

Why Hariri Has More to Lose and Hezbollah More to Gain in the New Lebanese Government

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Mona Alami is a French Lebanese journalist focusing on political and economic issues in the Arab world. She has conducted extensive research on radical Islamist movements in Palestinian refugee camps, Salafi movements in Lebanon and Jordan, al-Qaeda's reach to the West, as well as Hezbollah. Alami is also a fellow at the Atlantic Council and senior associate at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and TRENDS Research and Advisory.



Brief Analysis

On May 24, in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections held earlier that month, Lebanon's incumbent Prime Minister Saad Hariri was **[tasked \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/lebanon-saad-hariri-designated-prime-minister-180524142045731.html\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/lebanon-saad-hariri-designated-prime-minister-180524142045731.html)** with forming the next cabinet. Nonetheless, while Hariri's Future Movement remains the biggest Sunni-led party in the Lebanese government, Hezbollah and its allies were able to win the majority of seats in the parliament. Nearly five months later, despite a recent glimmer of **[hope \(http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/251875-aoun-hariri-meet-parties-in-new-govt-formation-drive\)](http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/251875-aoun-hariri-meet-parties-in-new-govt-formation-drive)**, cabinet formation remains stalled. The main reason for the delay is disputes between various political blocks, such as Hezbollah's ally, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party, which are fighting for a place in the cabinet. Additional factors encumbering the process also include the Trump administration's threats against Iran, an unprecedented economic crisis, and the **[closing sessions \(https://www.stl-tsl.org/en/media/press-releases/6290-conclusion-of-the-closing-arguments-in-the-ayyash-et-al-case\)](https://www.stl-tsl.org/en/media/press-releases/6290-conclusion-of-the-closing-arguments-in-the-ayyash-et-al-case)** of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) entrusted with trying Hezbollah members for the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri, Saad's father, in February 2005.

In light of the continued delay in the formation of a Lebanese government and the negative impact prolonged political uncertainty could have on Hezbollah, Hariri would be wise to recuse himself from becoming the leader of the next cabinet. Paradoxically, by continuing to serve as Prime Minister, Hariri may actually be helping his political opponent, Hezbollah, at a time when the military group is facing increasing adversity. Domestic and external conditions are such that if Hariri instead forces Hezbollah and its allies to play a more direct role in the government, the additional responsibility may compound with other broader challenges threatening Hezbollah and help erode its voter base.

On the one hand, Hezbollah has done very well in the most recent national elections. In May, the new proportional electoral system enabled the Shiite alliance, comprised of Hezbollah and the Amal movement, to win 26 out of 27 seats reserved for Shiites in the 128-seat parliament. According to electoral expert Kamal Feghali, if the group's alliances with the Syrian Nationalist Party and the Christian Marada party are factored in, Hezbollah's total bloc now

stands at 45 parliamentary seats. Last June, Iranian General Qasem Soleimani even **praised** (<http://yalibnan.com/2018/06/13/fpms-bassil-refutes-soleimanis-claim-we-are-independent-not-part-of-hezbollah/>) Hezbollah and its affiliates for their gains in the Lebanese parliamentary elections, claiming that the party had “won 74 out of parliament's 128 seats”, a number that included seats obtained by Hezbollah’s ally, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).

This increase in Hezbollah’s power is hardly surprising. Despite having lost its parliamentary majority in 2005, the year former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated, for the past thirteen years Hezbollah has been gaining ground in Lebanon. The Iranian and Syrian-backed Hezbollah **assassination campaign** (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/manage/index.php?S=4e2d84d4944f28dfbf4aecf4a14d6cd3139d4587&D=cp&C=content_publish&M=entry_form&channel_id=8) targeting members of the anti-Iranian and anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance sparked an 18-month political crisis resulting in street clashes and paralyzed of the parliament. Moreover, despite the depiction of the May 2008 **agreement** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/21/world/africa/21iht-lebanon.4.13105564.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=F72AC6BD00016EA952897B6E21539893&gwt=pay>) between the Lebanese government and opposition forces as necessary for ending Lebanon’s political crisis, the arrangement was a boon to Hezbollah as it enabled the organization to veto the government’s decisions.

Yet, while the militant group has consolidated power in its home turf, it is finding itself in an increasingly perilous position due to its international involvements. In September, the closing arguments of the STL **focused** (<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/250478>) on the involvement of four Hezbollah-affiliated suspects in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. And as the re-imposition of US sanctions on November 4 will certainly lead to a drastic reduction in Iranian oil revenue, Iran will have increasingly limited funds to distribute to its proxies. Furthermore, as part of its anti-Iran policy, the US is also targeting Teheran’s allies: This month congress passed a **new bill** (<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/115/s1595>) (S.1595) imposing sanctions on foreign persons and agencies of foreign governments providing Hezbollah with financial aid, arms, or other assistance. The United States and its Gulf partners have already imposed supplementary sanctions on Hezbollah leadership in **May** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/u-s-imposes-new-sanctions-on-top-two-hezbollah-officials-in-lebanon-1.6095457>) of this year.

Moreover, in addition to dealing with a hostile international arena and menacing regional rivals, Hezbollah must now also find a way to appease its political Shiite base, which is languishing in light of Lebanon’s poor governing practices. Indeed, as macro-financial risks remain extremely high, annual growth rates have fallen to between **1 and 2 percent** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-economy/imf-urges-lebanon-to-make-immediate-and-substantial-fiscal-adjustment-idUSKBN1JI0MX>), and the public debt – which in late 2017 stood at more than **150 percent of GDP** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-economy/imf-urges-lebanon-to-make-immediate-and-substantial-fiscal-adjustment-idUSKBN1JI0MX>) – continues to rise, Lebanese analysts are increasingly wary of an impending **financial crisis** (<https://www.ft.com/content/331697b0-381a-11e8-8b98-2f31af407cc8>).

The country also faces a major liquidity crunch leading to bankruptcies and downsizings in the private sector. Companies such as the real-estate giant **Sayfco** (<http://blogbaladi.com/check-out-the-latest-ramadan-drama-courtesy-of-sayfco/>) now appear to be struggling, but little institutional infrastructure exists to mitigate their own or other large corporations’ potential collapse. To make matters worse, corruption in the country is rampant and appears to be on the rise. Between 2005 and 2017, the country’s **world corruption rank** (<https://ieconomics.com/lebanon-corruption-rank>) rose from 63 to 143.

Thus, by refusing to spearhead the process of government formation, Hariri would be forcing Hezbollah and its allies

into dealing with this burden by themselves. In this manner, Hariri could also place Hezbollah under significant financial pressure. After all, the Lebanese Government's ability to secure the **\$11 billion** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-economy-worldbank/lebanon-economy-fragile-needs-reform-world-bank-official-idUSL5N1UR5YG>) investment pledged by international donors during a meeting in Paris this April largely rests on trust in Hariri and his allies – trust that is not extended to Hezbollah.

Economics aside, Hariri's support also provides Hezbollah with a form of international legitimacy. Many pundits in the United States are now arguing that the Lebanese state and Hezbollah are one and the same. Hariri's absence could validate this argument and pull away the veneer of respectability the Prime Minister provides.

The Incumbent Prime Minister is thus in an ironic position of power: Hariri's withdrawal from the government would definitely have painful repercussions in the short term, yet Lebanon might be in need of a brutal political shock to end the slow but impending decay the country is facing. ❖

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