

Hariri Returns to Lebanon: The Challenges Ahead

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Aug 14, 2014

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If Hariri is to lead Lebanon out of the current morass, he will have to take a risk and stray from Beirut's well-worn path of complete acquiescence to Hezbollah.

Last week after nearly three years of self-imposed exile, former Lebanese premier Saad Hariri returned to Beirut. Hariri, the most credible leader of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community -- and a true political moderate -- left in 2011 amidst threats of assassination. In his absence, security has deteriorated, local sectarian tensions have spiked, and some of Lebanon's historically moderate Sunnis seem to be radicalizing.

Hariri arrived in Beirut last Friday carrying with him \$1 billion in Saudi Arabian funding for Lebanon's counterterrorism force and the promise of filling the leadership vacuum in his Sunni community. He departed less than a week later to Jeddah, reportedly to discuss this grant, and it is not clear when he will return. His brief homecoming is a welcome development, but it is no panacea, and it is far from certain that his presence and stature will stem the fracturing of Lebanon's Sunnis and the state's slow devolution.

If he does not return to Beirut, there will be little if any tangible benefit to Lebanon of Hariri's drive-by. Should he return, Hariri will have a long to-do list. Many of Lebanon's governing institutions appear to be in decline. Since May, the state has been without a (Christian) president. Parliament, too, increasingly lacks legitimacy. In May 2013, legislators extended their term by seventeen months, and it is unclear whether elections will be held this fall.

Security is also a growing concern. Earlier this month, the Islamic State in Syria and al-Sham (ISIS), currently known as the Islamic State, and Jabhat al-Nusra took control of the Sunni town of Aarsal on the Syrian border, killing eleven and kidnapping nineteen Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) soldiers and twenty Internal Security Forces officers. The LAF offensive to retake Aarsal destroyed swaths of the town.

Meanwhile, since 2011, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah has been fighting against Sunnis on behalf of the organization's co-religionists -- Bashar al-Assad's Alawite regime in Syria -- with impunity, infuriating Lebanon's Sunnis. Worse, the LAF has been quietly cooperating with Hezbollah to battle Sunni militants in Lebanon,

undermining the army's perception of "neutrality" and standing as a "national" and non-sectarian institution.

And then there are the refugees. Over the last three years, nearly 1.5 million mostly Sunni Syrian refugees have entered Lebanon, skewing the delicate demographic balance of Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, and Druze. They have also taken a severe toll on Lebanon's economy.

If Hariri is to change the trajectory of Lebanon, he will have to counter the inroads of Sunni militants, unify the Sunni community, and reinvigorate his moribund pro-west so-called March 14 coalition, all the while opposing Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria. Staking out this last position, it bears mention, could get Hariri killed.

To date, Hariri himself has pledged \$15 million toward the rebuilding of Arsal, a contribution that should generate some positive sentiments toward the absentee political leader. Similar largess -- perhaps funded by Saudi Arabia -- could also help reestablish Hariri's influence and appeal in Sunni redoubts like Tripoli, Akkar, and Sidon, which could be predisposed to Islamist militancy.

On the political front, an ongoing Hariri presence in Beirut could help build support within the March 14 coalition behind a consensus presidential candidate and an electoral law. Of course, March 14 will have to negotiate with the Hezbollah-led March 8 bloc regarding these contentious issues, but a disciplined and unified March 14 position would undoubtedly strengthen the group during discussions.

Most importantly, though, to avert a further slide toward sectarian civil strife Hariri is going to have to find a way to limit the LAF's collaboration with Hezbollah vis-a-vis Sunni militants. In the West -- and indeed in Lebanon -- it is fashionable to see Sunni jihadists as a bigger threat than Shiite jihadists a la Hezbollah. This view is shortsighted, and will over time radicalize the state's Sunnis and erode support for the military.

While no individual or institution in Lebanon is currently capable of targeting and defeating Hezbollah, the state's tacit cooperation and de-confliction with the Shiite militia -- especially regarding developments in Syria -- is having a pernicious impact on Lebanese society. If Hariri is to lead Lebanon out of the current morass, he will have to stray from the well-worn path of acquiescence to Hezbollah. Given Lebanon's current challenges, confrontation with Hezbollah is clearly not the answer. If stability is the goal, however, neither is collaboration.

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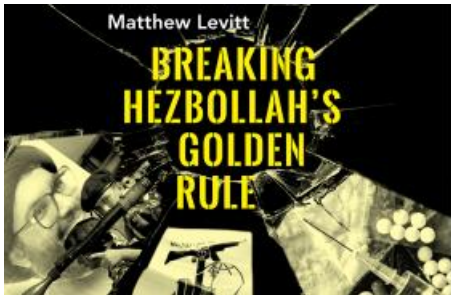


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