

Lebanon:

Back to Square One?

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On September 10, after seventy-three days of trying to formulate a government, Lebanon's prime minister designate, Saad Hariri, resigned his mandate. Although Hariri's pro-West March 14 coalition secured a parliamentary majority in June elections -- and with it the right to govern -- the Hizballah-led minority rejected the cabinet he submitted to President Michel Suleiman. Now that March 14 has reelected Hariri as its candidate for premier, the stage is set for yet another showdown with Hizballah and its allies. As the process drags on, both Hizballah and March 14 are hardening their positions. Meanwhile, Syria, via the regime-controlled press, is hinting at a return to violence in Beirut. Today, on the nineteenth anniversary of the Taif Accords, which ended the civil war, Lebanon again stands on the precipice.

Background

After the March 14 coalition secured a majority -- 71 of 128 parliamentary seats -- in the June 7 elections, President Suleiman offered Saad Hariri the mandate to form a government. Throughout the summer, Hariri met continuously with his coalition allies and opposition leaders from Hizballah, Amal, and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), to work out an acceptable formula for a national unity cabinet.

Negotiations were extremely complicated. Not only did Hariri want to placate his March 14 partners, he was committed to ensuring that Hizballah's March 8 alliance did not realize its demand for a "blocking third" -- one third plus one of the cabinet seats -- which would provide the opposition with the ability to stymie major initiatives and bring down the government at will. Hariri's efforts were further complicated by leading coalition partner, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who -- in an apparent shift -- opined during an August 3 speech that his political alliance with March 14 "cannot continue."

In attempting to form his cabinet, Hariri adopted a formula -- fifteen seats for the majority, ten for the opposition, and five for the president -- which, on the face of it, would denude the opposition of the blocking third. At the same time, Hariri indicated that he would not allow those who did not win parliament seats in the general elections to become ministers, a decision intended to preclude former telecommunications minister Jebran Bassil -- the son-in-law and political heir apparent to Michel Aoun -- from joining the cabinet. Likewise, Hariri designated all the opposition ministers himself, instead of allocating the portfolios to opposition parties and allowing them to choose. Hariri presented his cabinet to President Suleiman on September 7.

Swift Reaction

The opposition declared Hariri's proposed government dead on arrival, claiming, dubiously, that Hariri's designation of opposition ministers was unconstitutional. Seemingly more offensive to the March 8 coalition, however, was Hariri's position that only members of parliament could serve as cabinet ministers. Aoun -- who had demanded the reinstatement of Bassil as telecommunications minister -- was particularly incensed that his son-in-law was shut out, a sentiment echoed by Hizballah deputy secretary general Naim Qassem when he said on September 10 that ministries were not "prizes given out in accordance with the parliamentary elections results." Clearly the issue is personal for Aoun. When the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir suggested that the appointment of losing candidates as ministers would "go against the popular opinion," Aoun accused the cardinal of having joined March 14's leading Christian party, the Lebanese Forces.

Syria, too, was quick to respond to Hariri's resignation. On September 10, the regime daily al-Watan reported that Lebanon "had entered a period of instability" in which the "political vacuum" would be filled by "security tensions." The paper, which is owned by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad's cousin, added that it was unlikely a new government would be formed until December.

Even before Hariri resigned, the Obama administration was sharply critical of Syrian efforts to undermine government formation in Beirut. In an August interview with al-Nahar, a "high-ranking U.S. official" -- believed by many to have been Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman -- told the Lebanese daily that "The Syrians are mistaken if they think that their relations with us will not be affected as a result of what they are doing in Lebanon.... President Obama wants to improve relations with Syria, but it would be impossible if Syria and its friends in Lebanon continue to cripple the democratic institutions."

In this context, it came as little surprise that on September 11 -- the day after Hariri quit -- two Katyusha rockets were fired on Israel from Lebanon,

allegedly by a heretofore unknown al-Qaeda affiliate. More likely, some speculate, the attack was perpetrated by the Syrian-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine--General Command.

Moving Forward?

That Hariri will have an easier time forming a government his second time around is doubtful. As Naim Qassem told an audience convened for Iftar (at the ironically named Fantasy World restaurant) on September 12, "the reasons that complicated this [government] formulation are the same ones that the new prime minister designate will face." Knowing that he would be given another chance, it now seems apparent that Hariri's resignation represented calculated political theater, a tactic designed to pressure the opposition to make concessions. Now, although Walid Jumblatt is openly opposing the idea, Hariri is upping the ante, suggesting that he might not establish the cabinet based on the previously agreed 15-10-5 seat allocation.

Still, Hizballah and its allies do not appear to be fazed. March 8 has not yet veered from its demand for a "national unity government" that would provide the opposition with decisive influence in the decisionmaking process. The opposition remains confident it can achieve this influence -- the blocking third -- through the 15-10-5 formula: all that is required is to co-opt one of the president's five cabinet members, at least one of whom will be Shiite. Given the dynamic, March 8 is currently focused on trying to lock Hariri into this formula. Anything short, said Hizballah minister of labor Muhammad Fnaish in an ominous note, "means the state enters into a dark tunnel."

Hariri and his coalition have held tough so far, refusing to provide concessions to the minority that essentially would reverse the results of the June elections. Precedent suggests that the deadlock could last some time; in 1969, it took nine months for prime minister designate Rashid Karami to form a government. But Hariri also knows that sooner or later, Hizballah and/or Syria will likely resort to violence to force concessions from the pro-West coalition. And while Jumblatt clarified his August comments distancing himself from March 14, he remains an unreliable ally and leaves the coalition weakened.

Conclusion

Prime minister designate Saad Hariri has indicated that he will resume coalition negotiations after Eid al-Fitr on September 20. Although the talks will take time, it should become clear in relatively short order whether the direction of these talks suggests a different outcome than the first round. Ultimately, if March 14 wants to avoid another Hizballah invasion of Beirut, it may be forced to accept the 15-10-5 formula. Yet March 14 need not accept all the opposition demands.

Indeed, the opposition is also playing with a somewhat weakened hand. Although Hizballah won all the parliamentary seats for which it contended, its FPM allies performed poorly. Likewise, developments in Tehran and the recent bankruptcy of Hizballah's chief Lebanese financier have proved deeply embarrassing for the militia. At a minimum, Hariri has an opportunity to weaken his FPM rivals by excluding Bassil and relegating Aoun's ministers to peripheral portfolios.

While Lebanese government formulation should be an internal matter, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are all playing a part, by advising their local allies. Riyadh and Cairo continue to play a productive role in providing political support to March 14, but this will probably not be sufficient. If Washington wants to strengthen its Lebanese allies' position in these negotiations, the Obama administration will have to bring some pressure to bear on Damascus. As a first step, the administration should follow through on its August warning, perhaps by informing the Assad regime of the decision to postpone indefinitely the posting of a new ambassador to Syria.

Washington has a vested interest in seeing Hariri succeed in establishing a government not beholden to Hizballah and the FPM. No doubt, it is an ambitious goal. But given the June 7 election results, the Obama administration, like Hariri and March 14, should be aiming higher than a return to the status quo in Beirut.

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