, he told Papadopoulos that he had just returned from Moscow where he had learned that the Russians had “dirt” on Hillary Clinton in the form of “thousands of emails.”

This was the remark that supposedly triggered an FBI investigation. *The New York Times* describes Mifsud as “an enthusiastic promoter of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia” and “a regular at meetings of the Valdai Discussion Club, an annual conference held in Sochi, Russia, that Mr. Putin attends,” which tried to suggest that he is a Kremlin agent of some sort. But WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange later tweeted photos of Mifsud with British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and a high-ranking British intelligence official named Claire Smith at a training session for Italian security agents in Rome. Since it’s unlikely that British intelligence would rely on a Russian agent in such circumstances, Mifsud’s intelligence ties are more likely with the UK.

After Papadopoulos caused a minor political ruckus by telling a reporter that Prime Minister David Cameron should apologize for criticizing Trump’s anti-Muslim pronouncements, a friend in the Israeli embassy put him in touch with a friend in the Australian embassy, who introduced him to Downer, her boss. Over drinks, Downer advised him to be more diplomatic. After Papadopoulos then passed along Mifsud’s tip about Clinton’s emails, Downer informed his government, which, in late July, informed the FBI.

### **Was Papadopoulos Set Up?**

Suspicious are unavoidable but evidence is lacking. Other pieces were meanwhile clicking into place. In late May or early June 2016, Fusion GPS, a private Washington intelligence firm employed by the Democratic National Committee, hired Steele to look into the Russian angle.

On June 20, he turned in the first of eighteen memos that would eventually comprise the Steele dossier, in this instance a three-page document asserting that Putin “has been cultivating, supporting and assisting TRUMP for at least 5 years” and that Russian intelligence possessed “kompromat” in the form of a video of prostitutes performing a “golden showers” show for his benefit at the Moscow Ritz-Carlton. A week or two later, Steele briefed the FBI on his findings. Around the same time, Robert Hannigan flew to Washington to brief CIA Director John Brennan about additional material that had come GCHQ’s way, material so sensitive that it could only be handled at “director level.”

One player was filling Papadopoulos’s head with tales of Russian dirty tricks, another was telling the FBI, while a third was collecting more information and passing it on to the bureau as well.

On July 7, 2016 Carter Page delivered a lecture on U.S.-Russian relations in Moscow in which he complained that “Washington and other western capitals have impeded potential progress through their often hypocritical focus on ideas such as democratization, inequality, corruption, and regime change.” Washington hawks expressed “unease” that someone representing the presumptive Republican nominee would take Russia’s side in a growing neo-Cold War.

Stefan Halper then infiltrated the Trump campaign on behalf of the FBI as an informant in early July, weeks before the FBI launched its investigation. Halper had 36 years earlier infiltrated the Carter re-election campaign in 1980 using CIA agents to turn information over to the Reagan campaign. Now Halper began to court both Page and Papadopoulos, independently of each other.

On July 11, Page showed up at a Cambridge symposium at which Halper and Dearlove both spoke. In early September, Halper sent Papadopoulos an email offering \$3,000 and a paid trip to London to write a research paper on a disputed gas field in the eastern Mediterranean, his specialty. “George, you know about hacking the emails from Russia, right?” Halper asked when he got there, but Papadopoulos said he knew nothing. Halper also sought out Sam Clovis, Trump’s national campaign co-chairman, with whom he chatted about China for an hour or so over coffee in Washington.

The rightwing Federalist website speculates that Halper was working with Steele to flesh out a Sept. 14 memo claiming that “Russians do have further ‘kompromat’ on CLINTON (e-mails) and [are] considering disseminating it.” Clovis believes that Halper was trying “to create an audit trail back to those [Clinton] emails from someone in the campaign ... so they could develop a stronger case for probable cause to continue to issue warrants and to further an investigation.” Reports that Halper apparently sought a permanent post in the new administration suggest that the effort was meant to continue after inauguration.

Notwithstanding Clovis’s nutty rightwing politics, his description of what Halper may have been up to makes sense as does his observation that Halper was trying “to build something that did not exist.” Despite countless hyper-ventilating headlines about mysterious Trump Tower meetings and the like, the sad truth is that Russiagate after all these months is shaping up as even more of a “nothing-burger” than Obama administration veteran Van Jones said it was back in mid-2017. Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller has indicted Papadopoulos and others on procedural grounds, he has indicted former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort for corruption, and he has charged a St. Petersburg company known as the Internet Research Agency with violating US election laws.

But the corruption charges have nothing to do with Russian collusion and nothing

in the indictment against IRA indicates that either the Kremlin or the Trump campaign were involved. Indeed, the activities that got IRA in trouble in the first place are so unimpressive – just \$46,000 worth of Facebook ads that it purchased prior to election day, some pro-Trump, some anti, and some with no particular slant at all – that Mueller probably wouldn't even have bothered if he hadn't been under intense pressure to come up with anything at all.

The same goes for the army of bots that Russia supposedly deployed on Twitter. As *The Washington Post* noted in an oddly, cool-headed Dec. 2 article, 2,700 suspected Russian-linked accounts generated just 202,000 tweets in a six-year period ending in August 2017, a drop in a bucket compared to the one billion election-related tweets sent out during the fourteen months leading up to Election Day.

The Steele dossier is also underwhelming. It declares on one page that the Kremlin sought to cultivate Trump by throwing “various lucrative real estate development business deals” his way but says on another that Trump's efforts to drum up business were unavailing and that he thus “had to settle for the use of extensive sexual services there from local prostitutes rather than business success.”

Why would Trump turn down business offers when he couldn't generate any on his own? The idea that Putin would spot a U.S. reality-TV star somewhere around 2011 and conclude that he was destined for the Oval Office five years later is ludicrous. The fact that the Democratic National Committee funded the dossier via its law firm Perkins Coie renders it less credible still, as does the fact that the world has heard nothing more about the alleged video despite the ongoing deterioration in US-Russian relations. What's the point of making a blackmail tape if you don't use it?

Even Steele is backing off. In a legal paper filed in response to a libel suit last May, he said the document “did not represent (and did not purport to represent) verified facts, but were raw intelligence which had identified a range of allegations that warranted investigation given their potential national security implications.” The fact is that the “dossier” was opposition research, not an intelligence report. It was neither vetted by Steele nor anyone in an intelligence agency. Opposition research is intended to mix truths and fiction, to dig up plausible dirt to throw at your opponent, not to produce an intelligence assessment at taxpayer's expense to “protect” the country. And Steele was paid for it by the Democrats, not his government.

### **Using it Anyway**

Nonetheless, the spooks have made the most of such pseudo-evidence. Dearlove and

Wood both advised Steele to take his “findings” to the FBI, while, after the election, Wood pulled Sen. John McCain aside at a security conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to let him know that the Russians might be blackmailing the president-elect. McCain dispatched long-time aide David J. Kramer to the UK to discuss the dossier with Steele directly.

Although Kramer denies it, *The New Yorker* found a former national-security official who says he spoke with him at the time and that Kramer’s goal was to have McCain confront Trump with the dossier in the hope that he would resign on the spot. When that didn’t happen, Clapper and Brennan arranged for FBI Director James Comey to confront Trump instead. Comey later testified that he didn’t want Trump to think he was creating “a J. Edgar Hoover-type situation – I didn’t want him thinking I was briefing him on this to sort of hang it over him in some way.”

But how could Trump think otherwise? As Consortium News founding editor Robert Parry observed a few days later, the maneuver “resembles a tactic out of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s playbook on government-style blackmail: I have some very derogatory information about you that I’d sure hate to see end up in the press.”

Since then, the Democrats have touted the dossier at every opportunity, *The New Yorker* continues to defend it, while *Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg cites it as well, saying it’s a “rather obvious possibility that Trump is being blackmailed.” CNN, for its part, suggested not long ago that the dossier may actually be Russian disinformation designed to throw everyone off base, Republicans and Democrats alike.

It sounds more like CIA paranoia raised to the *nth* degree. But that’s what the intelligence agencies are for, i.e. to spread fear and propaganda in order to stampede the public into supporting their imperial agenda. In this case, their efforts are so effective that they’ve gotten lost in a fog of their own making. If the corporate press fails to point this out, it’s because reporters are too befogged themselves to notice.

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