

The Collapse of Lebanon's Government

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Wednesday's timeline from the Lebanese news portal Naharnet.com read as follows:

5:17 pm Agence France Presse: Prime Minister Saad Hariri went into talks with U.S. President Barack Obama at the moment that Opposition ministers resigned from the Lebanese government.

5:32 pm Minister of State Adnan Sayyed Hussein announced in a statement his resignation from Cabinet.

In that 15 minute span, President Obama went from meeting Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri to ex-Prime Minister Hariri. The unity government under his premiership had fallen, and deservedly so.

Events had rapidly unfolded.

Last weekend, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met Hariri in New York . The visiting prime minister was holding consultations with Saudi Arabia 's King Abdullah, recuperating from recent back surgery there, on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon 's (STL) impending indictments.

The STL is widely expected to implicate Hezbollah members in the February 2005 assassination of late premier Rafiq Hariri despite evidence pointing to Israel 's complicity in the crime. Saad Hariri's Western-backed ruling March 14 coalition backs the tribunal while the opposition March 8 coalition has called for its boycott.

Hopes have been riding on a Saudi-Syrian, or "S-S" initiative that would effectively mediate between the rival camps on how best to handle the STL's imminent verdict. Syrian President Bashar Assad and King Abdullah, respective patrons of the March 8 and March 14 blocs, sought to broker a solution to both side's satisfaction.

Although details of the alleged initiative were not made public, speculations exists it may have entailed Hariri distancing himself from the STL decision in exchange for March 8 dropping its pursuit of charges against the "false witnesses"—those who initially fingered Syria for Hariri's murder but whose testimony against Damascus was ultimately found to have been fabricated. Some of these witnesses are thought to be Hariri confidantes.

Not long after Hariri had finished meeting with Clinton , opposition leader and Free Patriotic Movement head Michel Aoun declared Tuesday the S-S initiative was dead:

"We thank the Saudi king and the Syrian president for the efforts they have exerted,

although their initiative has ended with no results. The Hariri-led camp didn't respond to these efforts, that's why we've reached a dead end."

A statement released by the opposition said the endeavor " ... reached a dead end due to U.S. pressures and the other camp's compliance with these pressures, despite the fact that we had positively dealt with that initiative and provided it with chances of success."

Progressive Socialist Party head and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt remarked, "Saad Hariri was on the brink of making a major concession as concerns the tribunal, but occult forces prevented him from doing so." After meeting with the Maronite Patriarch on Wednesday, he said, "dark forces intervened in the ongoing Syrian-Saudi talks and sidetracked this initiative from its original course."

According to Labor Minister Muhammad Fneish, the Saudi-Syrian effort was sabotaged by "American intervention and the inability of the other side to overcome American pressure." When asked why it ultimately failed, Fneish replied, "Ask Mrs. Clinton."

The Obama administration and the U.S. State Department never wanted, nor would they have tolerated, an intra-Arab solution to Lebanon's predicament. They ensured there would be no obstacle in the way of a discredited tribunal from issuing its findings based on doctored evidence, one that would sully Hezbollah's reputation in Lebanon and throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

When it became clear the S-S initiative and whatever promise it held had been quashed, opposition members called on Hariri to urgently convene a cabinet meeting by the following day (Wednesday) to address what the government's position toward the STL would now be.

The prime minister, still in New York, refused.

Ten opposition ministers in his 30-member cabinet then proceeded to tender their resignations.

Because the "one-third-plus-one" formula mandates at least 11 resign before the cabinet can be dissolved, one more minister was needed. That came when Minister of State Adnan Sayyed Hussein—one of five ministers directly appointed by President Michel Suleiman—announced his resignation. With that, Hariri's 14-month-old government fell.

"The grace period has ended, and the waiting stage that we lived through without any result has ended," said Energy Minister Jibran Bassil.

Saad Hariri rightly wants to see those who murdered his father and 22 others that fateful February day brought to justice. It is a wish shared by all Lebanese.

But Hariri and his coalition allies could not put their political and sectarian biases aside long enough to see how badly compromised the STL had become; its subjective investigatory methods, its reliance on Israeli-infiltrated telecommunication data, its refusal to even entertain the notion that Tel Aviv could possibly be involved in the assassination despite plausible evidence procured against it (not to mention the military benefits it reaped from Rafiq Hariri's killing).

Although a compromise appeared at hand, one that would satisfy both coalitions and guarantee the nation's well-being, Hariri was unwilling to overcome U.S. pressure. He

allowed Secretary of State Clinton to veto overnight a plan that was months in the making.

What Clinton 's action did make clear is that any outside solution will always be subject to such interference. It only reinforced calls for the Lebanese to assume control of their own affairs and reach an agreement a third party cannot abrogate.

After meeting with Hariri, Clinton embarked on a tour of Persian Gulf countries, continuing the mission to promote division between Arab and Iranian, Sunni and Shia. When asked on Al-Arabiya television to comment on the situation in Lebanon , she said "stability requires justice."

Ironically, a concept she tried to subvert and one Hariri never understood.

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