

A Bleak Outlook for Lebanon's March 14 Coalition



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by Editor

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The tragic assassination of Major General Wissam al-Hassan, head of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces Information Branch, and the death of innocent civilians in the Christian neighborhood of Ashrafieh in Lebanon one month ago caused significant disturbances within Lebanon's tenuous political climate. The assassination of al-Hassan has reignited deep-seated fears of another round of targeted assassination campaigns, particularly as escalating violence in neighboring Syria increases the probability of spillover into Lebanon.

Starting in February 2005 with the killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, the [terror campaign](#) claimed the lives of anti-Syrian politicians and opinion leaders in the years that followed. It did not settle until May 2008, when Lebanon's rival groups, Hizballah-led "March 8" coalition and Sunni majority "March 14" coalition, consented to a Qatari-sponsored agreement that gave Hizballah and its Christian allies veto powers over major ministerial decisions. The political entente brought a certain level of security and much-needed economic prosperity, but it soon ended with the breakdown of the Hariri government in January 2011, when Hizballah allegedly lured a handful of independent Sunni figures, along with the so-called "[weathervane](#)" Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, to deflect to a more centrist position.

Against this historical background and recent events, there is little reason to believe that March 14 will be able to decisively change Lebanon's political landscape in its favor, even if Hizballah ally Bashar al-Assad is ousted in Syria. While the security situation is certainly a major concern that is preventing many parliamentarians from freely commuting in and around the capital, several other factors are holding March 14 back.

For starters, al-Hassan was a confidante of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and a contested security chief. His efforts to uncover major leads in the previous assassinations that targeted various key political figures and opinion leaders of March 14 provided great leeway for the Internal Security Forces to flex its muscle amid an increasingly uncertain and challenging climate. This is precisely what made him a natural target and clearly influenced the prior assassination of at least one of his subordinates, Lieutenant Wissam Eid, in January 2008.

Al-Hassan's assassination suggests a serious security breach in an organization that many thought was immune to external penetration. This is especially true for many within the March 14 coalition, whose sense of insecurity has been reinforced by the fact that the once impenetrable security apparatus that they tirelessly built turned out to be vulnerable and subject to large-scale intelligence operations. Indeed, security analysts note that the al-Hassan assassination could not have been carried out, at least on the logistical level, without the commitment of a large network of professional operatives who spent weeks preparing the fieldwork to implement an increasingly demanding and sophisticated operation.

Despite various hawkish stands made by March 14 in the wake of the incident -- with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea notably going so far as to implicate Hizballah in the assassination -- the mass rally that gathered to mourn al-Hassan's death was underwhelming. More importantly, it was dominated by people flaunting black Islamic flags and flags of the Free Syrian Army, an extremely alarming development for March 14's Christian factions. Politically, the lack of proactivity from March 14 and the inability to present a clear and coherent strategy failed to provide the momentum needed for toppling the Mikati government.

As mainstream Sunnis grow frustrated by what is happening in neighboring Syria, Salafis and other Sunni extremists are gaining the [upper hand](#) by appealing to religious fervor among the poorest areas of Tripoli, Saida, and Akkar. Months ago, this posed a serious problem for the Mikati government, which relented in the face of growing Sunni protests around the country. Recently, it proved catastrophic for the citizens of Saida, who witnessed a rapid descent into chaos when a handful of Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir sympathizers were defeated after clashing with other Hizballah operatives.

According to a recent [article](#), as Sunni factions grow increasingly militant due to spillover of the Syrian crisis and Hizballah's provocations, the mainstream and more moderate Future Movement of Prime Minister Hariri appears awkward and uncertain of how to handle the changes in its environment. In fact, the Sunni-led uprising in Syria has awakened Lebanon's Salafi population, something that could impact the political calculus should Assad fall, and consequently pose serious challenges for moderate Sunni leaders like Hariri.

But March 14 and Hariri himself failed in their attempts to topple the Mikati government due to their poorly designed and incoherent communication strategy with the international community. To the chagrin of Hariri, for instance, the hope of seeing Mikati toppled was dashed by a surprising international consensus that favored maintaining the status quo, rather than opting for a premature governmental change that could lead to a costly political void.

Unsurprisingly, the Mikati government has remained firm in the face of pressure from March 14, while Hizballah continues to suppress any misstep that could trigger more street violence. The groups coordinated to limit clashes that brought angry Sunni youth against Shia locals in Beirut and Alawites in Tripoli. One week after the incident, only the pro-Syria Christian leader of the March 8 party, Michel Aoun, took the initiative to divert attention away from the assassination and toward the highly controversial election law.

By doing this, the March 8 coalition shrewdly navigated the crisis, hiding behind what seemed to be reluctance from the international community to support March 14's demands for an immediate government change despite a seemingly favorable posture with their political demands.

Amid an increasingly polarized atmosphere, and with no practical governing alternatives offered by March 14, it is likely that March 8 will continue to dominate Lebanese politics in the near future.

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