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# Lebanon's Prime Minister Resigns: What's Next?

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Nov 6, 2017

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Brief Analysis

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**Hariri's announcement could make Hezbollah and its Iranian patron more vulnerable to international pressure, particularly if the upcoming parliamentary elections do not go their way.**

On November 4, Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri unexpectedly resigned during televised remarks delivered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The speech mentioned an assassination plot against him and accused Iran and its proxies of destabilizing his country and the wider region. The timing of these claims was especially startling given that Hariri had just hosted Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian Supreme Leader's advisor for international affairs, one day prior, after which they released a joint statement emphasizing the "interests for Lebanon."

Moreover, the fact that the resignation happened in Riyadh carries a regional dimension that could open Lebanon up to both the Iranian-Saudi conflict -- which escalated this weekend after the Saudis intercepted a missile fired on Riyadh from Yemen and characterized it as an act of war by Iran -- and U.S. efforts to contain Tehran's ambitions in the Middle East. It is still uncertain why Hariri made the announcement in the kingdom. The Saudis may have pressured him to do so in reaction to Velayati's visit or as part of a wider plan to confront Hezbollah in Lebanon. Earlier today, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir struck an ominous tone, telling CNN that the attack on Riyadh involved "an Iranian missile, launched by Hezbollah, from territory occupied by the Houthis in Yemen." Whatever the truth behind the resignation and the missile incident, Hezbollah is now more exposed, without a coalition government to give its domestic and regional activities the stamp of legitimacy, and without a substantial Sunni partner to replace Hariri.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah criticized the resignation on Sunday, accusing Saudi Arabia of forcing Hariri to step down and keeping him under house arrest. Significantly, though, his rhetoric was calmer than usual -- he mostly called for patience and restraint. Hezbollah leaders seemed taken aback by the resignation, as Hariri has not tried to defy their authority since he came back as prime minister last year. Rather, his prior moves -- such as nominating Hezbollah ally Michel Aoun for the presidency -- and recent rhetoric signaled that his plan was to keep compromising with the group.

As for what happens next, one of several scenarios could unfold. Under the constitution, President Aoun is supposed to call for parliamentary consultations to pick the next premier. According to his most recent statements, however, he will not accept the resignation until Hariri returns to Lebanon and explains his reasons, something that Nasrallah demanded as well. If Hariri refuses, Aoun may have to move on. In any case, Lebanon faces a serious void in its institutions. Given its already delicate political, security, and economic situation, more instability could push the country into serious trouble.

If the void does not suit Hezbollah leaders -- who know they will need the cover of government to face potential new international sanctions -- they could try to push the president to replace Hariri with another premier, who is constitutionally required to be a Sunni. Yet this route would be challenging for two reasons. First, with parliamentary elections slated for May 2018 and international pressure on Hezbollah escalating, any Sunni leader would find it politically difficult to join a Hezbollah government. Second, the group does not have the necessary quorum in the current parliament to choose a new prime minister -- in fact, no party does. Some fear that Hezbollah will resort to assassinations in order to secure the quorum. Whatever happens, the interregnum will be thorny.

As for the elections themselves, getting all factions to agree on the details was already a nightmare, so their status is now up in the air. The current void makes it even more urgent to hold the elections on time, but Hariri's resignation -- with the confrontational tone it embodied -- might lead to a postponement, or perhaps internal and external pressure to change the [new proportional electoral law](#). Hariri agreed to that law because he claimed that Lebanon's stability and democratic process were paramount, despite the fact that the electoral changes would probably guarantee Hezbollah's victory next May [by allowing its allies more seats](#). Now that Hariri's priorities have seemingly shifted, the new law and election schedule are no longer certain.

His resignation might also affect several items passed by his cabinet, including oil and gas decrees for offshore exploration and the new national budget, Lebanon's first in twelve years. The resultant turmoil could scare off foreign companies that need to trust the political environment in order to make business investments -- a grim prospect given that Lebanon is still struggling with the impact of the Syria war, which cut major trade routes and brought more than one million refugees into the country.

These problems, coupled with the possibility of more forceful interference by Saudi Arabia and Iran, mean that Lebanon could move even faster toward political and economic crisis. Accordingly, the international community should respond to the resignation with a coordinated plan aimed at two goals: ensuring the country's stability, and confronting Hezbollah to make sure it cannot use the void to its advantage.

Whether or not Hezbollah chooses to accept the void until elections, it will try its best to keep a grip on Lebanon amid growing regional and domestic challenges. This gives its domestic and foreign opponents an opportunity to push back, particularly against the backdrop of upcoming elections. Supporting anti-Hezbollah candidates or pushing to change the electoral law could both prove helpful. But elections are unlikely to be held on time unless the international community keeps the country from succumbing to chaos and ensures that the Iran-Saudi war does not escalate into armed clashes inside Lebanon. Political voids and chaos have only strengthened Hezbollah and weakened the state since 2005, so they are hardly a recipe for countering the group today.

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