

## Case Closed

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Jan 21, 2011

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The seemingly never-ending story of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which was established by the U.N. Security Council to prosecute the killers of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, reached a landmark this week when the court's prosecutor submitted his indictment to pretrial judge Daniel Fransen. Diplomats from Washington to Tehran expect the indictment, which will remain sealed for a few more months, to implicate members of the radical Shiite militia Hezbollah in the crime. Hezbollah has denounced the tribunal as an American-Zionist plot, collapsed the Lebanese unity government, and even, in recent days, staged mock "coup drills" in the streets of Beirut.

Behind Hezbollah's power play against the tribunal lies something more than brute force: Lebanon's Christians and Sunnis, once largely united in support of the tribunal, have parted ways. This split began a few years ago at the elite level with the defection of Gen. Michel Aoun, the leader of the largest Christian party, to the pro-Syrian camp. But, as recent polling data in Lebanon makes clear, the divisions have now reached the popular level.

At this point, a majority of Lebanon's Christian community has actually turned against the tribunal. As a result, there is little prospect today of the sort of mass popular demonstrations that kicked Syrian forces out of Lebanon in 2005 following the assassination of Hariri, a Sunni -- or that booted president-for-life Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali out of Tunisia just a few days ago.

This is the most surprising and politically significant finding of a public opinion poll conducted in Lebanon during November and December 2010 by Pechter Middle East Polls, a firm advised by the author. The findings, made possible with the help of a reliable local commercial market research firm, are based on face-to-face interviews with a representative national sample of 1,000 respondents, yielding a statistical margin of error of approximately plus or minus 3 percent. Pechter previously conducted a survey of political attitudes in Lebanon in April 2010, which shows the shifts in Lebanon's complicated and often highly polarized sectarian society.

As of last month, 79 percent of Lebanon's Sunnis called the tribunal "free and fair," including a solid majority (60 percent) who felt "strongly" that way. But only about half as many (42 percent) of the Christians agreed even "somewhat" with that position. Instead, a majority (55 percent) of Christians said the tribunal was not free and fair.

In this respect, Lebanon's Christian community is closer to the country's Shiite population, from which Hezbollah

draws its support. Fully 85 percent of Shiites surveyed believed strongly that the tribunal -- which, let's remember, has yet to release any of its findings -- was neither free nor fair. Similarly, asked an open-ended question about the country's highest national priority today, 18 percent of both Christians and Shiites cited "the false witnesses file" of the tribunal, a complaint raised by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah meant to cast doubt on the tribunal's credibility. This answer was not far behind the plurality first choice in all three major communities of "protecting civil peace." By contrast, not even 1 percent of Sunnis named the issue of false witnesses as a Lebanese national priority.

The fall of Lebanon's unity government means that the country's small Druze minority may hold the swing vote in parliament on the identity of the new prime minister and the composition of a new government. Because the Druze comprise only about 5 percent of the Lebanese population, they accounted for just 50 respondents out of 1,000 in this survey. This subsample is too small to be statistically significant -- but it is still suggestive. Druze respondents split almost evenly on whether the tribunal is free and fair (23 percent support the tribunal versus 26 percent who do not). Druze leader Walid Jumblatt has exploited this ambivalence by shifting at will from strong support to strong opposition to the tribunal, depending on regional political trends. His current pro-Hezbollah and pro-Syrian position is another clear indication of which way Lebanon's political winds are blowing.

The tribunal is not the only issue on which Lebanese Christian and Shiite views have converged. Regarding Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad, around 60 percent of Shiites and 40 percent of Christians now voice at least somewhat favorable views. Among Sunnis, by contrast, that percentage plummets to just 17 percent. By comparison, Lebanese caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Rafik's son, garners favorable ratings from nearly all Lebanese Sunnis (94 percent) and around two-thirds of the country's Christians; a mere 11 percent of Lebanon's Shiites concur with that assessment. Nevertheless, when asked in an open-ended way to name the national leader they most admire, 51 percent of Sunnis cite Hariri, but only 3 percent of Christians do.

Moreover, the data suggest that Lebanon's Christians no longer expect much help from the United States. Barack Obama's approval rating among Christians has now tipped in a negative direction (45 percent vs. 55 percent). Lebanon's Shiites remain overwhelmingly negative (12 percent vs. 88 percent) toward Obama -- no surprise, given their strong support for Hezbollah. Only Sunnis retain a largely positive view, giving the U.S. president a 65 percent vs. 35 percent approval rating.

Iran is one issue on which Lebanon's Sunnis and Christians still generally agree, and differ sharply from their Shiite countrymen. Two-thirds of both Christians and Sunnis have unfavorable views of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; among Lebanese Shiites, that figure is an astonishingly low 2 percent.

For all these stark differences, the latest survey also shows that it is simplistic to analyze Lebanese public opinion purely by sect because there is significant diversity of views on some important questions within each community. For example, while 51 percent of Sunnis name Saad Hariri as their most admired national leader, second place is held by "no one" -- with 21 percent. Two Sunnis often mentioned these days as possible replacement candidates for prime minister score miserably inside their own community: Former Prime Minister Najib Miqati received the support of only 4 percent, while Omar Karamah, another former premier, was named by only 2 percent of Sunnis.

Surprisingly, the Shiites are likewise far from monolithic: Nasrallah gets 64 percent of their votes as "most admired national leader," but Nabih Berri, the parliamentary speaker and leader of the Shiite-dominated Amal movement, scores second with a respectable 23 percent. And Lebanese Christians support a potpourri of leaders: Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Michel Aoun, and Lebanese President Michel Suleiman are virtually tied at 13 to 15 percent; they are followed by Suleiman Franjeh and Hassan Nasrallah, with 9 percent apiece. First place among the Christians goes to "no one" with 21 percent.

Such intriguing nuances notwithstanding, the central finding from this survey remains: Lebanon's Sunnis are currently the only group who continue to support the tribunal entrusted with bringing Hariri's assassins to justice. They are more isolated than ever before, as the Shiite opposition to the court has remained strong and the Christian community has clearly moved toward an anti-tribunal and even pro-Syrian position.

As a result, Hezbollah's firm opposition to the tribunal, to the Hariri government, and to what remains of U.S. policy in Lebanon will probably carry the day -- not only among the shifting Lebanese elites, but also on Lebanon's volatile streets.

*David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Actions, Not Just Attitudes: A New Paradigm for U.S.-Arab Relations \(/templateC04.php?CID=331\)](#).* ❖

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