

Saad's Sad Goodbye: Hariri Leaves Lebanese Politics

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Jan 25, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/wda-mhzn-llhryry-bd-astqalth-mn-alhyat-alsyasyt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/wda-mhzn-llhryry-bd-astqalth-mn-alhyat-alsyasyt) /

[Farsi \(/fa/policy-analysis/wda-mhzwn-hryry-dr-knarhgyry-az-syast-lbnany\)](/fa/policy-analysis/wda-mhzwn-hryry-dr-knarhgyry-az-syast-lbnany)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

Despite seeming more well-intentioned than most of his colleagues in Beirut's political elite, Hariri ultimately became part of the coterie that has pushed Lebanon to the brink of state failure.

On January 24, former Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri, the leader of the state's largest Sunni party, announced he would be suspending his political career and urged candidates in his Future Movement not to run for office in this spring's parliamentary election. The prospect of him stepping away had been rumored since last July, when he failed to form a government and then left Beirut for Abu Dhabi. Amid Lebanon's unprecedented financial crisis and the increasing dominance of Iran-backed Hezbollah, his departure will likely spur much hand wringing in the West over a perceived vacuum in Lebanon's Sunni Arab leadership.

From Revolution to Ruin

Since the assassination of his father, Rafiq, in February 2005, Hariri has been the country's most prominent Sunni politician and a favorite interlocutor in Western capitals. An affable and highly sympathetic figure, he helped steer the Cedar Revolution, the protest movement that ended Syria's decades-long occupation. And as head of the Future Movement, he led the pro-West, anti-Hezbollah "March 14" coalition to election victories in 2005 and 2009.

Yet despite securing parliamentary majorities, Hariri was unable to translate votes into progress on the ground. To be fair, Hezbollah routinely threatened—and periodically employed—force to prevent Western-oriented Lebanese politicians from changing the status quo. From 2005 to 2013, Hezbollah assassinated nearly a dozen of Hariri's political allies. In 2008, after his government issued a series of edicts detrimental to Hezbollah, the designated terrorist group invaded Beirut and riddled his house with bullets, among other targets.

Unfortunately, even before this killing machine went into overdrive, Hariri was predisposed to compromise with Hezbollah. In the 2005 vote and subsequent elections, he struck deals with the group to maximize his coalition's seats in parliament. After the 2009 election, he was pressured to enter a coalition government with the militia and embrace (at least rhetorically) its "resistance" doctrine as national policy. Later that year, at Saudi Arabia's urging, he reconciled with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, visiting Damascus and overnighting at the dictator's home.

After his government collapsed in 2011, Hariri left Lebanon for Saudi Arabia, where he holds citizenship. His departure purportedly came under threat from Hezbollah, and he did not return to Beirut until 2014. In 2016, he took office again as prime minister of another coalition government with Hezbollah, made possible through a deal that involved backing the election of his political nemesis—the militia's pro-Syria ally Michel Aoun—as president. That year, increasing fiscal challenges spurred Hariri to approve or accede to a new series of problematic financial engineering practices by the Central Bank.

Meanwhile, just before he returned to office, Riyadh forced Hariri's mega-construction company, Saudi Oger, into bankruptcy. Adding injury to insult, Saudi authorities apparently kidnapped him one year into his term, then threatened and tortured him, ultimately compelling him to resign in protest of Iranian and Hezbollah domination of Lebanon. After his release, however, he retracted his resignation and resumed his term as prime minister.

As the economy continued deteriorating due in large part to corruption and financial mismanagement, more protestors began demanding transparency and accountability. By October 2019, demonstrations were calling for all government officials to be sacked amid popular cries of "*kelun yani kelun*" (all of them means all of them). Hariri shortly resigned.

Will He Come Back Again?

Many in the West and some in Lebanon had hoped that Hariri would return to office one more time after the tumult of the past two years, but this departure may be more enduring. Although his exit leaves Lebanon's Sunni community without a consensus leader, his legacy in that role is mixed at best. Clearly, he was ineffective at protecting Sunni interests—even when he was fully backed by Saudi money, Hezbollah's Shia cadres gained influence and increased their domination of the state.

Hariri was also ineffective at promoting a Western vision for Lebanon, despite his undoubted Western orientation. He was never the reformer many hoped he would be, and the economy crumbled under his tenure as the state pursued ill-advised Ponzi-scheme policies.

And just like Lebanese politicians from all other corners of the religious spectrum, Hariri was hardly immune from allegations of corruption. Among other accusations, his name was frequently raised in connection with questionable business deals related to waste management, a sector whose dysfunction sparked mass demonstrations in 2015-2016 and the "You Stink" protest campaign in Beirut. In October 2021, the Biden administration designated Jihad al-Arab—reportedly a close associate of Hariri—for corrupt practices in this and other sectors.

Thus, while Hariri was perhaps well-intentioned during his various terms, at the end of the day he was not a transformative leader for Lebanon. After the heady days of the Cedar Revolution, his politics and coalitions were designed to perpetuate, not change, the country's systemic problems, whether corruption, mismanagement, or the dominance of Iran's top regional proxy. During his farewell speech in Beirut, he cited the prevention of civil war as one of his principal accomplishments. Yet this undeniable achievement has come at the cost of destroying Lebanon **by other means (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-stands-crossroad-between-painful-revival-and-complete-submission-iran>)**.

Leading up to his retirement announcement, Hariri understood that if he came back again to save Lebanon, he would have to change his approach. Unable to make another deal with Hezbollah or truly oppose the militia's diktat, he was

in an untenable position.

As for Lebanon's next Sunni leader, Hariri's older brother Bahaa welcomed the news of Saad's retirement from his residence in Paris. Yet despite trying to fill the void by bankrolling some reform-minded anti-Hezbollah candidates for parliament, Bahaa does not seem inclined to decamp to Beirut and inherit the family mantle. Their seventy-year-old aunt Bahaa, based in Sidon, may win another seat in parliament, but neither she nor any other Hariri is likely to be included in the next government.

In any case, the chances of elections affecting Lebanon's current trajectory are questionable at best—Hezbollah has shown that it has **higher regard for bullets (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-crisis-and-unifils-mandate-renewal>)** than ballots. Yet a pause in the Hariri dynasty could provide an opportunity for new Sunni leaders who are less accommodating to Iranian tutelage and more inclined to reform. After years of deterioration that has left Lebanon on the verge of becoming a failed state, it is obvious that the current political elite in Beirut are not up to the task of making the changes needed to reverse course. Hariri was better than most of his colleagues, but he ultimately became part of that same failed coterie of elites.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Program on Arab Politics. Previously, he served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in 2019-2021. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)



Ido Levy,
Craig Whiteside

[\(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response\)](/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Middle East at the Olympics: Six Countries Compete While Great Power Politics on Display

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Carol Silber

(/policy-analysis/middle-east-olympics-six-countries-compete-while-great-power-politics-display)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)