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Political earthquake in Lebanon

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A political earthquake shook Lebanon at the weekend when prime minister Saad Al-Hariri resigned while visiting the Saudi capital Riyadh.

Although the Lebanese are used to lightning-bolt politics, especially the sudden collapse of cabinets such as when the Shia group Hizbullah passed a no-confidence vote when Al-Hariri was

meeting with US President Donald Trump in Washington, this week's resignation blindsided everyone. There was no warning, and Al-Hariri's government seemed to be doing well by Lebanese standards.

The resignation, announced on the Saudi news channel Al-Arabiya, and its timing after Al-Hariri had met with Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and State Minister for Gulf Affairs Thamer Al-Sabhan in Beirut, were factors that alarmed the Lebanese media, making many think that a new conflict could be in the offing.

Al-Hariri has been making confrontational statements against Iran and its interference in Lebanese affairs.

Last month, the news on everyone's mind came in the form of reports that Israel was preparing for war against Lebanon. Now Al-Hariri's resignation from Riyadh and the appearance of a Saudi-US intention to confront Iran's influence in the region by attacking Hizbullah have raised tensions even higher.

Al-Arabiya quoted Western sources as saying that "there was an attempt to disrupt the radio communication of Al-Hariri's motorcade in Beirut days before his resignation" made using Iranian-made equipment.

In his resignation statement from the power-sharing government with Hizbullah, Al-Hariri said that "I want to tell Iran and its associates that they will lose and hands meddling in the Arab countries will be cut off."

Al-Arabiya, which exclusively broadcast the resignation, went on to call for measures to counter Hizbullah's and Iran's influence in Lebanon. The editor of the Saudi-based Okaz newspaper called for "military confrontation" with Hizbullah, predicting "Lebanon's liberation". He urged "the Lebanese people to stand up to Hizbullah by protests similar to the demonstrations in 2005."

Lebanese politicians tried to downplay the impact of the resignation. Lebanese President Michel Aoun said he would not take any unilateral decisions without consulting Al-Hariri, who must return to his country for his resignation to be accepted.

It remains unclear, however, whether Al-Hariri will return to Beirut anytime soon. Since his resignation on Saturday, he met with King Salman bin Abdel-Aziz on Monday — refuting claims he was under house arrest — and briefly visited Abu Dhabi on Tuesday where he met Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the United Arab Emirates Mohamed bin Zayed before returning to the kingdom.

President Aoun insisted the security situation in the country was under control. At a security meeting at the Baabda Palace in Beirut to discuss the resignation, Aoun said that "if all political leaders comply with calls for calm, this will bolster security and stability and maintain national unity in Lebanon."

Minister of Interior Nehad Al-Mashnuq, who is close to Al-Hariri, commented that the "Lebanese agencies are not aware that there has been any attempt on Al-Hariri's life, but a trusted Western agency conveyed these reports directly to him."

Hizbullah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah appeared to want to de-escalate the consequences of the resignation. "Hizbullah did not wish to see the resignation, and we felt matters were

moving along reasonably. The cabinet meets and we discuss issues; we believe the government could have continued until the forthcoming parliamentary elections,” he said. However, he called the resignation a “Saudi statement” saying Riyadh had forced Al-Hariri to resign.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir told CNN that it was “nonsense” to say that Al-Hariri had been coerced to resign. “Al-Hariri, a Saudi citizen, was free to leave the country at any time.”

Saudi Minister of Gulf Affairs Thamer Al-Sabhan said on Monday that Lebanon had declared war against Saudi Arabia “due to the aggression of Hizbullah”. He added that Hizbullah militias are involved in terrorist acts that threaten the kingdom, stressing that Saudi Arabia will use all political and other means to confront the “Party of Satan”.

The question now is what will happen next in Lebanon, with all the indications being that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry with all its political, sectarian and ethnic aspects will play out on the Lebanese domestic scene. Attempts by Hizbullah to neutralise the Lebanese Future Current, including its influence among Sunnis in Lebanon, may notably no longer be possible.

The Lebanese media do not expect Al-Hariri and Hizbullah to form a government together again, and the next cabinet will either not be headed by Al-Hariri or will not include Hizbullah members.

It seems likely that no government will be formed in the near future, especially since few Sunnis in Lebanon will agree to turn away from their Arab and Sunni identity and participate in a government that ousted the Future Current from power.

The current now seems to be ending its ambiguous treatment of Hizbullah, no longer dealing with the group as a domestically defeated political player. Neither is it likely to accept Hizbullah continuing its aggressive policies towards Saudi Arabia and other Arab players.

Some have suggested that the way forward is to form a neutral government capable of holding parliamentary elections and discussing political disputes in a national dialogue. They believe this option will put the Future Current in a better position.

Sunni figures who might accept to lead a cabinet separate from Saudi Arabia’s wishes will first need to secure a parliamentary majority, which is unlikely to be possible and will compound the problem not solve it.

On the economic level, Banque du Liban (the Lebanese Central Bank) Governor Riyad Salameh said that “the Lebanese pound is stable against the US dollar,” but added that “Lebanon is experiencing a political and cabinet crisis which has raised questions about the future of the currency.”

He added that “everyone agrees that a stable exchange rate benefits Lebanon. The potential is there, thanks to pre-emptive financial engineering and actions by the Banque du Liban and existing cooperation with the banking sector, to serve the interests of Lebanon, the Lebanese people, and monetary stability.”