**Hariri Probe May Spark Violence in Lebanon as Hezbollah Resists**

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Oct 11, 2010

Bloomberg

*http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-10-11/hezbollah-resistance-may-emerge-with-un-set-to-name-names-in-hariri-case.html*

Five years after the murder of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, his son’s government of national unity has sought to stabilize a country torn for decades by sectarian war. The search for Hariri’s killers puts that goal at risk.

A United Nations tribunal investigating the case is preparing to name names. U.S.-backed Prime Minister Saad Hariri supports the inquiry, while the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement, a key member of his coalition, says the court is biased and should be abolished amid speculation some of its members may be among those indicted.

Hezbollah and its allies are stepping up pressure on Hariri by promising to block budget funds for the UN probe. Last month, members of the Shiite group staged a show of force at Beirut’s airport in support of a former suspect in the case. The row comes just as the U.S. struggles to get Middle East peace talks under way, and threatens to derail an economy that boomed during the global financial crisis.

“We’re heading into a kind of showdown” that could be “a catalyst for violence,” said Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Middle East Center in Beirut. Hezbollah “will start with rhetoric and political pressure, like we have now, and escalation might then include civil disobedience, demonstrations, closing of roads, of the airport.”

Rafiq Hariri and 22 others were killed by a roadside bomb in Beirut in February 2005. The UN panel says it may file indictments before the end of the year.

Hezbollah and its backer Syria deny any role in the killing, which galvanized millions of Lebanese to protest and led to the ousting of Syrian troops from Lebanon after 29 years.

Syria Blamed

An initial UN inquiry charged four pro-Syrian officials in Lebanon’s security services. They were held in jail for four years before being released last year by the tribunal due to a lack of evidence, after some witnesses changed or retracted statements. That led Hezbollah to press for the detention and trial of “false witnesses,” and the group’s leader Hassan Nasrallah to accuse the tribunal of protecting them.

Hezbollah refuses to disarm its militia, saying it needs to defend the country from Israel, which invaded in 1978, 1982 and 2006. Israel and the U.S. classify Hezbollah as a terrorist group. The group fired thousands of rockets into Israel during a monthlong war in 2006.

Hezbollah also gets funds from Iran, whose President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is due in Lebanon this week. Pictures of the Iranian leader line the road from Beirut’s airport.

The year of relative calm Lebanon has enjoyed under Hariri’s coalition, which includes representatives of all the country’s main sectarian groups, isn’t typical of the recent past.

Biggest Challenge

A 15-year civil war ended in 1990. The country suffered the war between Israel and Hezbollah four years ago, and an outbreak of civil strife in May 2008 that left at least 80 people dead after Hezbollah and its allies seized control of west Beirut.

As the UN indictment nears, the Shiite group is mounting its biggest challenge to Hariri since then.

Hezbollah publicly supported Jamil al-Sayyed, a former general who was one of the four men jailed over the Hariri killing and then freed. Last month, al-Sayyed called for the overthrow of Saad Hariri’s government, then refused to comply with a court summons to answer questions about the comments.

Hezbollah sent senior officials to meet al-Sayyed at Beirut airport on Sept. 18. The former general attacked Saad Hariri and the UN tribunal in a televised press conference in the airport’s VIP lounge.

Iranian Backing

“If false witnesses aren’t held accountable under the law, we shall settle this against them on the streets,” he said, flanked by two Hezbollah bodyguards wearing black shades.

A “more stable political environment” under Saad Hariri has helped Lebanon’s economy perform “remarkably well,” the International Monetary Fund said in a report published Oct. 8. It forecast growth of 8 percent this year, from 9 percent in 2009.

Still, the country needs tighter fiscal policy to reduce debt, the IMF said. Hezbollah though is threatening to hold up the budget in parliament because it objects to an article setting aside about $42 million this year and $33 million in 2011 to help fund the UN tribunal.

“Hezbollah’s position is known,” said Ibrahim el- Moussawi, the group’s spokesman, in an interview. “We won’t approve.”

A relapse into violence “would have a devastating effect on consumer confidence, which has been a key driver of economic activity,” said Nassib Ghobril, head of research at Byblos Bank in Beirut.

‘No Choice’

Hariri’s supporters play down the risk that the conflict may escalate.

“In this country you are always worried,” Mohamad Chatah, Hariri’s chief political adviser, said in an interview. “The flip side of being worried is also to take things in your stride. The country has weathered a lot of storms.”

Hariri told Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper last month that blaming Syria for his father’s killing was a mistake. While the comments were seen by some supporters as a climbdown, Hariri “has no choice,” said Josh Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma in Norman.

“He needs Syria because the warring communities in Lebanon can’t resolve their own internal issues,” Landis said.

As Saad Hariri weighs the difficulties of governing Lebanon without the cooperation of Hezbollah and Syria against the possibility they may have helped kill his father, the family connection is also important for the tribunal’s opponents. Under Arab and Islamic moral codes, it would carry extra weight if it’s the victim’s son who exonerates suspects, Carnegie’s Salem said.

“They want the concession from Hariri because he’s the son of Hariri,” he said.

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