

Ahmadinezhad's Lebanon Visit and the Fate of the Hariri Tribunal

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Brief Analysis

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's trip to Beirut this week will likely produce a flurry of rhetorical challenges against Israel and perhaps even a visit to the Israel-Lebanon border. But one purpose of the trip may be aimed at influencing the fate of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), charged with investigating the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. As the tribunal inches closer to indictments that reportedly include Hizballah operatives, both the group and Syria -- apparently backed by Tehran -- have stepped up what seems to be an orchestrated campaign to pressure Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his Western allies into ending their support for the judicial process.

Background

In mid-July, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah launched a blistering public relations campaign to delegitimize the STL after reports all but confirmed that prosecutor Daniel Bellemare intended to issue indictments against group members. In addition to characterizing the tribunal as an "Israeli project" aimed at targeting the resistance and provoking sectarian strife in Lebanon, he also cited "hard and irrefutable evidence" that Israeli intelligence agents were behind the Hariri assassination. Then, after raising questions about the STL's credibility, he demanded a new, "apolitical," Lebanese-controlled investigation that would take Hizballah's evidence into account.

Later that month, Saudi King Abdullah and Syrian president Bashar al-Asad visited Beirut -- the culmination of Riyadh's year-and-a-half-long effort to lead Asad away from Iran and back into the "Arab fold." After rumors of an agreement between the two leaders linking government formation in Iraq with a renewed Syrian role in Lebanon, Saad Hariri issued a stunning public revocation of previous allegations that Syria was behind his father's assassination. In September, however, Asad hosted Ahmadinezhad in Damascus and then traveled to Tehran, reaffirming the Syrian-Iranian "axis of resistance" and signaling their joint support for Hizballah.

Efforts to Derail the Tribunal

As part of its escalating campaign to undermine the STL, Hizballah -- with backing from Damascus and Tehran -- has sought to end all official Lebanese support for the tribunal's operations. The organization has made clear that it will prevent the cabinet from approving Lebanon's share of STL funding, set by UN Security Council Resolution 1757 at 49 percent of the tribunal's \$56 million annual operating budget. It has also asked the government to withdraw the Lebanese judges assigned to the STL.

At the same time, Hizballah has intensified political pressure on Saad Hariri to denounce the STL and join the opposition in publicly calling for its dissolution. This campaign has taken an increasingly ominous tone. For example, Hizballah ally and speaker of parliament Nabih Berri warned of "civil strife" if the issue dragged on, and Hizballah's al-Manar website added that Lebanon would face "tough days ahead" if Hariri refused to oppose the STL by the end of September, a statement interpreted as a threat to his premiership. Syria officially joined this effort last week when it issued arrest warrants against thirty-three "false witnesses" in the case, including some of Hariri's closest aides and the first lead UN investigator, a former German state prosecutor.

Both Hizballah and Damascus have also been increasingly vocal in warning that any indictments aimed at the group could fuel a new round of violence in Lebanon. Nasrallah reportedly told Hariri that if he attempted to embrace such indictments, Hizballah would take actions that were "a hundred times worse than in 2008." Al-Manar added that the group would treat any indictments as a "new invasion" of Lebanon. Similarly, in a recent Wall Street Journal interview, Syrian foreign minister Walid Moullem warned that indictments would risk "plunging Lebanon into a new round of sectarian strife."

What's Next?

In the face of increasing pressure, Hariri has so far held firm, vowing on September 29 not to "let the blood of Premier Rafiq Hariri go to waste." But with the expiration of Hizballah's September 30 ultimatum, the stage appears to be set for a potentially violent political confrontation. Several scenarios are possible:

Hariri concedes. To avert a crisis, Hariri could decide to accept Hizballah's demands, disavowing the STL, ending Lebanon's funding for it, and calling for the withdrawal of Lebanese judges. Yet Hizballah would probably not be satisfied with such actions given their limited potential impact on the STL's ongoing investigation. For example, under Resolution 1757, other UN member states can make up for any shortfall in Lebanese STL funding via voluntary contributions. Indeed, the Obama administration has pointedly reaffirmed U.S. support for the tribunal and appears ready to pursue alternative funding sources if necessary. Moreover, as appointees of UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, the Lebanese judges appear to be beyond the reach of any Lebanese cabinet or parliamentary attempts to remove them.

Hizballah walks out. If the pressure campaign against Hariri fails, Hizballah could seek to bring down his government by asking its allies to withdraw from the cabinet. The group controls ten of the eleven cabinet members needed to produce such a collapse, so it would need the support of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt or one of President Michel Suleiman's appointees (e.g., Adnan al-Sayyed Hussein, a Shiite placed on the cabinet with Hizballah's consent). If successful, such a move would paralyze Lebanon's political institutions, plunge the country into another crisis, and put Hizballah in a position to block formation of any new government until the STL's fate was determined.

Hariri resigns. In an effort to preserve his dignity and uphold his father's legacy amid Hizballah pressure, Hariri could decide to step down as prime minister - an option publicly floated last week by a member of his parliamentary bloc. Although some have suggested that such a move could strengthen Hariri's hand by making it politically untenable for any other Sunni politician to accept a compromise on the STL, it could also give Hizballah the leverage needed to block formation of a new government, as in the previous scenario.

Hizballah takes to the streets. If Hariri continues to defy Hizballah's demands, the group could launch street protests designed to undermine stability and increase pressure on the government. As in the past, this could lead to clashes with Sunni and Christian supporters of the March 14 coalition. Hizballah may even go further and attempt a military takeover of Beirut, as it did in May 2008 -- a move that led regional powers to step in and broker a new governing framework for Lebanon that reflected Hizballah's enhanced political power. By repeating that scenario, the group could use fears of civil war as leverage, demanding that any new agreement on Lebanon's political future -- a "Doha II" -- require March 14 and its Western allies to shut the STL down or, perhaps more likely, place it under greater Lebanese control.

Challenge to the International Community

Ahmadinezhad's visit -- aimed in part to reinforce Lebanon's further shift toward Syria and Iran -- may signal the beginning of a new, more dangerous phase in Hizballah's intimidation campaign. This weekend, for example, Nasrallah reiterated his determination to "stop this American and Israeli attempt to destroy the resistance." With few other choices, Hariri and the Saudis appear to be placing their faith in Syria to restrain Hizballah and maintain calm -- a role that Asad relishes as he continues his double game of encouraging the group to proceed while reassuring Hariri of his support.

Although Hizballah and its allies have directed their pressure campaign against Hariri, their ultimate aim appears to center on challenging overall support for the STL by forcing the international community to choose between justice and stability. The Obama administration should use its nascent dialogue with Damascus to make clear that Syrian efforts to undermine the tribunal will have adverse consequences. The real choice facing Washington and its allies is whether to surrender Lebanon to the forces of armed intimidation or bolster those fighting to uphold justice, democracy, and the rule of law. Although the United States has little sway over Hizballah's actions on the ground, Washington should continue to reaffirm support for the tribunal and make clear that it will not countenance any political deal over its future.

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