

Hizballah Challenges Lebanon's Prime Minister Hariri -- and President Obama

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker), [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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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.



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Yesterday, January 12, as Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri prepared to meet with President Obama in the Oval Office, the Hizballah-led opposition withdrew its support from the Beirut government, forcing its collapse. In the next few days, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) is widely expected to announce between two and six indictments of Lebanese Shiites affiliated with Hizballah regarding its investigation into the February 2005 assassination of Saad's father, former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Forcing the political crisis was Hizballah's latest card in its campaign to curb Lebanese government support for the UN-mandated investigation and prosecution. How this political drama plays out will have crucial implications for Washington's standing in the Middle East, as well as for Hizballah's allies, Syria and Iran.

Rocky History in the Cabinet

In the aftermath of the 2005 assassination, the pro-West "March 14" coalition was elected to power in Lebanon over the Hizballah-led "March 8" bloc. Early on, the establishment of an international tribunal to try Hariri's killers became the focal point of controversy. While March 8 opposed the move, the tribunal was a high priority for Saad Hariri and his March 14 coalition.

A related point of contention was how many cabinet seats would be apportioned to the opposition. Hizballah demanded at least one-third plus one of the total seats. This "blocking third" would provide the opposition with veto power over future government initiatives -- including tribunal-related matters -- and, more important, allow the militia to bring down the government at will.

In November 2006, when the government led by then prime minister Fouad Siniora refused to meet the demand, six opposition ministers temporarily boycotted the cabinet, paralyzing the government. Hizballah continued to press for

the blocking third but did not attain it until May 2008, after the militia invaded Beirut to overturn two unfavorable government edicts. Under the gun, March 14 acquiesced to Hizballah's demands during negotiations in Qatar following the offensive, giving the opposition eleven of thirty cabinet seats. This "power-sharing" formula continued even after March 14 was returned to power by the 2009 elections.

Hizballah Spooked

Notwithstanding the posturing within the cabinet -- and nearly a dozen assassinations of politicians and personalities aligned with March 14 -- government support for the tribunal has persisted. Most recently, Hizballah -- bolstered by its blocking third -- unsuccessfully attempted to curtail government financial support for the STL in fall 2010, via a prolonged battle over the 2011 national budget.

It is not difficult to see why the militia would so vociferously oppose the STL. If the indictments even remotely echo the report that appeared in *Der Spiegel* in May 2009, Shiites will be the primary suspects in the murder of the leader of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community. Not only will this damage Hizballah's reputation at home and abroad, it could result in domestic reprisals.

Following a February 2010 report in *Le Monde* underscoring the Hizballah angle and subsequent requests by tribunal investigators to interview several members of the organization, leader Hassan Nasrallah took to the airwaves for an exercise in damage control. During a lengthy November 28 videoconference televised throughout the region, he attempted to implicate Israel in the assassination. He also condemned the tribunal as an American political tool and posited that Israeli spies had fabricated the compelling communications evidence supporting the case.

Saudi-Syrian Mediation

In addition to undermining the tribunal's legitimacy, Hizballah and its allies have been pressuring Saad Hariri to discredit the STL. This undertaking has largely played out behind closed doors in a Saudi-Syrian mediation effort.

The 2005 murder of dual Lebanese-Saudi citizen Rafiq Hariri -- widely believed to have been perpetrated in collusion with Damascus -- caused a rift in Saudi-Syrian relations. In 2009, however, Riyadh began to explore rapprochement with Damascus with an eye toward shoring up Saad Hariri's new government in Beirut, strengthening Lebanese sovereignty, and ensuring domestic stability. That October, in an effort to reach an understanding on Lebanon, Saudi King Abdullah visited Damascus, reportedly with a large aid package.

Two months later -- in what appeared to be another Saudi goodwill gesture toward Syria -- Riyadh pressured Prime Minister Hariri to meet with Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, a man widely believed to have played a role in the assassination. In September 2010, Hariri continued with this conciliatory line by ostensibly absolving Syria from responsibility for his father's murder, calling his earlier accusations against Damascus "politicized."

But Hariri's blandishments and Riyadh's efforts did little to ease growing sectarian tensions on the ground. As indictments neared, Saudi-Syrian discussions about Lebanon became a daily fixture in the Arab press. Although few reliable details emerged on the substance of the mediation, most reports focused on attempts by Riyadh and Damascus to craft a "deal" on the STL to mitigate Hizballah's exposure and prevent a post-indictment Lebanon from inching toward civil war.

Earlier this week, after it was announced that the Saudi-Syrian mediation had failed, Hizballah and its allies blamed Hariri for the impasse. The mediation effort had very little chance of succeeding from the start, however. Hariri (and Saudi Arabia) had few concessions left to offer after patching up relations with Damascus and -- if Nasrallah is to be believed -- making the unrequited proposal to label indicted members of Hizballah as undisciplined individuals or "rogue" elements who did not represent the organization as a whole. In any event, to discredit the STL and absolve

the Shiite militia completely would constitute political suicide for Hariri. Meanwhile, even if it were so inclined, Damascus would likely be unable to convince Nasrallah -- who already rejected the "rogue elements" compromise -- to accept another scenario in which Hariri does not completely distance himself from the tribunal.

Implications

During tomorrow's press conference, STL prosecutors are widely expected to announce that they have submitted a draft indictment to the pretrial judge. The indictment -- which may remain under seal -- will set in motion a process by which the pretrial judge reviews the draft and decides whether or not to confirm the indictments and issue arrest warrants. If warrants are issued, trial preparation of four to six months would commence. Suspects -- either present in court or in absentia -- would likely stand trial in the Hague no earlier than September or October 2011.

For months, in an effort to present a choice between "justice and stability," Hizballah and Syria have been suggesting that violence will result if indictments target the militia. In May 2008, it became apparent that Hizballah had no qualms about turning the "weapons of the resistance" against the people of Lebanon. It also appears that the organization has done some operational planning -- conducting surveillance of the tribunal's headquarters in the Hague and its investigators on the ground in Lebanon -- should it decide to target its accusers.

In the near term, while Hizballah may potentially initiate strikes, close roads, shut down central Beirut, and surround the government offices in the Grand Serail, it seems unlikely that the militia would resort at this time to wholesale violence against March 14 and the state, now under a caretaker government. Given the political environment, even if Hizballah members were eventually convicted, no Lebanese force would be prepared to make arrests and extradite the criminals. And reinvading Beirut would only do further damage to Hizballah's image in the Sunni Muslim world. Over time, however, the Shiite militia's calculus could change.

Choices for U.S. Policy

As indictments unfold in the coming months, the key for Washington will be to maintain international support for the tribunal in the face of heightened tensions and perhaps sporadic violence. During their brief meeting yesterday, President Obama reportedly emphasized to Prime Minister Hariri the "importance of the work of the STL as a means to help end the era of political assassinations with impunity in Lebanon." The administration has also indicated that it hopes to widen the circle of regional actors involved. The risk is that by including the wrong partners -- e.g., states such as Qatar, which are more closely aligned with Hizballah than March 14 -- Washington could do more harm than good. Rather than extracting further concessions from U.S. allies, the administration should continue to emphasize the importance of the STL finishing its work.

David Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute.

Matthew Levitt is director of the Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. ❖

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