CHAPTER 2

Rafiq Hariri as a Political Actor: Legacy

Because Rafiq Hariri was such a massive figure in Lebanese politics during his lifetime, his disappearance was equally influential. His assassination created a power vacuum that Sunni Lebanese have struggled to fill ever since. This did not prevent Hariri’s heirs and allies to keep his political agenda very much alive and reinvent it according to the circumstances of the day. This chapter explores some of the defining moments and structuring features that shaped Hariri’s political legacy. It is precisely through the competing uses of Hariri’s legacy, as employed by both his supporters and detractors, that we can gauge the power of Hariri as a political actor, up until today.

2.1 From Victim to Martyr (2004–2005)

Bonne seemed prescient when he predicted, in 1995, that Hariri would be prime minister only as long as it pleased his Syrian patrons. With the crisis of confidence ever more blatant, after his resignation Hariri prepared himself once again for a period on the opposition benches.

Omar Karami had been designated to form a new cabinet, meanwhile, but his team would rarely be more than a lame duck government because of internal manoeuvring and international pressures. Castigated as pro-Syrian, Karami attracted the ire of many Lebanese media – not least those loyal to Hariri. Simultaneously, the Elysée became instrumental in sidelining Lahoud. Months later, a good deal of the international community was indeed completely ignoring the Lebanese president.

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1 Bonne, Vie publique, patronage et clientèle, p. 99 II [RH] ne sera en tous cas, vraisemblablement, premier ministre que le temps qu’il plaira au tuteur syrien. Bonne also ascertains that Hariri’s big example in Lebanese politics was Riad as-Solh (1894–1951). On this figure, see Patrick Seale, The Struggle for Arab Independence. Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East, Cambridge University Press, 2010.
2 It appears that Hariri had ruled out the possibility for himself to return to power as long as Lahoud remained president. See: Charbel, Assassinating me is improbable.
3 See e.g. “Annan au Liban pour assurer la paix” in Libération of 28 August 2006 reporting on a visit to Beirut by UN SG Kofi Annan. The text says that Annan is to meet “l’ensemble des dirigeants libanais.” It is interesting to note how the journalist goes on to name the leaders one by one (“le Premier ministre Fouad Siniora, le président du parlement Nabih Berry et les différents membres du gouvernement”) while Emile Lahoud – still the head of state – is strikingly absent.
New lines of political fractures started to appear and opposition groups were vaguely divided between hardliners who asked for an application of Resolution 1559 and others who opted for the strict implementation of Ta’if. Driven by political calculations or genuinely infuriated by the perceived arrogance from Lahoud and Damascus, a large opposition movement, known as the Bristol Gathering was born in December 2004.

Based on a Christian-Druze alliance of supporters of Jumblatt’s Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) with the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, the movement also included supporters of Michel Aoun and followers of Samir Geagea. In coordination with Hariri, two of his closest allies, Ghattas Khoury and Basil Fleihan, had attended Bristol meetings before Hariri decided, after a turbulent meeting with General Rustom Ghazaleh on 9 January 2005, to openly join the opposition.

With parliamentary elections scheduled for the first half of 2005, Hariri continued to talk to all parties. Even after he had rejected the deal offered by Ghazaleh, Hariri did not blow up all bridges between himself and Damascus. During what was to be his last meeting with the Secretary-General of Hizbullah, on Friday 11 February 2005, Hariri accepted Nasrallah’s offer to try to broker a secret meeting between Hariri and the Syrian president.4

Such was the context in which Lebanon prepared to celebrate Valentine Day 2005. However, what Nazek Hariri had feared ever since her husband had decided to enter politics, occurred that fateful Monday: Hariri fell victim to the history he had helped to write.

**14 February 2005**

On the morning of 14 February 2005 Hariri was up early. He was reportedly well tempered that morning when he took his breakfast on the seventh floor of his private residence in Qoraytem – alone, since his wife was in Paris. At about the time Hariri was having his breakfast of labneh, tomatoes and cucumbers, Blanford writes,

Amer Shehadi was told he would be driving the lead vehicle when Hariri departed Qoraytem later in the morning. As usual, Shehadi would not

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4 See: Blanford, Killing Mr. Lebanon, p. 125. During a visit to Washington in April 2015, Saad Hariri claimed that, just before his mysterious death on 24 April, Rustom Ghazaleh had asked to make an important public statement on Future TV. See: “Hariri: Late Syrian security chief tried to speak out”, Al-Monitor.com, 27 April 2015.