

Pricey Cedar Politics

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

Nov 27, 2006

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.



Articles & Testimony

The assassination of Lebanese minister of industry Pierre Gemayel last week was yet another in a seemingly endless series of brutal murders of anti-Syrian politicians in Lebanon. But while Gemayel's death was tragic, for Lebanon watchers, the killing didn't come as much of a surprise.

For weeks Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah had been threatening to topple the pro-West anti-Syria Lebanese government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. Syrian President Bashar Assad was also been gunning for the fall of Siniora. In a now infamous August 15 speech, Assad predicted that Siniora's fall was "looming."

Then, when six pro-Syrian cabinet ministers resigned from the government last week, the Hezbollah-led bloc constitutionally needed only three more cabinet ministers to resign—or die—for the government to fall. For Hezbollah and Syria, Gemayel's death put the magic number at two.

The context of Gemayel's murder, of course, is the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. Shortly after Hariri's death, the United Nations Security Council launched a comprehensive investigation in the killing. As the investigation progressed—and preliminary findings emerged—the Assad regime became increasingly concerned that it would be formally implicated in the crime.

Compounding Assad's problems, in December 2005, Lebanon started to discuss the establishment of an international tribunal to try those responsible for the Hariri murder. When the topic was broached in the cabinet, Hezbollah and Amal ministers went on strike in protest, returning only several months later. Nevertheless, work on the tribunal went forward, and the Lebanese justice ministry entered into negotiations with the U.N. to formalize an arrangement on the tribunal.

Quick progress by the Siniora government in moving the tribunal forward apparently set off alarm bells in Damascus. After all, if high-ranking officials in the Assad regime were indicted and/or convicted, it potentially could shake the very foundations of the regime.

In mid-November, when the draft of the tribunal agreement was returned to the Lebanese cabinet for a vote, Hezbollah cried foul. The Shiite militia's protest focused not about the tribunal, but rather, on its allocation of seats in the cabinet. Nasrallah demanded that three more cabinet seats be apportioned to (presumably Hezbollah) Shiites,

giving the pro-Syrians 8 of 24 cabinet seats and an effective veto of all government initiatives—including the international court.

If it did not receive what is known as the “blocking third,” Nasrallah said, the Shiites would resign from the cabinet and Hezbollah would go to the streets to topple the Siniora government. Initially, it had been expected that Hezbollah would organize mass demonstrations on November 22. In the aftermath of the Gemayel assassination, however, Hezbollah rallies were pushed back.

I was in Beirut in mid-November when Hezbollah left the cabinet meeting, with among others, politicians and personalities aligned with the anti-Syria pro-West-oriented March 14th Movement. On November 11—the night Hezbollah bolted from the government—I had dinner with the anti-Syrian Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. The typically engaging but somewhat depressed Jumblatt seemed unusually distressed that night. Hezbollah, he said, would try to force the government to cede the tribunal; ultimately this standoff would lead toward renewed violence that could degenerate to civil war. Still, Jumblatt said, the Siniora government had no alternative but to press forward with the tribunal.

Later in the week, I met with Jumblatt’s political ally, future party leader Saad Hariri. Hariri, too was under no illusions as to what lie ahead for the democracy advocates. Syria, he predicted, would restart its campaign of assassinations to end the tribunal. For Hariri, whose father Rafiq was assassinated in 2005, the matter is personal. But he also saw this as a moment of truth for the March 14th Movement: On the issues of the blocking third and the tribunal, no concessions would be made.

On November 13, the Siniora cabinet—absent the six pro-Syrian mostly Shiite ministers—convened, and approved by a legal majority the draft agreement with the U.N. on the international tribunal. That afternoon, I caught up with minister of justice, Charles Rizk, the driving force behind the tribunal. Despite having secured cabinet approval, Rizk told me that congratulations were not yet in order, because the agreement still had to be approved by parliament. Lebanon’s Pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud and Amal’s speaker of the parliament might delay the process a few months, Rizk said, but it now appeared inevitable that the tribunal would be approved.

Rizk’s assurances notwithstanding, with Gemayel’s assassination, it appears that the pro-Syria forces in Lebanon are one step closer to scuttling the tribunal. But the anti-Syrian forces have not given up. Fearing for their safety, last week the remaining 17 cabinet ministers took up residence in the government saray for protection. And this Saturday—four days after Gemayel’s murder—they courageously reconvened to approve another draft of the U.N. statutes to create an international court. Now the draft goes to parliament for approval.

So despite the threats and the ever-present possibility of violence, the process to establish an international court continues to creep forward. As the Gemayel assassination would suggest, however, life is cheap in Beirut these days. And with so much at stake for Syria and its allies, it is all but certain we can expect more murders of Lebanese cabinet ministers. The killers of Rafiq Hariri were in for a penny. To avoid the consequences of this crime, it seems likely they’ll be in for a pound.

David Schenker is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 2002 to 2006, he was the Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestinian affairs adviser in the office of the secretary of defense. ❖

National Review Online

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)

