

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

56 /2017

December 2017

What is behind Hariri's resignation?

by Theodora Fabrikezi

Research Fellow, Middle Eastern Studies Programme, ELIAMEP, Greece
The University of Leiden, the Netherlands

On November 4th, Saad Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, read out his resignation statement in a speech broadcast in Saudi Arabia, during his visit there.

The abrupt event shocked Lebanon and allegations about Hariri being forced to do so have been repeatedly made by his government allies. At a video interview, a man is appeared holding a piece of paper for Hariri to read from. Hariri's staff claims that Saudi Arabia, a country of Sunni Monarchy made Hariri resign. Hariri, who as the PM represents his country's Sunni majority, discarded all allegations of him being forced to quit his Premiership, stated a "free man" and will return to Lebanon within days to affirm his resignation. During his speech, Hariri accused Iran and their Lebanese Shia ally, Hezbollah, for hostility in the region. Riyadh aims to dent Hezbollah and consequently Iran, forcing Hariri to use the "strife" in the region as the reason behind his resignation. He also mentioned his fear of assassination along with Lebanon's security issues as some of the reasons of his sudden act. However, the Lebanese army has not uncovered any plots of this kind. The Sunni Premiership is responsible for maintaining the balance within the country. Hariri has supported stability, which would be instantly shook in the case of confronting Hezbollah. Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, suggested that Saudi-allied Hariri might be replaced due to his inability to control "Hezbollah". The Saudis suggested his younger brother as Hariri's successor, a more easily controlled alternative. However, Hariri sources mention that from his last visit to the Kingdom a neutral Hariri-Hezbollah entente was agreed from both sides. The heated proxy situation between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the power over Lebanon escalated even more when Saudi Arabia accused the Lebanese government of "declaring war" against it.

Instability has caused fear of escalation and security issues within the country. The latest political developments have led Beirut into an emergency situation, while UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia recommended that their citizens being in Lebanon, leave the country as soon as possible. As a fact, Hariri's departure has shaken the already destabilized Lebanon. Reactions from the International community urged Hariri to return and assume the Premiership in order to avoid a meltdown in Lebanon. The French FM suggested non-interference as a primary principle, while French PM Macron invited Hariri with his family to Paris, as an act of "friendship".

It seems that Hariri has been presented with two options. He either returns to Beirut and confronts Hezbollah or leave politics once and for all, whilst going to exile in Europe. The question is which the motives behind those scenarios would be. For starters, Hariri already made his resignation clear. However, he refused to reveal more information up to his arrival to Beirut from Paris. On the top of the list would also be a meeting with the country's president, Michel Aoun, who has not yet accepted his resignation. Despite any pressure from the International Community, the chances of Hariri retrieving the Sunni Premiership are particularly low. So far, in this Proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Hariri has been motivated to confront Hezbollah. Supposing that this is not what he would choose as a PM, it might appeared less destructive to him to step down. Either way, Beirut's Democracy becomes less credible. For the past two weeks, although his supporters have been asking for their PM to come back, Hariri has undoubtedly been dealing with a loss of face. People have not been asking for Hariri as a politician. The solidarity rather regards a man who "has been

What is behind Hariri's resignation?

kept in captivity in Saudi Arabia". On the assumption that Hariri is as safe and free as he claims to be, then the question is why he has not returned to Beirut sooner. The most valid argument in this case is that if Hariri is currently dealing with threats, he has more than his Premiership to lose. Except for a respected politician, he is also a business and family man. Provided that Saudi Arabia gave Hariri two options, he could save his reputation both ways by the way he could handle it. Either not betray his beliefs regarding Hezbollah and quit or return and resume Premiership. Both ways require Hariri to stand up and face his people as the leader the country needs. He is going for a third way, this being completely vague about the situation and stepping down from a place far away from his country without having to face people's frustration. Given the circumstances, if safety issues about his life were not on the table, Hariri would have dealt with his reputation first.

Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

Vas. Sofias, 10676 Athens, Greece | Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail eliamep@eliamep.gr

ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Learn more about our work - Visit our website at www.eliamep.gr/en

Should you wish to **unsubscribe** from our mailing list please send a blank message to unsubscribe@eliamep.gr