

US Pressure Triggers Collapse of Lebanese Government

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Global Research, January 14, 2011

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 14 January 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Lebanon's misnamed "national unity" government fell Wednesday after the political bloc led by Hezbollah withdrew over the failure to reach an agreement on policy toward a United Nations probe into the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

Underlying the government's collapse are the growing social and political tensions in Lebanon, which have been stoked by outside intervention, most powerfully from Washington. The opening up of a new period of political turmoil in the country carries with it the threat of renewed internal sectarian strife and even war in the region.

Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, the assassinated leader's son, was in Washington consulting with President Barack Obama and the US State Department when the bloc of 10 ministers in the opposition, known as the March 8 Alliance, announced their resignation from the coalition government.

The ministers from March 8, which includes the Hezbollah Shi'ite party and militia, Amal, also a Shiite party led by speaker of the parliament Nabih Berri and the Free Patriotic Movement of the Maronite former general Michel Aoun, were soon followed by an 11th minister loyal to Lebanon's President Michel Sleiman. Under the Lebanese constitution, the withdrawal of one-third plus one of the cabinet ministers requires the formation of a new government.

The confrontation pits the Hezbollah-led opposition against the forces loyal to Hariri, the so-called March 14 coalition, composed of Sunni Muslim parties, the Druze Party of Walid Jumblatt and the Phalangist Christian groups.

The two camps were named for rival demonstrations held on March 8 and March 14, 2005, the first supporting Syria's role in the country and the second demanding an end to Syrian influence.

The immediate trigger for the government's breakup was an announcement that efforts by Syria and Saudi Arabia, which are aligned, respectively, with the March 8 Alliance and the March 14 bloc, to reach a negotiated settlement on the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) had reached a dead end.

The STL is expected to indict "rogue" members of Hezbollah in connection with the 2005 assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri. Hezbollah has denied any involvement in the killing of the billionaire former prime minister and has charged that the tribunal is acting as an instrument of Washington and Israel's intervention in Lebanon.

The Hezbollah bloc had repeatedly demanded that Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri convene a cabinet meeting to discuss a common attitude toward the Tribunal. Hezbollah called for the government to repudiate its actions, withdraw Lebanese judges from the Tribunal and cut off the Lebanese government's share of its funding,

The opposition also demanded a discussion of the so-called "false witnesses" controversy concerning fabricated testimony given to the tribunal in an effort to implicate Syria and a group of four pro-Syrian Lebanese generals in the assassination.

One of the recently released WikiLeaks cables from the US Embassy in Beirut from May 2008 quotes the STL's senior judge, Daniel Bellemare, as admitting that he "had no case" against Syria.

After first pursuing the theory of Syrian sponsorship of the killing, the Tribunal concluded the testimony of the witnesses were unsubstantiated and released the four Lebanese generals, who had been imprisoned for four years without charges. One of the generals began a legal case in Syria over his false detention, leading to the indictment of some 30 politicians, officials and journalists in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader, told the AFP news agency, "Saad Hariri was on the brink of making a major concession as concerns the tribunal, but occult forces prevented him from doing so."

While Jumblatt failed to spell out the identity of these "forces," it is apparent that the principal pressure to scuttle the Saudi-Syrian mediation of the dispute came from Washington and Paris.

This view was put forward more explicitly by Energy Minister Jibril Bassil, one of the first 10 to resign. He told Lebanon's Daily Star, "The other side bowed to external, especially American pressure, ignoring the advice and wishes of the Saudi and Syrian sides."

Similarly, State Minister for Administrative Development Mohamad Fneish said, "There was an Arab effort which we dealt with positively. We even bargained on it. However, as a result of US interference and the inability of the other side to deal with it, this effort reached a deadlock."

After hastily leaving Washington following the dissolution of his cabinet, Saad al-Hariri made a stop-off in Paris to meet with French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The Obama administration has viewed the tribunal as a means of pursuing its own interests in Lebanon, particularly that of weakening Hezbollah and striking a blow against its principal international ally, Iran.

This was made clear in a statement by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in reaction to the cabinet resignations.

"We view what happened today as a transparent effort by those forces inside Lebanon, as well as outside Lebanon, to subvert justice and undermine Lebanon's stability and progress," she told a news conference in Doha, Qatar.

"Lebanon needs now to rally behind its own interests," she continued. "The Lebanese

people need to get beyond political party. It's not political parties that would be put on trial, it's individuals."

She called Hezbollah's action an "abdication of responsibility."

The utterly hypocritical character of her remarks is apparent in the context of Washington's official attitude toward Hezbollah, which it has designated as a foreign terrorist organization because of its armed resistance to Israeli aggression in southern Lebanon.

The coalition government formed by Saad al-Hariri following the June 2009 election has been unstable from the outset, with Hezbollah exercising an effective veto.

Al-Hariri's coalition won a narrow majority in the parliament, while Hezbollah and its allies won the largest share of the popular vote. Under Lebanon's undemocratic confessional power-sharing arrangement, parliamentary seats are divided equally between Christians and Muslims, even though the former make up barely a third of the country's 4 million people. Shiites, who now make up 40 percent of the population and are the largest confessional group, have historically been the most poorly represented in government.

Now, however, the Daily Star reports that sources within the March 8 Alliance are claiming a majority in the 128-member parliament and indicate that the bloc may name its own candidate for prime minister.

Such a majority notwithstanding, Washington has repeatedly made it clear that it would view a Hezbollah-led coalition assuming power in Lebanon as a direct threat to its strategic interests in the region and would likely respond with a concerted destabilization campaign, if not outright military aggression.

It appears that the US administration is banking on Al-Hariri being able to maintain himself in power indefinitely as an acting prime minister in a "caretaker" government.

The Israeli military, meanwhile, announced that it has placed its forces on the Lebanese border on a state of high alert.

"A senior officer in Israel's northern command said commanders were following events in Lebanon very closely for any sign Hezbollah might try to heat up the already jittery northern border to deflect attention from political turmoil," the Israeli daily Haaretz reported Thursday.

Israel waged a savage 2006 war that devastated southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, leaving some 1,200 Lebanese dead and nearly 5,000 more wounded, the overwhelming majority of them civilians.

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