

Beirut Spring: The Hariri Tribunal Goes Hunting for Hizballah

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Brief Analysis

Last week in Beirut, the United Nations Special Tribunal charged with investigating and prosecuting the killers of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri brought six members of Hizballah in for questioning. The tribunal's decision to interview Hizballah in connection with the 2005 murder appears to confirm a 2009 report in *Der Spiegel* -- corroborated more recently by *Le Monde* -- implicating the Shiite militia in the conspiracy. A shift in the short-term focus of the investigation from Syria to Hizballah will have a profound impact on domestic politics in Lebanon, and potentially on U.S.-Lebanese relations.

Background

Since the February 2005 assassination of Hariri and the establishment of the UN-mandated inquiry into the killing, the primary public focus of the investigation has been on Damascus. Indeed, the first report of the International Independent Investigation Commission (IIIC) in October 2005 "conclud[ed] that ... many leads point directly towards the involvement of Syrian security officials with the assassination." Although no mention was made of Hizballah in the commission's quarterly reports through 2009, the organization -- allied historically with Damascus -- expressed strong opposition to the formation of the IIIC and bolted from the cabinet in protest of the government's decision to support its establishment.

Then, in May 2009 *Der Spiegel* published an article that reported in great detail on how Hizballah operatives participated in the murder, and how the IIIC had discovered the connection. Apparently, one of the militia's operatives "committed the unbelievable indiscretion" of calling his girlfriend from a mobile phone used in the operation, enabling the investigators to identify the man. The revelations contained in the *Der Spiegel* article sent shock waves through Beirut.

Questioning Hizballah

Because Lebanon was embroiled in a civil war from 1975 to 1990, the prospect that Shiites might have killed the leader of the state's Sunni Muslim community has prompted grave concern. Given the sensitivities, since last May Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has repeatedly denied the story. Most recently, in February 2010 he characterized the *Der Spiegel* and *Le Monde* pieces as an Israeli "accusation."

Notwithstanding Nasrallah's protests, Hizballah is struggling increasingly to dissociate itself from the Hariri plot. Last week's well-publicized questioning of members of the organization's security apparatus by the UN tribunal has once again refocused attention on an alleged Shiite role in the murder. According to the Lebanese satellite television station *al-Jadid*, among others, last week's tribunal interviewees included senior Hizballah officials *al-Hajj Salim* and *Mustafa Badreddine*. *Salim* reportedly heads one of the organization's special operations units, which was run by military commander *Imad Mugnyiah* until his assassination in February 2008; *Badreddine*, *Mugnyiah*'s brother-in-law, heads the militia's counterintelligence unit.

The IIIC interviews generated some interesting responses from supporters of Hizballah (and Syria), most notably former Lebanese cabinet minister *Wiam Wahab*, who predicted that *fitna*, or civil conflict, would ensue if the tribunal proceeded on course. During a meeting with the Spanish ambassador to Lebanon, *Wahab* also suggested that the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) might be targeted if the tribunal was "politicized" -- in other words, if it continued to pursue Hizballah suspects. *Wahab*'s mention of UNIFIL, which operates in Hizballah-controlled southern Lebanon, amounted to an unmistakable threat to the envoy: Spain's UNIFIL contingent has been attacked twice in recent years.

Unfortunate Timing

For the pro-West March 14 coalition in Lebanon, the allegations of Hizballah involvement in the murder should come as little surprise. Not only would the militia have had the capacity to carry out the operation, its close allies in Damascus had the motive. Members of the coalition had also been at odds with Hizballah for years, and particularly so since the Hariri assassination and the subsequent Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. At the same time, a Hizballah connection to the crime would not in any sense absolve Syria -- which then occupied and controlled Lebanon -- of culpability.

Yet the IIIC's targeting of Hizballah comes at an awkward time for the March 14 leadership. Although the coalition won national elections this past summer -- and with this victory, the opportunity to form a government -- the opposition compelled the majority, led by Rafiq Hariri's son *Saad*, to establish a national unity government to include members of the Shiite militia and provide the organization with preponderant influence. Strange bedfellows indeed.

Worse, in the months following the election, the March 14 coalition, which had remained fairly stable since its establishment in 2005, started to fray as its leading international backers in Washington and Riyadh sought rapprochement with Damascus. Consequently, in recent months both *Saad Hariri* and the

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