

Najib Mikati's Resignation: A self-sacrifice that has little to do with altruism...

On March 22, Lebanon's inauspicious Prime Minister Najib Mikati dramatically announced his resignation when—among other issues—the country's council of ministers failed to address the approaching end of Internal Security Forces (ISF) Chief General Ashraf Rifi's term. "Today, I announce my resignation, [which] may [be]... an impetus for the political blocs to handle their responsibilities and meet each other halfway to pull Lebanon out of this ordeal."¹ He later informed *an-Nahar* newspaper "For me...a shock [was needed] that [might] break the [political] deadlock in the hope of reshuffling the deck and pushing toward a new arrangement for the situation."² In truth, Mikati has tried repeatedly during his tenure to invoke this particular brand of "martyrdom," to *sacrifice* himself symbolically in order to mediate the country's opposing forces effectively. In analyzing the situation, a story in *Foreign Affairs* concluded that Mikati:

...accepted the challenge, perhaps naively believing that he could do something that no politician has been able to do since former prime minister Rafiq Hariri was killed on February 14, 2005: bring stability and normalcy to a country seemingly always on the verge of sectarian strife. In the end, though, he could not.³

The prime minister's announcement followed a series of deadly clashes that erupted Thursday in his—and Rifi's—hometown of Tripoli. Understandably, these skirmishes only increased tensions in a city struggling with rampant discord, as gunfire could still be heard on the eve of his resignation and the army deployed to the area in force.⁴ But that violence may not seem coincidental given the city's predisposition to conflict. The timing of this flare-up is somewhat questionable,

particularly given the widespread rumors about Mikati's funding of some armed groups within the city.⁵ Unsurprisingly, Mikati supporters "burnt tires and blocked roads in Tripoli on Friday when he announced he would step down."⁶

Under the circumstances, however, it appears that PM Mikati's act of self-sacrifice had little to do with altruism. Instead, it was merely an attempt to grab the spotlight. His resignation came as no surprise to anyone, as calls for his ouster have echoed throughout the country since he was appointed in 2009. Still:

...skeptics and acquaintances pointed to prior episodes that had demonstrated the prime minister was a first-class maneuverer, possessing an extraordinary ability to absorb

Najib Mikati by Najib Mikati



According to his official website, Najib A. Mikati "began his political career in 1998 as Minister of Public Works and Transport. He remained at that post until 2004 after having served with three consecutive cabinets. In 2000, he was elected for the first time as a Member of Parliament representing Tripoli. In 2005, he became Prime Minister of Lebanon, during which time he steered

the country towards what were seen as pivotal democratic elections. He was reelected as an MP from Tripoli in 2009, which gave him another four-year mandate. In addition to his political aspirations, Mikati is a successful businessman, having been "the co-founder of M1 Group, a family owned holding with interests in various sectors such as telecom, real estate, aircraft financing, fashion and energy." He is also "active in various think tanks and international organizations," such as the Dean's International Council at the Harris School of Public Policy within the University of Chicago and the International Advisory Council of the International Crisis Group.

political shocks and convulsions while still retaining remarkably calm nerves.⁷

Moreover, the PM threatened to resign on two previous occasions “...the first time in 2011 over funding the [UN Special] tribunal, and the second time came after the assassination of Wissam al-Hassan, the former head of the Lebanese intelligence.”⁸ Notably, Hassan was head of the ISF’s intelligence office, commonly known as the “Information Office” (*Far’ al-Maaloomat*).

Even before Mikati made the announcement, rumors began to circulate regarding his intent to resort to measures that would clearly underscore his discontent with the overall situation in the ministry, as well as the withering political pressures he was attempting to manage. It appears, however, as if the PM was unsure of what his final decision would be. Other rumors suggest that prior to issuing his statement, Mikati phoned a Hezbollah official to ask that Sayyed Nasrallah be informed of his intent to resign. The response he supposedly received a few minutes later was something akin to “Please do whatever suits you!”⁹

The timing of Mikati’s resignation makes one wonder why the Ashraf Rifi issue has taken center stage in the Lebanese crisis. Many observers have noted that the assassination of Wissam al-Hassan last October should have been a more logical catalyst for the PM’s resignation. But the net effect of the refusal to renew Rifi’s mandate despite an atmosphere of political and security uncertainty is tantamount to the burial of this once vital security apparatus, one that has been adrift since the bloody elimination of its head, al-Hassan. This means the last vestiges of March 14’s intelligence community have been expunged, which leaves all of Lebanon’s remaining intelligence organizations under the direction of the March 8 Alliance. Of even more profound importance, Ashraf Rifi was considered the last, best assurance of Sunni and March 14 security in the country. With Rifi having been sidelined and his original benefactor (Mikati) departing the national stage, yet another crater has been dug in Lebanon’s already scarred Sunni political landscape.

The roots of Najib Mikati’s tenure as Lebanon’s prime minister can be traced to the political crisis of 2005. Following the February 14 assassination

of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, known affectionately as “Mr. Lebanon,” the government began a downward spiral. The serving prime minister at the time, PM Omar Karami resigned after less than six months in office, an act that facilitated Mikati’s appointment to head a government tasked only with holding elections for a new National Assembly. Only three months after he took power—when the elections confirmed that the March 14 Alliance had secured a majority position in the National Assembly—Mikati handed the position to Fouad Siniora. Siniora’s term came to a halt in 2008 after political tensions led Hezbollah forces to invade West Beirut, a situation that ended with the implementation of the Doha Agreement. Much to the dismay of the Hezbollah-backed March 8 Alliance, Saad Hariri succeeded Siniora in 2009 despite the fact that the incumbent needed two successive nominations and a full six months to form a fragile “national unity” government. Among other issues, that delay can be attributed to March 8’s increasing criticism of the government’s support for the United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which was conceived to investigate the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (Saad Hariri’s father). In response to the STL’s indictment of four Hezbollah members for the assassination, the organization reasserted its vehement denial of any association whatsoever with the crime. It then staged a constitutional “coup” by pushing its ministers and those of its allies to desert their posts, thus causing the government to collapse. Notably, Saad Hariri was busy meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama when the ministers submitted their resignations, after which the cabinets he headed collapsed as well.

Since most of Lebanon’s Sunni leaders were aligned with the Hariri-led March 14 Alliance at the time of the collapse, March 8 began an intense search for a Sunni leader who could serve adequately as prime minister and exude a positive image within the international community, but who could also be manipulated. Najib Mikati emerged as the best bet, especially since he had already established himself as a seemingly “moderate” Sunni leader—a *mantra* he adopted in his focus on “consensus,” “dialogue” and “compromise.”¹⁰ He even enjoyed an amicable relationship with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—one of Hezbollah’s linchpin

The Crescent of Sunni Martyrdom



The explosion of Sunni identity in Lebanon is far more subversive and complex than it may appear. That strife is evident in the violent and bloody conflicts between Alawi and Sunni in Tripoli or the Shia and Sunni in Beirut and Saida, or even where the jihad missions in Syria are concerned, in which some Islamist Lebanese and Palestinian refugees participate. The above picture, which was taken Monday 25 February 2013 in the Zahiriyeh quarter of Tripoli, (the hometown of Najib Mikati), speaks volumes. The two individuals pictured in the center are fighters from that same quarter who were killed during one of the rounds of sectarian violence. Flanking them on the right is Rafik Hariri and on the left, Saddam Hussein!

allies, but an enemy to many of the country's March 14 partners. In fact, Mikati achieved victory in the 2009 elections by appearing on a March 14 party list. Yet after accepting the post, Mikati quickly morphed into a Sunni quisling when he oversaw a power play that handed the parliamentary majority to March 8.¹¹

The simple fact that Mikati accepted the post placed him at odds with March 14. But despite being seen as Hezbollah's lackey during his tenure as prime minister, Mikati attempted to mediate the issues that separate the country's opposing forces. Of course, this may be due to his self-proclaimed belief "in remaining equidistant from every issue," and that it is "the responsibility of the true Lebanese [sic] to be forever present to speak [...] the truth."¹² In reality, he backed each side alternately when such action was deemed appropriate. A notable example was Mikati's funding of Lebanon's share of the STL assessment in November 2011 after

months of political deadlock on the subject, an achievement he accomplished through nimble political and administrative chicanery.¹³ These actions conflict with the perception that Mikati was the political equivalent of a "Good Samaritan" who sought to bridge the national divide. In reality, he hoped to please both sides by posing as a magician who could preserve Lebanon's fragile balance of power.

Mikati's political rise, longevity and very recent withdrawal can largely be attributed to a combination of domestic and regional factors, including his role in the government following Hariri's assassination, the precipitous decline of the Hariri/March 14 establishment and the ongoing Syrian crisis. Sunni political power has continued to decline precipitously after the collapse of the Hariri establishment—Mikati's original ticket to power. Today, however, Mikati is seen as Lebanon's most prominent Sunni leader despite the

The Two Legitimacies of N. Mikati



Najib Mikati acquired his legitimacy from two primary sources: his family history and the institutionalization of his persona. According to his official website:

“The Mikati family is a Sunni Lebanese family from Tripoli. The Mikati’s have been involved in judicial positions during the Ottoman era (1290 A.D) and were known to be the keepers of Prophet Muhammad’s holy treasure. The word “Mikati” derived from the Arabic word “Miqa’at” or the time keeper. During the Ottoman Empire, the Mikati family was in charge of the Azan (Islamic call to prayer).”

Mikati’s historical legacy reflects a sense of Islamic legitimacy, which is a prerequisite to establishing oneself as a viable leader within the Sunni community.

Mikati’s familial legitimacy—regardless of its veracity—is augmented by yet another source, his numerous institutions. As noted in the “Focus Areas” section of his website, Mikati plays a leading role in at least six ideological, developmental and educational institutions that have utility in expanding his political influence. (1) The Middle East Prospects Forum, “a private, non-profit, and independent institution devoted to policy research related to Lebanon and the Middle East.” (2) Al-Wasatia, an organization that aims to support “moderation between people, institutions and civil society organizations in the areas of education, culture, society, and economics...” (3) The Azm & Saade (Will & Happiness) Association, which offers charitable assistance and development for “society, health and food, [and] education and culture. (4) Shabab al-Azm, a youth-focused developmental organization. (5) The Azm Cultural Center, a cultural space located in al-Mina, north Lebanon. (6) The Azm Educational Campus, an educational institution in Tripoli. Interestingly, the last three institutions mentioned play on the word Azm, which reflects both Najib Mikati’s father’s name (thus implying the family’s genealogical heritage) and the Arabic word for “determination” or “firm will” (which connotes a strong Quranic reference).

fact that he is astonishingly unpopular among his sectarian constituents. Essentially, the single most important factor in Mikati’s decision was that he could not continue to head a Hezbollah “inspired” government and maintain any hope of enjoying a political future, particularly since Lebanon’s official “disassociation” policy vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis has provoked the ire of the Gulf Sunni states. But historically, Lebanon has not been kind to leaders who have acted contrary to the interests of their community. The 1958 crisis doomed the political career of seven-time Prime Minister Sami el-Solh after he backed pro-Western President Camille Chamoun and opened the country to foreign military intervention.¹⁴ A similar demise befell Shafiq al-Wazzan in the 1980s when he agreed to serve as prime minister under another pro-Western leader, President Amine Gemayel. In the end, there is very little mystery behind Mikati’s resignation: his tenure was marked by numerous theatrical instances of self-abnegation, largely because as PM he had essentially been taken hostage by those who secured his appointment.¹⁵

For the future, the billionaire businessman still has plenty to fall back on in his post-PM life. Thanks to the investment holdings of the MI Group (valued at

\$5.5 billion in 2006) he founded with his brother, *Arabian Business* magazine recently ranked Mikati as 167th among its list of the 500 most powerful Arabs.^{16,17} Similarly, *Forbes* magazine listed Mikati as 384th among the world’s billionaires and first in Lebanon, with an estimated net worth of \$3.5 billion.^{18,19} Clearly, the former prime minister will have little problem returning to the world of business as he rebuilds his reputation among national and regional Sunnis. It almost goes without saying that in Lebanon, under the right conditions and aided by an effective strategy, even criminals and traitors can make political comebacks.

In sum, the circumstances surrounding Mikati’s resignation are vastly different from those at his inauguration. Rather than being a grand event, his exit will be viewed as little more than another speed bump along Lebanon’s long, winding road of ministerial crises. Here, the general Lebanese attitude will prevail: politicians come and go. Practically, this means Hezbollah will continue its rule of the country without having to bear the “moral responsibility” that should rightly accompany such power. It also means that Hezbollah and its Christian allies may emerge as winners in the upcoming elections—whenever

they are held—as the March 14 community is still struggling to identify a leader capable of seizing the reins and combatting effectively Hezbollah’s political dominance. Although the role being played by Hezbollah in Syria has sparked some criticism among the organization’s constituents, the remnants of March 14 are scattered and without direction. As a result, the road to electoral success in Lebanon will indeed be bumpy.

Moreover, it is patently obvious that the country’s Sunni leaders are finding that the task of filling the position of prime minister is becoming an increasingly disquieting proposition. Mikati’s resignation can be seen as yet another failure in a string of losses, which includes the termination of political careers and assassinations of the leaders

themselves. Indeed, in the 24 years since the war ended, Lebanon has experienced ten prime ministerial terms, none of which was without controversy. For instance, Mikati’s predecessor, Saad Hariri was literally ousted from power and now lives in self-imposed exile. PM Fouad Siniora was accused of all manner of sins, including conspiring with Israel against the “resistance.” PM Omar Karami was tagged as having served as a mute witness to the assassination of the late former MP Rafik Hariri. Finally, Rafik Hariri met his untimely end in a car bombing so dramatic that it was felt worldwide. All things considered, it appears that Lebanon’s executive position is also one that represents little more than political suicide—or worse—for those who accept the challenge.

Kelly Stedem contributed to this article.

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 - 6 “Clashes in Lebanon as PM Mikati’s resignation accepted.” *Reuters*. 23 March 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/23/us-lebanon-mikati-idUSBRE92M0E220130323>
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 - 8 Joyce Karam. “Lebanon after Mikati’s Resignation.” *al-Arabiya*. 23 March 2013. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/2013/03/23/Lebanon-after-Mikati-s-Resignation.html>
 - 9 The hours that preceded Mikati’s resignations are described in the *as-Safir* article “The full story of Mikati’s resignation” (25 March 2013). Another firsthand narrative of that period appears in a Facebook entry (<http://www.facebook.com/PaulaYacoubian?fref=ts>) by television personality Paula Yacoubian (25 March 2013).
 - 10 “Bridging Gaps.” *NajibMikati.net*. Accessed 29 March 2013. <http://www.najib-mikati.net/EN/OurInterests/109/Bridging%20Gaps>
 - 11 Along with three other MPs, Mikati shifted his allegiance to March 8, which had been the minority party before the election. That change allowed March 8 achieving a majority within parliament.
 - 12 “Bridging Gaps.” *NajibMikati.net*. Accessed 29 March 2013. <http://www.najib-mikati.net/EN/OurInterests/109/Bridging%20Gaps>
 - 13 “Miqati Pays Lebanon’s Share of STL Funds from ‘Premiership’s Budget’.” *Naharnet*. 30 November 2011. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/21822>
 - 14 U.S. troops entered Lebanon under the auspices of the “Eisenhower Doctrine.”
 - 15 See Jihad az-Zein’s editorial (Arabic) “Gloomy lessons from Mikati’s resignation.” Aside from the comparison drawn between Mikati and previous Sunni prime ministers, the author asserts that Mikati’s resignation was an “escape.” *An-Nahar*, 28 March 2013.
 - 16 “The 500 most powerful Arabs in the World.” *ArabianBusiness.com*. <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/arabian-business-power-500-2013-493796.html?view=profile&itemid=493945#.UVGStByYiSo>
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 - 19 *Ibid*.