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The Hariri Political Dynasty after the Arab Spring

WARD VLOEBERGHES¹

Quite symbolically, in September 2011, the Rafiq Hariri DVD box on offer in downtown Beirut's Virgin Megastore came at a discounted price. Next door, the flowers at Hariri's gravesite were no longer being refreshed every couple of days; instead artificial flower arrangements had been planted. Worse, perhaps, in January 2012 Saad Hariri (Rafiq's son and political successor) broke a leg during a skiing holiday in the French Alps.

Obviously, a year after Saad Hariri's government had been ousted from power, the juvenile 'Hariri dynasty' seemed to have hit an adolescent crisis. Plagued by political rivals, financial troubles and a dangerously lingering Syrian crisis, Saad Hariri was spending most of his time between Paris and Riyadh.

During the past two decades (1992-2012), the Hariri family has continuously wielded governmental power in Lebanon, except for a short spell between December 1998 and October 2000 and an even shorter period between October 2004 and June 2005. Their conspicuous absence from power in the cabinet since early 2011, which could last until the parliamentary elections of 2013, constitutes a remarkable rupture with the past.

In order to understand this dramatic change, this article intends, first, to analyse the birth of a dynasty and, second, the reasons behind its apparent decline before, thirdly, assessing perspectives for its survival in an uncertain regional environment now dominated by the Syrian imbroglio.

Birth of a Dynasty

After the spectacular assassination of its resourceful patriarch on 14 February 2005, the Hariri family was under pressure to put forward a new leader. The relatives of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (b. 1944) settled the issue in about two months. On 20 April 2005, the family took advantage of the traditional forty days of mourning (*arba'in*) to announce that Nazek Hariri (Rafiq Hariri's widowed second spouse and mother of four of his seven children) was to oversee "all charitable and social institutions" while his son Saad was to "assume the historic responsibility and leadership of all national and political affairs".¹

Among the direct family members, Bahia Hariri (Rafiq Hariri's younger sister, b. 1952 and married to her paternal cousin Mustafa Hariri) enjoyed most political seniority. As a parliamentary representative for the family's hometown of Saida since 1992 and as the erstwhile Director of the Hariri Foundation, she had witnessed from the inside how her brother's political career unfolded. Moreover, on 28 February 2005, Bahia Hariri had delivered an emotional speech in Parliament which had contributed to Omar Karami's resignation as Prime Minister that same day. Following this intervention, her popularity had risen and several observers may have seen in her a potential first female Arab Prime Minister – although she herself soon contradicted such rumours. Though Bahia Hariri's absence from the political scene following Saad's designation was heavily debated, she has continued to be a major force in the family stronghold of Saida. She served as Minister of Education between July 2008 and November 2009.

For his part, as Hariri's eldest son, Bahaa ad-Din (b. 1967) was the natural heir to his father's political authority. Contrary to his younger brother Saad ad-Din (b. 1970), Bahaa appeared as a strong and flamboyant personality. In the days following his father's death, it was Bahaa – not Saad - who was presented as the main broker of the family's interests. It was Bahaa who travelled to Riyadh in early

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April 2005 to receive the King Faysal Prize in the name of the Hariri Foundation. Yet, Bahaa did not go on to represent the family politically.

Theories positing that Saad manoeuvred himself into the post enjoy only marginal credibility. Several more tangible factors catalysed his political career. On the national level, Walid Jumblatt, an important ally of Hariri at the time, was so close to the family that he had helped organise the protocol for the ceremonies at Qoraytem (Hariri's palatial residence in Beirut) following Hariri's assassination. A mutual understanding between Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt seems to have developed in these days. The Druze leader may also have sensed that compared to his older brother, Saad was more assertive and determined towards the Syrian regime – then the intuitive culprit of Hariri's assassination.

Besides, Bahaa preferred to concentrate on his business activities. Subsequent redistributions of shares allowed Bahaa to quit Saudi Oger, the family's holding in Saudi Arabia, and concentrate on the administration of his own investments (in Middle Eastern real-estate and logistics sectors) out of his family residence in Geneva.

At the local level, in Beirut, Nazek Hariri held considerable sway over family affairs; it was only natural for her to play a certain role in the succession. Some observers have read in Nazek's position one of susceptibility regarding her sister-in-law's political ambitions but one should not forget that Bahia Hariri had ruled herself out early on. Moreover, it should be noted that Bahia Hariri's oldest son, Nader (b. 1969), has been Chief of Staff in Saad Hariri's office since 2005 while her second son, Ahmad (b. 1982), has been assuming several leadership positions within the Future Current (*tayyar al-mustaqbal*), the political party founded by Rafiq Hariri.

Therefore, although up until today it is Bahia's sons, rather than Nazek's sons (Ayman and Fahd) who have integrated the Hariri political machinery, the configuration of the succession appears as a carefully negotiated compromise rather than the outcome of a power struggle between a dominant and a lesser branch of the family. Besides, this arrangement with Saad in charge and Nader as his main counsellor complies with the Lebanese tradition of masculine (political) succession which is yet another reason why the candidacy of Bahia Hariri was always a delicate matter, especially in the eyes of conservative (Sunni) constituents. On that account, Crown Prince Abdullah (who became King in August 2005) and Prince Saud Al Faysal in Saudi Arabia as well as French President Jacques Chirac in Paris all had their say on the succession issue.

As the second son of Rafiq Hariri and Nida Boustani (Hariri's elusive first wife)ⁱⁱ Saad ad-Din Hariri was born in Saudi Arabia on 18 April 1970. When he grew up between Riyadh and Saida, surrounded by his grandparents and aunt Bahia while his father worked abroad, he is said to have rapidly developed a warm relationship with Nazek, whom Saad –unlike his brother Bahaa- refers to as his mother. As a matter of fact, it was Saad who flanked Nazek when Chirac and his wife had appeared at Hariri's grave on the day of his funeral.

Following his graduation (in 1992) with a Business Administration degree from Georgetown University, Saad Hariri's connection with Saudi Arabia was further developed after he settled in Riyadh in 1996 to look after the family businesses. In addition to his connections with the Saudi business and political establishment, the interventions of Crown Prince Abdullah may have reflected the monarch's preference for Saad's affable personality over Bahaa's occasional tempers.

The Rise and Fall of Saad Hariri

Soon, Saad Hariri was being sworn in as the seventy-first Prime Minister of Lebanon. Having led his alliance to electoral success during two subsequent legislative elections (2005 and 2009) and having overcome obstructionist bickering by his eventual coalition partners, Saad Hariri was officially installed on 9 November 2009 at the helm of a heteroclite, 30-member government. In effect, he

switched jobs with his predecessor, Fouad Siniora (2005-2009), who has since presided over the Future Current.

In other words, the Hariri dynasty had now come full circle: Saad Hariri, the son who had started by consolidating his father's business empire had also come to assume the highest possible office available to a Sunni Muslim in Lebanon. As with the succession issue, concurring national and international factors determined Saad's premiership. Though he may not have been gifted with his father's knack for glamour and politics, since he inherited his family's influence and patronage Saad Hariri has gained assertiveness before large audiences in public.

At the national level, Saad Hariri worked hard to gain legitimacy at home: he gradually developed a demeanour and a territory of his own in Lebanese politics. His strategically located residence in downtown Beirut metaphorically called 'bayt al-wassat' or Center House symbolises his claim to act as the capital's main Sunni representative. Moreover, thanks to the longstanding loyalty of Fouad Siniora the potentially threatening shadow of a former prime minister has been efficiently transformed into a senior politician's pledge of allegiance to Saad Hariri and his policies.

On the international stage, arguably Saad Hariri's single most significant decision was his official visit to Damascus in late December 2009. Brokered by Saudi Arabia and facilitated by his own marriage into a prestigious Syrian family (through Lara al-'Azm, with whom he has three children), Saad Hariri conducted a two-day visit to President Bashar al-Assad, indicating a willingness to act as a statesman by putting political imperatives before personal considerations.

While this conciliatory attitude bolstered Saad Hariri's international standing, his frequent travels abroad (for talks, but also as a security measure) and the picturesque encounters with world leaders did not necessarily improve his credentials at home in Beirut, since his detractors accused him of abandoning his Lebanese constituents amidst difficulty. Nevertheless, during his tenure, Saad Hariri systematically expanded his control over a network of interrelated institutions and influential individuals.

This network of close advisors and distant clients can be called the Hariri conglomerate, an essential feature of the Hariri political dynasty since both father and son have relied upon this pattern to generate leverage and resources allowing them to control vast patches of the Lebanese economy and to entertain a considerable number of supporters motivated by spoils. This conglomerate consists of concentric circles composed of administrative bodies as well as counsellors who accompany the prime minister on every outing, thus acting as a shadow cabinet.

Just as Rafiq Hariri counted on a host of advisors such as Nouhad Mashnouq, Ghassan Tahir, Fuad Saniora, Bassem Sabah, Basil Fleihan or Fadl Chalak and on business interests in media (al-Mustaqbal Group), real estate (Solidere), finance (Banque de la Méditerranée) and telecommunications (Ogero) as well as on selected public administrations (Council for Development and Reconstruction, Finance Ministry), so his son-and-successor too strategically positioned his armada of aides and intermediaries. Key figures surrounding Saad Hariri included Hani Hammoud (media advisor), Mohammad Shatah (political advisor), Mazen Hanna (economic advisor), Muhammad Sammak (religious affairs advisor), Fadi Fawaz (development advisor), Amal Mudallali (US affairs advisor) as well as MPs Ghazi Youssef and Ghattas Khoury. On the business level, key figures included Mohammed Hariri (administrator in banking, construction and telecommunications companies) and Ali Kholaghassi (in charge of several real estate investments in Jordan). The inner core of this conglomerate during Saad Hariri's premiership, however, was composed of Nader Hariri, Mohammad Shatah, Hani Hammoud and Saad Hariri himself.

In business, Saad Hariri further developed al-Mustaqbal media group (Future News was launched in December 2007), he rationalised banking activities in Lebanon and the Gulf and in January 2008, Saad Hariri bought his brother Bahaa's stake in Saudi Oger to own 50% of the company. As for his

lieutenants in public administration, they were to be found in several departments, not least the intelligence units of the Internal Security Forces (ISF).

Such a pervasive reach was sure to cause irritation. As soon as it had been put in place, resistance against Saad Hariri's government materialised. On one hand, opposition was inherited by the profound cleavage between 8 and 14 March coalitions that has marked the Lebanese political scene since 2005. On the other hand, Saad Hariri's proceedings largely imitated those of his father, including some of the conglomerate's members. As a result, in January 2011, governmental support to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigating his father's assassination pushed Hizballah to overthrow Hariri's cabinet by promoting Najib Miqati as the new Prime Minister. With his colossal fortune and a regional power base (in Tripoli), this Sunni politician resembles – and challenges – Hariri in several ways.

Practices of Transition

In considering the future of the emerging Hariri dynasty, attention must be paid to the triptych that really matters in Lebanon, namely the conjunction of religious, economic and political circumstances. On the religious level, a fierce battle for the backing of the Sunni authorities has erupted between Hariri and Miqati. The Mufti of the Republic, Shaykh Qabbani, who owed his elevation to Rafiq Hariri, had been allied to the Hariri family for the past two decades. In February 2011, shortly after Miqati's nomination, the Mufti staged a reconciliation meeting between both political rivals at the Dar al-Fatwa premises. However, in the second half of 2011, Qabbani increasingly paid lipservice to Miqati and his government. In September 2011, Qabbani's visit to the Lebanese south (seen as a bulwark of Hizballah) infuriated Sunni supporters of Hariri. Subsequently, in February 2012, Qabbani called for the restructuring of Sunni administrative bodies in a bid to widen his autonomy. The backdrop to this triangular tug of war, in which the Mufti offers his support to the highest bidder, is a historic quest for recognition among Lebanon's Sunnis in which the Mufti has long been involved himself.

On the economic front, the survival of the Hariri dynasty depends on its capability to continue to dole out jobs and stipends to its clients. However, tenacious rumours of unpaid salaries and other financial woes of the Hariri conglomerate have proliferated ever since Saad Hariri was forced out of office. In fact, Nadim Munla was sacked as the CEO of Future News (which has since merged with Mustaqbal TV) and, later, Saad Hariri was reportedly forced to sell parts of Oger Telecom to Saudi Telecom. Earlier on, he had already sold his shares in insurance outfits (MedGulf) to an emirates-based group, only to retain non-Lebanese shares – such as Saraya Holdings in Jordan or Tihama Power in Saudi Arabia – in addition to a participation in MedBank. During a communication effort launched via Twitter in late 2011, Saad Hariri acknowledged this economic hardship but asserted that the problems had been resolved.

Finally, the emerging Hariri dynasty faces serious political challenges. At the national level, the new Miqati-led government has targeted the Hariri conglomerate on key positions (Communications Ministry, Beirut Municipality, Solidere portfolio). In the face of these setbacks, the Mustaqbal clientelist practices have not only decreased financially, they also lacked a nationally appealing programme by nurturing confessional fissures. Moreover, in his chats on social media, Saad Hariri has stepped up criticism against Hizballah, pointing out Sayyed Nasrallah's inconsistency in praising revolts in certain Arab countries but remaining silent on Syria.

This brings us to the challenges on the international level, where three issues are key for the Hariri dynasty's political survival in Lebanon. First, there is Saad Hariri's relationship with Saudi Arabia. Not only did Hariri irk royal sponsors by running into financial trouble in spite of their generosity. There has also been irritation between Saad Hariri and influential personalities, such as Muhammad bin Nayef, son of Interior Minister Prince Nayef who, after the death of his brother Sultan in November 2011, was named Crown Prince.ⁱⁱⁱ Although Hariri downplayed this animosity and swiftly met with the newly appointed Crown Prince, Riyadh did not receive Saad Hariri between January

2011 and the celebrations of Eid al-Fitr in late August 2011, a clear sign of disenchantment. This turbulence has been overcome, however, because of broader geopolitical imperatives.

The second key issue, pending as a sword of Damocles above the heads of all Lebanese and, indeed, of their regional allies, is the outcome of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). Given the sensitivity of its everlasting proceedings (in late February 2012, the UN extended the STL's mandate for another three years) and the indictment of Hizballah militants, this question is inextricably tied up to a third determining factor, namely the power struggle in Syria.

Crisis in Syria and Perspectives for the Future

The multiple effects of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon include economic deterioration, internal dissent among Miqati's government members but also the arrival of more than 26000 registered refugees in Lebanon (mostly in the Akkar and Bekaa regions), thereby exhibiting a governance dilemma within a cabinet unable to provide humanitarian assistance because of the demographic (and hence political) sensitivity of a third wave of regional refugees – after the Palestinians since 1948 and the Iraqis since 2003. As in other fields, this executive void has fostered Lebanese ties of confessional and family solidarity, thus reinforcing these networks as the citizen's main administrative representative within the Lebanese state.

Meanwhile, among others, Saad Hariri as well as Walid Jumblatt have been voicing overt support for Syrian opposition forces. In the build-up to the annual commemoration ceremony for Hariri's assassination, the Future Movement also published a policy paper presenting the Beirut Spring of 2005 as having fathered the Arab Spring of 2011.

Some elements within the pro-Western, Hariri-led 14 March coalition seem to believe that once the Assad regime collapses the whole (geo)political project underpinning the pro-Syrian, Hizballah-led 8 March camp will inevitably implode. However, the likelihood of such an evolution and, a fortiori, the political gains of this stance, especially on the long term, remain to be seen.

Indeed one should not forget that rhetoric of resistance against Israel is popular in Syria; both Nasrallah's rise in popularity throughout the (predominantly Sunni) Arab world after July 2006 and the Baath leadership's tradition of opportunistic solidarity with the Palestinians illustrate this. It is not because the Assad dynasty is brought down that the resistance project will die out as a corollary.

This helps to explain why Hizballah –betting as it is on the survival of the Syrian regime- is counting on the support of Alawite and Christian communities (because of its Shia identity and because of its alliance with Aoun respectively) and has on its mind not to alienate the Sunni nor the Druze community in Syria too much.

It also indicates that, in a post-Assad Syria, any automatic gains for Hariri's side are improbable: even among Bashar's opponents –some of whom are more attracted by moneyed Gulf monarchies- the 14 March coalition has long been perceived as an imperialist force. In short, the ties recently forged between 14 March and members of the Syrian opposition may not resist long to a new Syrian political reality on the ground.^{iv}

Further implications for Lebanon should therefore be sketched out on two hypothetical scenarios. The first, best-case scenario would be one which sees Bashar al-Assad leave power. His elimination or exile could then allow for negotiations including all forces in Syrian society and lead to the establishment of a consensus government oriented towards reconciliation and economic recovery. Just how realistic such a turn of events is, is another matter.

A second scenario could be that, although many believe it is a question of time before Bashar al-Assad goes, the regime manages to stay on far longer than is commonly assumed. This could either lead to a shaky restoration of Baathist control or to a protracted civil war (the worst-case scenario for all local

and regional parties, including Israel). In both cases, the implications for Lebanon are potentially catastrophic.

Examples such as the kidnapping of Lebanese Shi'a pilgrims near Aleppo or the self-styled 'Rafiq Hariri Brigades' fighting the Syrian army in Idlib suggest just how easily the Lebanese could be dragged into a Syrian quagmire. Though insurgents and weapons also sneak in from Turkey, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, Lebanese actors may find it hard to restrain hotheads keen on putting their combat skills to test.

For now, two factors have prevented contamination that would set Lebanon aflame. First, the Syrian people have attempted to resist the Syrian regime's divide-and-rule tactics. Their numerous links to Lebanon via business and family histories have made them well aware (more than the Iraqis were) of the potential dangers of confessional radicalism. Because of Nasrallah's support for the Assad regime, opposition forces within Syria despise Hizballah and have referred to the Party of God as Hizb al-Lat (an insult referring to a pre-Islamic goddess) in a grim hint of what could be a Syrian society marked by sectarian hatred.^v

A second factor has been the Lebanese security apparatus' determination to quell any unrest. The increasing reliance of politicians on military know-how and their tendency to consult with generals such as M. Sleiman (Lebanese President), J. Qahwaji (Army Commander-in-Chief) or A. Rifi (General Director of ISF) is a telling dynamic in itself. Although this phenomenon has deeper historic roots and is not only related to the turmoil that erupted in Syria since March 2011, it has been among the more significant shifts in Lebanon since 2005.

While the army is above all interested in preserving the security and stability, this dynamic has put the interests of the army led-state before public interests, thus encroaching on public space and public properties. Ironically, this gradual militarisation of Lebanese politics may be among the more visible consequences Lebanon has come to experience since the wave of regional change.

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ⁱ Statement by the Hariri Family on 20 April 2005, retrieved from <http://www.hariri2005.com> on 2 November 2011. See also: The Daily Star, 21 April 2005.

ⁱⁱ In 1965, Rafiq Hariri married Nida Boustani, who is of Iraqi origin. The pair had met at the Arab University of Beirut and went on to have three sons together: Bahaa, Saad and Houssam, who died in a car accident in the USA in 1993. The couple divorced and in 1976, Hariri married Nazek Audi, who has Palestinian roots.

ⁱⁱⁱ Prince Nayef died on 16 June 2012. His brother, Prince Salman, was named Crown Prince two days later.

^{iv} In fact, the official participation of Syrian National Council members at the annual commemoration proved divisive even among the 14 March coalition partners. See: *al-Akhhbar*, 13 February 2012; see also P. Seale, "Asad Family Values" in *Foreign Affairs*, 20 March 2012 and Joshua Landis, "Why the Asad Regime Is Likely to Survive to 2013", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Spring 2012).

^v I thank Thomas Pierret for comments on this issue. For more details, refer to his "Syrie: l'islam dans la revolution" in *Politique étrangère*, Nr. 4, 2011, p. 879-891.