

Saad Hariri's Moment of Truth

by Hilal Khashan

Recent developments in Lebanon have shown that the preconditions for restoring its sovereignty have not yet materialized. The demise of the “Cedar Revolution” and the fragmentation of the “March 14 Coalition” have set the country back to the era of Syrian domination. The crisis associated with the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the formation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) afford yet another stark demonstration that the country remains a victim of regional encroachment and that the loyalties of its leaders remain as sectarian as ever.

TRAGEDY AND HOPE

The assassination of Hariri in a powerful explosion on February 14, 2005, shocked and saddened many Lebanese, especially Sunnis, who experienced a sense of deep personal loss. Outside Lebanon, Arab and world leaders expressed exasperation at the untimely death of a self-made towering political figure. Beirut's Martyrs' Square, where Hariri was buried outside the adjacent al-Amin mosque, became a rallying spot for the former prime minister's mourners and others who wanted to voice their dismay at Syria's 29-year-old military presence in Lebanon. The daily rallies, mostly by supporters of the Future Trend, the Lebanese Forces, and the

Phalangist Party, soon gave rise to what became known as the Cedar Revolution. Domestic pressure ensued for the implementation of U.N. Security Council resolution 1559 of September 2004, which, among other things, called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Lebanon.¹ Coupled with widespread accusations of Damascus's role in the assassination—mainly emanating from Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's distrust of Hariri's Saudi and Western connections and Hariri's displeasure with the Syrian push to give then-president Emile Lahoud another term in office—the politically inexperienced Assad panicked.

SYRIA MAKES AN UNCEREMONIOUS EXIT

The pro-Syrian Lebanese government of Omar Karami promptly submitted its resignation²

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1 “The Situation in the Middle East,” UNSC resolution 1559, Sept. 2, 2004.

2 *CNN News*, Feb. 28, 2005.

Hezbollah condemned the U.N. Special Tribunal as a Zionist conspiracy.

and was replaced on April 19, 2005, by an interim national unity government tasked with overseeing national elections within a month. Three weeks after Hariri's assassination, Assad succumbed to the pressures coming from Lebanon and the West and announced his intention to withdraw the 16,000 Syrian troops from Lebanon by the end of April.

On March 8, Hezbollah orchestrated a pro-Syrian rally in downtown Beirut that attracted about 700,000 supporters, and the broad anti-Syrian coalition responded six days later with a million-plus-strong rally in the same area. These major shows of force yielded two polar political formations, the anti-Syrian majority "March 14 Coalition" and the pro-Syrian "March 8 Coalition." As the former group took the initiative and pursued a pugnacious anti-Syrian stance, its rival contented itself with maintaining a low profile while at the same time recounting "Syrian sacrifices in Lebanon."³ Anti-Assad Sunnis and Maronites lashed out in anger at hapless Syrian laborers in the country. Many of them became "victims of crimes, including beatings, robberies, the setting on fire of tents where they live[d], and even killings."⁴

Leaders of the March 14 Coalition, especially the Lebanese Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, and Saad Hariri, Rafiq Hariri's son, mounted a scathing defamation campaign against the Syrian regime in general and President Assad in particular. Naming Assad "the Damascus tyrant," Jumblatt said: "This boy is controlling people's lives in Damascus and killing free people in Lebanon. ... If the tribunal is hampered, we will all be a Nawaf [a Druze who assassinated former Syrian president Adib Shishakli in 1964]."⁵ In one of his numerous attacks on the Syrian regime, Hariri accused Assad of smuggling Islamic extremists into

Lebanon "in order to spread chaos and commit terrorist acts that target army officers and civilians."

⁶ Addressing the Syrian people, Hariri said, "Your truthfulness and brotherly love for us contrast the regime's cunning tactics and deception."⁷ He described Qasr al-Muhajerin (Assad's presidential palace) as Qasr al-Mutajerin (merchandise's palace).⁸

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL FOR LEBANON

The Hariri assassination generated a political upheaval that jolted the Sunni community and seriously undermined the 1989 Ta'if agreement, which had ended Lebanon's 15-year civil war. Since perpetrators of political crimes in Lebanon had rarely been brought to justice owing to the country's weak and inefficient judicial and law enforcement systems, the Karami cabinet succumbed to heavy public pressure, led by the Hariri family, and agreed to involve the United Nations in investigating those who planned, financed, and executed the assassination. A U.N. fact-finding mission arrived in Lebanon for background inquiries, and on April 7, 2005, the Security Council formed the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) to probe the assassination of the former prime minister.⁹

U.N. investigator Detlev Mehlis's preliminary report in October 2005 provided evidence that implicated ranking Syrian and Lebanese officials in the assassination.¹⁰ Two months later, his follow-up report shed additional light on the

3 Voice of America, Mar. 8, 2005.

4 Agence France-Presse, Mar. 14, 2008.

5 *Ya Lubnan* (Beirut), Dec. 28, 2006.

6 *The Daily Star* (Beirut), Sept. 29, 2008.

7 *Al-Riyadh*, Aug. 18, 2006.

8 *Ibid.*

9 "Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1595 (2005): Chronology of Events, Mid-2004-September 2005," (Mehlis report), United Nations, New York, p. ii.

10 *BBC News*, Oct. 21, 2005.

possible perpetrators of the crime, based on interrogation of new witnesses, investigation of the explosion scene, intercepted telephone conversations, and Lebanese Internal Security Forces records.¹¹ Immediately after the publication of the second report, the Lebanese government requested U.N. assistance in establishing “a tribunal of an international character to prosecute the alleged perpetrators.”¹² On May 30, 2007, the Security Council passed Resolution 1757 to set up a Special Tribunal for Lebanon under the mandatory chapter VII¹³ after the divided Lebanese government had failed to sign the agreement and statute for the tribunal. Syrian leaders considered the STL a violation of the country’s sovereignty, and Hezbollah condemned it as a Zionist conspiracy.¹⁴

THE ASCENDANCY OF IRAN AND ITS ARAB PROXIES

Meanwhile, the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) rid Hezbollah’s creator and onetime patron—the Islamic Republic of Iran—of its two sworn enemies, the Taliban in the east and Saddam Hussein in the west. The ensuing quagmire in both countries effectively ended Iran’s containment, allowing Tehran to wield paramount power in Iraq, especially among the ruling Shiite majority, and to establish an important foothold in Afghanistan, particularly in non-Pashtun areas. The indecisive outcome of the 2006 summer war between Israel and Hezbollah further boosted

The assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri generated a mass protest movement, which led to the establishment of an international tribunal of investigation and to the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon after three decades of occupation. Here protestors march in Martyrs Square with posters of Hariri, Beirut, March 14, 2005.

Iran’s bid for regional preeminence as evidenced by its continuing pursuit of a controversial nuclear program in defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions and intensifying international sanctions.

Hezbollah’s influence has likewise surged in the aftermath of the 2006 war. During the war, it accused the then-Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora of collusion with Israel, and in November 2006, all five Shiite members of Siniora’s cabinet submitted their resignation in protest of his intention to sign the U.N. draft plan for the creation of the STL. In December, Hezbollah and its allies in the Shiite Amal move-

11 *Ya Lubnan*, Dec. 20, 2005.

12 “Handbook on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon,” International Center for Transitional Justice, New York and Beirut, Apr. 10, 2008, p. 9.

13 “The Situation in the Middle East,” UNSC resolution 1757, May 30, 2007.

14 *Al-Qabas* (Kuwait), Sept. 30, 2010.

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ment, together with former president Michel Aoun's National Patriotic Trend, organized a prolonged protest in downtown Beirut and camped outside Siniora's office for several weeks. In May 2008, Hezbollah invaded west Beirut and Jumblatt's stronghold on the Shuf Mountain, forcing the government to rescind its decision to ban Hezbollah's landline communication network and to fire the Shiite chief of Beirut's international airport.

In the Palestinian territories, Damascus and Tehran have used their weighty influence with Hamas to derail all attempts at achieving Palestinian reconciliation, complicating PLO-Israeli peace negotiations, and giving the Iranian-Syrian alliance an additional bargaining chip in Middle East politics.

Iran's regional gains have also threatened the stability of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Geographic proximity, the presence of large numbers of Iranian immigrants on the Arab side of the gulf, and the seeming inability of the GCC countries to adequately incorporate their Shiite populations into the political system and the fabric of society offered Iran a unique opportunity to collaborate with these communities at the expense of their Sunni counterparts.

In Kuwait, sectarian tensions have mounted following the rise of Sunni fundamentalism with Shiites having second thoughts about the ability of the ruling family to ensure their security and personal safety. Saudi Shiites are still essentially quietist though they are unlikely to remain impervious to the winds of change that are blowing in neighboring countries, including a Huthi insurgency in Yemen.

Indeed, the Saudis, who for years dreaded a Shiite awakening coming from the east and north, have recently found themselves contending with yet another threat from the south. During the summer of 2009, the Saudi armed forces were drawn into a difficult military confrontation with the Iranian-supported Huthis, who occupied a string of Saudi border locations. Coupled with the undying al-Qaeda domestic

threat and the kingdom's unresolved succession issue, Saudi Arabia's ruling elite has been confronted with problems on all fronts.

SYRIA RETURNS WITH A VENGEANCE

Against this backdrop of heightened regional tensions, Assad made a bid to reclaim his country's regional standing, repairing relations with Saudi Arabia—severely damaged following the Hariri assassination—by supporting Riyadh in its fight against the Huthis and quietly rectifying the imbalance of Syria's power relationship with Iran. He calculated that just as Syria's weakened position vis-à-vis Iran stemmed from a string of inopportune developments (especially the Syrian exodus from Lebanon), so Tehran's growing isolation increased its need for pan-Arab Damascus in order to legitimize its regional encroachments. Moreover, given its key location, Syria was vital for maintaining the Iranian lifeline to Hezbollah.

Bashar's strategy sought to emulate the role played by his late father after the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980. Then, Hafez al-Assad had convinced the nervous GCC states that he would use his good offices with Tehran to preserve their territorial integrity and prevent the war from spilling over to their territory. Nearly thirty years later, mindful of the Iranian penetration of Iraq and losing faith in the U.S. ability to protect them, the Saudis rediscovered the merits of the Assad regime.

The Saudi ambassador to Damascus confirmed the restoration of the two countries' relations following King Abdullah's visit to Damascus in October 2009, stating that "the steady communication and special relationship between the custodian of the holy shrines and President Assad are exemplary for other Arab leaders to emulate." The ambassador added that the "fruits of the two countries' distinguished relations ... are reflecting positively, especially in Iraq and Lebanon."

Walid Jumblatt, whose father was murdered in 1977 by Syria's Lebanese proxies, quickly grasped the implications of the nascent Syrian-Saudi entente. He defected from the Hariri-led March 14 Coalition shortly after the 2009 parliamentary elections, stopped criticizing the Syrian regime and its Lebanese allies, and even issued "an unambiguous apology to Syria" on al-Jazeera satellite TV station.

Recanting his vitriolic criticism of Assad, Jumblatt explained that the foul-mouthed words he had used to describe the Syrian president had been wrong because they had been made at the spur of the moment during the difficult days following the Hariri assassination.¹⁵ He followed this by adopting Hezbollah's position regarding an international inquiry into the assassination: "I wish the STL has not existed, and it is better for justice to expose the false witnesses."¹⁶

Jumblatt's apology to Syria and the about-face of his political course sent a sobering but unmistakable message to Hariri who had failed to form a cabinet until Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah interceded on his behalf with Assad. It was only after Hariri received an official invitation to visit Damascus, five months after his March 14 Coalition had won a clear parliamentary majority, that the opposition agreed to join his cabinet in November 2009. Even then, the Saudis continued to put pressure on Hariri to accommodate the Syrian demands, claiming that there were clear limits to their influence and that both Riyadh and Beirut must accept a greater role for Damascus in the affairs of its smaller neighbor.¹⁷

These limits manifested themselves in both Lebanon and Iraq. Although the Saudis had supported the coalitions of Saad Hariri and former



Saad Hariri, the slain leader's son and current prime minister of Lebanon, has been forced to backtrack from his earlier accusations of Syria's President Assad as the driving force behind the assassination in an attempt to prevent the country's slide into civil war.

Iraqi prime minister Iyad Allawi, neither of them managed to form a cabinet on the basis of the parliamentary majority they obtained at the polls. In Allawi's words: "It is illogical to expect the efforts of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria to succeed in removing the hurdles in front of the formation of the Iraqi cabinet."¹⁸

The Saudis also reminded Hariri that King Abdullah's July 2010 arrival in Beirut aboard the same plane as Syrian president Assad was intended to underscore Riyadh's acquiescence in Damascus's superior role in Lebanon.¹⁹ In an interview with the Saudi-owned *al-Sharq al-Awsat* daily, Hariri apologized to Syria for having charged it with murdering his father. "Accusing Damascus of the assassination was a mistake," he said. "The false witnesses misled the investigation, and they have caused harm to

15 *Al-Diyar* (Beirut), Dec. 13, 2009.

16 *Al-Khaleej* (UAE), Sept. 27, 2010.

17 Ariel Farrar-Wellman, Robert Frasco, "Saudi Arabia-Iran Relations," *IranTracker*, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., July 20, 2010.

18 *Al-Iraq News* (Baghdad), Aug. 1, 2010.

19 *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), July 31, 2010.



Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, right, meets with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad at al-Shaab palace in Damascus, October 7, 2009. Against the backdrop of heightened regional tensions, Assad made a bid to reclaim his country's regional standing by repairing relations with Saudi Arabia—severely damaged following the Hariri assassination.

Syria and Lebanon. [They] ... ruined the relationship between the two countries and politicized the assassination."²⁰ Hariri's concessions, painful as they were, did not seem to satisfy Assad, who wanted nothing short of the prime minister's unconditional capitulation.

Accordingly, in October 2010, a Syrian court issued arrest warrants for thirty-three individuals, mostly members of Hariri's political and administrative team, for having allegedly misled the Mehlis investigation. Brig. Gen. Jamil al-Sayyed, former chief of the Lebanese General Security and one of Syria's foremost men in Lebanon, who had filed the lawsuit underlying the warrants, went so far as to challenge Hariri "to take a lie detector test to find out if he stood behind the witnesses who gave false testimony" that had led to Sayyed's imprisonment for four years.²¹ Given his close ties with Assad, who

gave him a personal welcome whenever he visited Damascus, it is inconceivable that Sayyed would dare attack Hariri without a green light from the Syrian president.

Indeed, Damascus's concerns about STL indictments seem to have all but disappeared, feeling as it does that the Hariri assassination case has been substantially downsized. This has in turn left Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah worried that Assad might let him "face the tsunami of the special tribunal for Lebanon on his own."²² Muhammad Raad, a Hezbollah parliamentary deputy, articulated the organization's concern when he bluntly told Lebanese president Michel Suleiman, "We do not have

officers who can spend four years in jail; we do not have anybody who can spend four seconds in jail."²³

It is in this context that one should assess Assad's insistence that Hariri denounce the STL. It is important for Bashar to continue to convince the Iranians that he is able to extract concessions from the Saudis and their allies in Iraq and Lebanon, for otherwise he might lose his self-assigned position of regional conciliator. Likewise, in keeping with his new role of appeasing Damascus and Hezbollah, Jumblatt volunteered to claim that "there [was] no need for a tribunal that leads to bloodshed."²⁴

Hariri has already gone a long way in making concessions, and he is unlikely to start defying his Saudi patrons. After all, Iraq and the Persian Gulf mean far more to King Abdullah than indicting Hariri's assassins. The essential

20 *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), Sept. 6, 2010.

21 LCCC (Lebanese-Canadian Coordinating Council) *English Daily News Bulletin*, Sept. 18, 2010.

22 *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 25, 2010.

23 *Al-Akhbar* (Beirut), July 26, 2010.

24 *Al-Nahar* (Beirut), Oct. 4, 2010.

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building blocks are in place for settling the STL stand-off between Hariri on the one hand and Damascus and Hezbollah on the other. Given the confessional nature of Lebanese

politics, everything there must be resolved on the basis of consensus, which means accommodation. The ongoing activity for laying the crisis to rest thus centers on finding a formula that will satisfy Hezbollah while allowing the Future Trend and Hariri to save face.

To find the winning formula, the regional powers are trying to square the circle with regard to the main stumbling blocks: 1) the STL and the forthcoming indictments; 2) the Syrian arrest warrants; and 3) the charges of false witnesses. The emerging compromise seems to consist of a Syrian cancellation of the arrest warrants, coupled with Hezbollah dropping the false witnesses charges, and Hariri criticizing the weakening of Hezbollah as a “resistance movement” by the U.N. report.

The prime minister will most probably avoid a personal denunciation of the indictments but will not authorize government officials to cooperate with the STL, thus effectively making the indictments worthless. As Jumblatt has recently suggested, Hariri might content himself with finding the truth about his father’s assassins without bringing them to justice. Meanwhile, Hezbollah can continue to denounce the STL and claim that it amounted to nothing more than a U.S.-Israeli conspiracy. This will allow all parties in Lebanon to interpret the indictments when published in accordance with their interests without reigniting the civil strife.

**LOSING THE BATTLE
FOR SOVEREIGNTY**

French president Nicolas Sarkozy has stated that the key to Lebanon’s sovereignty

remains in Syria’s willingness to exchange diplomatic missions with its neighbor. When in 2009 Damascus finally agreed to open an embassy in the Lebanese capital,

Sarkozy often boasted that this achievement was of “his own making, and that his policies have succeeded.”²⁵

Sarkozy and his Western, like-minded politicians, who think that engaging Syria and ending its isolation provide sufficient incentives to induce it to leave Lebanon, are dead wrong. Damascus appears to have a constitutional fixation on its smaller neighbor. Eager to claim a regional power status for their country, Syrian leaders have long considered Lebanon an integral and legitimate part of their patrimony.

For their part, the Saudis are anxious to contain the region’s Sunni-Shiite divisions and seem willing to compromise Lebanon’s sovereignty to this end, considering the country “a tug-of-war needed to resolve regional crises of more import to them.”²⁶ By the same token, Lebanon’s geostrategic position provides an ideal arena for its near and distant neighbors to extend their regional influence and to challenge the West and Israel while taking advantage of this soft state. The Lebanese never miss an opportunity to complain that their neighbors do not leave them alone. But the fact that Lebanon’s sectarian leaders do not know how to play politics without having a foreign sponsor attests to the sad truth that the roots of the country’s lack of sovereignty are primarily internal and are imbedded in its anachronistic, confessional political system.



25 *Al-Hayat* (London), Oct. 6, 2010.

26 *Al-Safir* (Beirut), Oct. 5, 2010.