
What was Saad Hariri thinking on Syria?

Posted By [Ian Bremmer](#) ■ Thursday, September 16, 2010 - 12:05 PM



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There is no shortage of theories on why Saad Hariri has abruptly retracted his accusation that Syria was "involved" in the 2005 assassination of **his father**. Some say that Syrian or Iranian threats forced the about-face. Others say the Lebanese premier must have finally realized last week that Syria is truly innocent -- and that **someone else** is the guilty party.

Neither scenario sounds plausible. Hariri probably still believes that "Syria" was involved, but he has chosen between competing priorities that have become increasingly impossible to pursue simultaneously: the drive to find his father's killers and the need to govern Lebanon.

Several factors likely went into his decision. Hariri's anti-Syria position no longer enjoys solid international backing, and domestic problems are becoming harder to solve without removing this elephant from the room. Saudi Arabia wants to "break the Iran axis," and is courting Syria to further isolate Tehran. Important players in Lebanon's stability, the Saudis need Hariri to give Damascus some breathing room.

In addition, Saad Hariri can't govern Lebanon by himself. His anti-Syria March 14 coalition is shrinking, and his influence with other key players has waned, particularly since Druze leader Walid Jumblatt made an early exit following parliamentary elections in June 2009. Most important is the calculation involving Hizbullah, Syria's most important ally in Lebanon. Beyond easing pressure on Syria, Hariri is also undermining the ongoing work of the U.N.-backed **Special Tribunal for Lebanon**, which may well indict members of Hizbullah in the murder in the not-too-distant future. The retraction should ease some of the frictions between his government and the country's most powerful political force.

Consensus is always necessary to govern in Lebanon, but now it is becoming increasingly

impossible for Saad to even remain premier without dropping the issue of his father. Hariri may also see this as a chance to reduce the likelihood of Sunni-Shia conflict inside his country, and to move Lebanon out of its protracted political stalemate.

But there's one other issue. Look closely at what Hariri actually said. Many of his supporters are left bewildered by his reversal, but these were **his words**:

"I have opened a new page in relations with Syria since the formation of the government ... One must be realistic in this relationship and build it on solid foundations. One should also assess the past years, so as not to repeat previous mistakes. Hence, we conducted an assessment of errors committed on our behalf with Syria, and I felt for the Syrian people, and the relationship between the two countries, we must always look to the interests of both peoples, both countries and their relationship. At a certain stage, we made mistakes. We accused Syria of assassinating the martyred premier, and this was a political accusation."

He never said "Syria didn't do it," and he made no mention of Hizbullah. He's stepping away from an accusation that has made life more difficult. He's allowing himself to appear above the political fray without sacrificing his credibility completely with his anti-Syrian, anti-Hizbullah political base before the tribunal finally issues indictments against Hizbullah operatives -- which it may do soon.