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Lebanon rhetoric rises as Hariri tribunal ruling nears

Fears grow that dispute over investigation into responsibility for prime minister's assassination may prove flashpoint for regional strife.

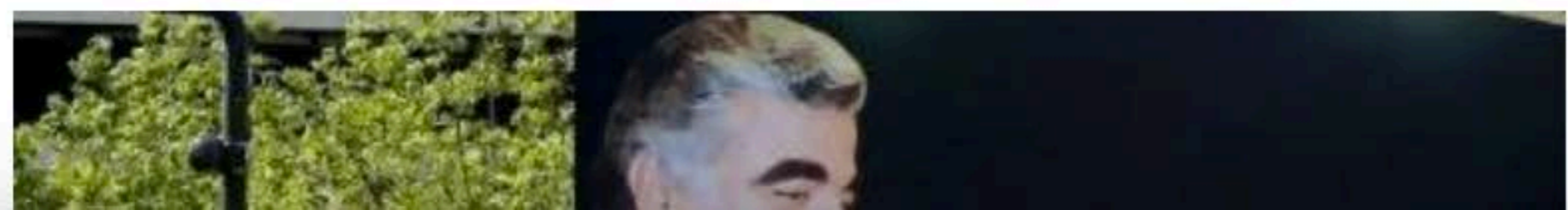


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December 5, 2010

Updated: December 5, 2010 04:00 AM

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A billboard in Beirut carries a picture of the assassinated Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri with the slogan 'The Truth for Lebanon!'

BEIRUT // Tensions in Lebanon surrounding the investigation into the assassination of the former prime minister Rafiq Hariri escalated last week, prompting foreign leaders to enter the fray.

The US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, defended the United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon, charged with finding those behind the 2005 lorry-bomb deaths of Rafiq Hariri and 22 others.

It "represents to the world that the era of political assassination with impunity in Lebanon must



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end", she said while in Bahrain on Friday for a conference on security.

In Paris on Wednesday, during a state visit by the current Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated leader, the French foreign minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, said: "This tribunal was endorsed by the [UN] Security Council and no one can touch it".

Meanwhile, on Iran's Arabic-language television Al Alam, Ghazanfar Roknabadi, Iran's ambassador to Lebanon, called the tribunal "a conspiracy and an Israeli plot to sow discord and divisions to prepare the ground for an aggression". Such polarised comments expressed by world leaders come as Lebanon enters its fourth week of political paralysis over the tribunal. The country's cabinet has not met since November 10.

Since rumours emerged months ago that the tribunal would indict high-ranking Hizbollah officials, the Islamist group, together with its opposition coalition allies in government, has sought to discredit the tribunal.

The government majority coalition, headed by Saad Hariri, is refusing to cave in to demands to reject the tribunal's findings before it issues indictments. Last week, Lebanese politicians entered "shuttle diplomacy" mode in an effort to stimulate a detente and restart dialogue. Mr Hariri visited France, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, one of his coalition's key patrons. Representatives for Hizbollah and its allied Shiite party, Amal, travelled to their major patron, Syria. In Lebanon, President Michel Suleiman shuttled between meeting with 19 leaders and politicians from across the country's political spectrum in a bid to resolve the impasse. All the journeys and meetings led to no



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The Kuwaiti newspaper Al Rai reported on Wednesday that Hizbollah said it had completed its preparations for the next war with Israel. Sectarian rhetoric in Sunni circles in Lebanon called on Sunnis to assert their power and remain vigilant of ascending Shiite power in Lebanon. On Thursday, a letter from Salem bin Abdullah Qaraawi, the leader of the Abdullah Azzam brigades, an al Qa'eda-inspired Sunni militant group, called on Lebanon's Sunnis to "take back their rights by force".



Hilal Khashan, a professor of political science at the American University of Beirut, said: "Rhetoric is increasing, and Hizbollah appears to be involved in the politics of intimidation. They give the impression that if Prime Minister Hariri doesn't denounce the tribunal, all hell will break loose, but I don't think they will do anything."

Walid Sukkarieh, an MP allied with Hizbollah, echoed the party's sentiment that the tribunal is a US-Israeli ploy to weaken Hizbollah's resistance against Israel and reorganise power in the region against Iran.

"They want a conflict between Sunni and Shia in Lebanon," he said. "Hizbollah is Shia and a friend of Iran. A conflict between Shia and Sunni in Lebanon is the beginning of conflict between Arab Sunnis across the Middle East and Shia Iran."

The stakes are very high for both sides of Lebanon's political divide. Denouncing the tribunal would amount to political suicide for Mr Hariri and his pro-western coalition. Such a move would also

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create major problems between Mr Hariri's coalition and its patron states such as France, the US and Saudi Arabia.

On the other side, Hizbollah's doomsday rhetoric has put it in a corner. If Mr Hariri and his allies refuse to denounce the tribunal and Hizbollah members are indicted, Hizbollah will then feel pressured to follow through with its promises to "cut off the hands" of anyone who attempts to arrest any of its members.

This is a prospect Hizbollah can ill afford if it wishes to continue along the path of mainstream political participation it has pursued since it first ran in elections in 1992.

In a brief civil conflict in May 2008, Hizbollah fighters took over parts of west Beirut, a move that estranged many moderate Lebanese whom Hizbollah won over during its war with Israel in 2006. Such moderate constituents are key to the future development of Hizbollah's democratic political programme in Lebanon, should it remain committed to democratic politics.

For now, most of the Lebanese political stakeholders are putting their faith in an ill-defined "Saudi-Syrian initiative" to reach consensus and restore dialogue to the Lebanese political stage. Saudi Arabia is a major backer of Mr Hariri's majority coalition while Syria is a key patron of the Hizbollah-led opposition.

No concrete proposals have been announced from either Riyadh or Damascus about the ongoing discussions between these countries regarding the Lebanese situation.

In the meantime, the clock is ticking. The tribunal is expected to hand down indictments in the coming weeks.

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