

Hariri in Washington

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Apr 23, 2001

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Brief Analysis

A preview of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri's first visit to Washington since returning to office in September 2000.

Tomorrow, Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri begins his visit to Washington, his first since the September 2000 elections that saw his return to the office he held from October 1992 to December 1998. His ears are ringing with voices of two interwoven debates at home — namely, debates about the deterioration of the security situation along the Lebanese–Israeli border and about the continued Syrian presence in Lebanon. Hariri, a seasoned businessman who is well aware of the delicacy of the situation and of his limitations as the head of a government with restricted powers, does not see this visit as a mere courtesy call, but as a milestone. To assure his own political survival, he needs to extricate Lebanon from its severe economic crisis and avoid entanglement in war. For the new American administration that is still formulating its Middle Eastern policy, this visit could be an opportunity to prevent a conflagration in Lebanon and to begin a new long-term policy towards Lebanon and Syria.

The Lebanese-Israeli Border Heats Up On April 14, Hizballah exacted another price on Israel, killing an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldier in an attack on Mount Dov. This attack was part of Hizballah's campaign to "liberate" the Sheba'a farms, an area that Lebanon claims but which lies on the Israeli side of the UN-determined "Blue Line" that marks the area beyond which Israel needed to withdraw in order to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 425. In contrast to Israel's restrained policy since the IDF withdrawal in May 2000 (despite the three Israeli deaths and three kidnappings in the region), this time Israel carried out on its threats to retaliate. Israeli Air Force planes reacted by attacking a Syrian radar outpost in Lebanon, leading to the death of three Syrian soldiers.

Through this action, Israel demonstrated to Damascus that it sees Syrian president Bashar al-Asad as responsible for the attacks against Israel, given his influence over Lebanon and Hizballah. For Asad, this is the first significant test he has faced and many in the region and outside it are waiting to see what his next move will be. Until now he has chosen to stick with his father's policy and refrain from reacting directly to the attack. Indeed, his potential reactions are limited. He understands that Syria's military capability is inferior to Israel's and that additional deterioration of the situation would not serve his interests. On the other hand, a lack of response might be interpreted as weakness, especially if Asad also undertakes steps to restrain Hizballah. While Bashar has avoided a direct response thus far,

last Sunday, on the eve of Hariri's departure for the West, Hizballah officials stressed that the organization is ready to attack the northern Israeli settlements.

Syria's Presence in Lebanon The attack on Syrian assets in Lebanon has stoked the debate in Lebanon regarding the Syrian presence in the country, a debate encompassing ever-widening circles of Lebanese society. At first, the demand for Syrian withdrawal was common in the Maronite Christian and Druze communities, led by Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir and Walid Junbalat, respectively. However, lately even Hariri himself has suggested re-examining Syrian–Lebanese relations.

Hariri's delicate situation on these issues borders on the impossible, but the Lebanese political structure allows him to express a variety of voices. While Hariri continues publicly to support Hizballah's struggle to liberate the Sheba'a farms, his newspaper, *al-Mustaqbal*, attacked Hizballah in an unprecedented manner on April 15, complaining that the timing of the latest operation against the Israeli contributed to regional instability. This attack constitutes a further shift in the Lebanese consensus regarding the actions of Hizballah. Two different viewpoints are at work: "the continuation of revolutionary resistance" on the one hand, and "stability and economic development" on the other. Hizballah, which relies on popular support, places great importance on its position within the Lebanese consensus, and is certainly not willing to be portrayed as an obstacle on the way to economic development and prosperity. This is the reason the leaders of the organization are trying to shift the public debate from the binary dilemma of "bread or resistance" towards a wider discussion that encompasses national ethos, pride, territories, and sovereignty.

The IDF's withdrawal has pulled the rug out from under Hizballah's feet. The wide consensus against the IDF's presence has dwindled after the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, and it seems that the relatively small area of the Sheba'a farms is not enough to galvanize the Lebanese people to sacrifice their future and livelihood. This is in direct contrast to the Palestinian struggle. Fed and encouraged by the example of Hizballah, the Palestinian population has borne a heavy price for a significant amount of time without experiencing any decline in popular support for the uprising (at least until now).

Hariri's Objectives Hariri's visit to Washington is a one in a series of visits to Western countries, coming on the heels of a round of trips to Arab states and Iran. Apart from direct assistance, Hariri hopes to receive the remainder of the allotted \$35 million in U.S. assistance to Lebanon (that is, the \$20 million earmarked entirely for NGOs, rural development projects, and educational institutions). Media accounts suggest that this aid is conditional upon the deployment of the Lebanese army along the border with Israel. As far as Hariri is concerned, the timing of Hizballah's latest attack is most unfortunate, since it led to an intensification of criticism of Lebanon on the part of the UN and some Western governments.

Hariri's decision to leave for this visit, in spite of events in the region, entails some risk. His return from Washington empty-handed would undermine his position and deflate his hopes for increased international assistance for the Lebanese economy. Since Hariri understands the problematic nature of aid to Lebanon, he will probably emphasize the need for humanitarian assistance to southern Lebanon, and may also present a series of symbolic steps that will further express his country's sovereignty in the south.

It is extremely unlikely that in Washington, of all places, Hariri would come out with clear-cut statements against Hizballah and its actions. The American administration faces two central challenges regarding its Lebanon policy. The first and main challenge is calming the region and preventing a deterioration into widespread fighting. The second challenge is building stability in Lebanon while presenting the Lebanese people a tangible alternative to continued Syrian dominance. Achieving these goals requires an improvement in the Lebanese economy and a strengthening of Lebanese state institutions. In this regard, it would be useful for Hariri to depart Washington with some achievements, which he will be able to present to his people and to the other players in the region, especially

Hizballah and Syria. Losing the lever of American support may push resource-less Lebanon towards other forces such as Iraq, which is longing for ties with Beirut, and Iran. In this context, it is interesting to note that parallel to Hariri's visit to the West, Nabih Berri, leader of Shi'ite Amal and chairman of the Lebanese parliament, is touring China and Iran.

On the other hand, there must be a certain built-in conditionality between the level of stability and the level of aid. A clear-cut refusal to discuss all aid until the deployment of the Lebanese army in the south may be too ambitious, since this is not in Hariri's power and his return empty-handed would seriously harm his position and set back prospects for economic growth, which is the main counterweight to Hizballah. One approach would be to provide Hariri with the possibility of considerable assistance if Lebanon stabilizes the situation to ensure that there are no more lethal attacks on Israelis. This would also send a message to Bashar al-Asad (via Hariri, among other means) that both Syria and Lebanon stand to gain if security returns, but both will lose if Asad continues to urge Hizballah to attack.

Yossi Baidatz is a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. Rachel Stroumsa assisted in the preparation of this PolicyWatch. ❖

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