

Staring into the abyss

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Lebanon is hurled into a deep crisis as Hezbollah topples its national unity government. Its last ditch effort to prevent the publication of an international murder investigation that will implicate the Shiite militia raises the specter of new violence in this war torn country.

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Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri may have been smiling officiously to the cameras when he shook Barack Obama's hand in Washington Wednesday, but practically, he was just being toppled by his own coalition. With the immaculate timing that has become a hallmark of Hezbollah's media savvy, ten out of 31 cabinet ministers stepped down in a dramatic press conference at the very moment Hariri was received in the Oval Office. Hariri succumbed to foreign and American pressures and turned his back on an Arab initiative to uphold his fragile coalition, castigated Hezbollah's Energy Minister Jibril Bassil. Adnan Sayyed Hussein, an appointee by Lebanon's President Mischel Suleiman, waited for the summit in Washington to end before he walked out too, effectively ending Hariri's term. Thus, barely one year after taking the reins and two years after sectarian violence had killed 81 Lebanese in bloody street fights, the National Unity Government came to a premature yet predictable end. Now, the whole region fears that the battle of wills in the Land of the Cedars may spiral out of control and result in a civil or even a regional war.

Background for the crisis is the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). This UN-body came to life to investigate the murder of Rafiq Hariri, the popular former Prime Minister and Saad's father. In 2005, he was assassinated with a massive car bomb that also killed 22 innocent bystanders. After more than two years of intensive investigations, it seems like the STL has finally nailed the culprits and is ready to go public with unequivocal findings. According to early reports, the Shiite Hezbollah militia put out Hariri, because he had planned to improve Lebanon's ties to the West and distance the country from Hezbollah's backers, Syria and Lebanon.

An indictment along these lines would spell disaster for the "Party of God", the translation of Hezbollah. In a country fraught with sectarianism that has pitted Sunnis, Druze, Christians and Shiites against each other for centuries, Hezbollah has for years sought to portray itself as a unifying "defender of all Lebanese". As a matter of fact, it argues that this function entitles it to remain the only militia allowed to hold on to its weapons after a bloody civil war ended. It promised it would use its arsenal only against Israel. This claim has already been disproven in the bloody fighting two years ago. But charges by an international investigative committee demonstrating that Hezbollah assassinated an Arab politician and willingly hazarded the death of innocent bystanders in downtown Beirut, would threaten to taint it indelibly as the Iranian proxy and terrorist organization its enemies have always claimed it to be.

Months ago, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah therefore embarked on a campaign to discredit the STL, branding it as a "Zionist project" aimed at tearing Lebanon apart. Later he increased the pressure by threatening that "anyone who tries to harm the armed resistance will see his hand cut off". Now, Nasrallah set an ultimatum: Hariri had until Wednesday to call for a special Cabinet session to stop transferring Lebanon's share of the STL's budget, withdraw all Lebanese judges from the tribunal and cease any cooperation with it. In an especially deprecating move, Nasrallah demanded that the "false witnesses" who had linked his organization to Hariri's killing were to be prosecuted. For a while it seemed as though the victim's son would cave in to the killers' demands to avoid further bloodshed, but now he has decided to face them down.

Amr Moussa, Secretary of the Arab League, voiced his concern: "Only national agreement can save Lebanon from the peril of civil war", he said. Most pundits may claim that none of the parties involved stands to gain from an outbreak of new violence in Lebanon. However, "things are liable to slip out of the hands of decision-makers," retired Israeli General and Lebanon expert Yaacov Amidror said in an interview with Israel Radio. "In such a volatile and delicate situation, where everyone has a lot of weapons, a lot of resentment, a lot of frustration — you never know where it could lead." Israel put its army along the border on high alert, fearing a scenario in which Hezbollah could initiate a surprise attack to divert attention from the crisis at home.

Lebanon's President Michel Suleiman asked Hariri to stay in office as the head of a caretaker government while he holds consultations with all factions to determine how to proceed from here. But it seems unlikely any solution will be found soon, or at all. Hezbollah and its mentors Syria and Iran are determined to see the STL dismantled, and its potentially disastrous findings stashed away. On the other hand, the U.S. and its Arab partners like Egypt and Saudi Arabia want these findings published to weaken their enemies and to prevent their ally Hariri junior from losing face. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the toppling of Hariri "a transparent effort by those forces inside Lebanon, as well as interests outside Lebanon, to subvert justice and undermine Lebanon's stability and progress." President Obama said the STL needed to press forward "to help end the era of political assassinations with impunity in Lebanon." "The efforts by the Hezbollah-led coalition to collapse the Lebanese government only demonstrate their own fear and determination to block the government's ability to conduct its business and advance the aspirations of all of the Lebanese people," a White House statement read. A compromise seemed to remain unattainable, making new violence appear to become ever more inevitable.

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