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## Lebanon Brings Back Saad Hariri as Prime Minister Amid Political Crisis

*Saad Hariri is tasked with forming a new government as Lebanon struggles in the wake of the Beirut blast*

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Former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was nominated as the country's next premier a year after he quit the position under pressure from popular protests, a move that risks angering many Lebanese who sought a complete overhaul of the political system they blame for the deadly Beirut explosion.

President Michel Aoun on Thursday tasked Mr. Hariri with forming a new government after a majority of lawmakers backed him. His designation comes after another candidate quit last month upon failing to form a government.

Speaking after his meeting with the president, Mr. Hariri vowed to act swiftly. "I am adamant on keeping my promise...by working to stop the collapse that threatens our economy, our society, and our security," he said in an address broadcast live.

The last government, headed by Hassan Diab, collapsed in the wake of a massive explosion that tore through the Lebanese capital in August, killing nearly 200 people and compounding an economic crisis that has cast more than half the population into poverty.

The hope is that a new government will take steps to secure a \$10 billion International Monetary Fund bailout and unlock aid that Western leaders have made contingent on reforms to the political system.

The Lebanese pound, which has lost 80% of its value against the dollar since last year, gained against the greenback on the black market in the days leading up to Mr. Hariri's expected designation.

For many Lebanese, however, Mr. Hariri's return underscores the ruling elite's resistance to change.

"They are naively thinking that by getting Hariri back, they would get international support," said Assad Thebian, executive director of Gherbal, a group lobbying for access to public information.

A majority of lawmakers back Mr. Hariri, who first came to power in 2005 after inheriting purported leadership over Lebanon's Sunni community from his slain father. He is an ally of the West and was traditionally backed by Saudi Arabia.

But Mr. Hariri's international supporters have become wary of investing political and financial capital in Lebanon with little or nothing to show for it. France and the U.S. have conditioned any aid to Lebanon on deep-rooted reforms that would touch at the heart of the political elite's control over the levers of the state.

Mr. Hariri must name his cabinet, an arduous task beset by local and regional calculations—usually months of political horse trading precede any consensus.

In Lebanon, senior government positions are divided between the country's religious groups and confessions. The prime minister is always a Sunni, the president a Maronite Christian and the speaker of parliament a Shiite.

Two of Lebanon's largest factions, Mr. Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement and Mr. Hariri's Sunni Future Movement, disagree over the shape of the coming government, according to two people familiar with the cabinet formation process.

A previous attempt to form a government failed when the prime minister designate, Mustapha Adib, quit, citing the political class's unwillingness to agree on a cabinet lineup that would break with the traditional power-sharing formula.

Since resigning in August, Mr. Diab's cabinet has acted as a caretaker government with limited powers. His cabinet was exclusively made up of Iran-backed Hezbollah and its allies.

Meanwhile, Lebanese are struggling to adjust to a new economic reality, with many seeking to bail out of the country.

Earlier

Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his government stepped down on Monday amid mounting pressure from protesters demanding accountability for an explosion in Beirut on Aug. 4 that killed more than 150 people. Photo: Hannah McKay/ Reuters (Originally Published August 10, 2020)

More than two months since the explosion, nobody has been held accountable for allowing nearly 3,000 tons of highly explosive material to be stored for seven years at Beirut port.

Annual inflation has reached 462%, according to Steve Hanke, senior fellow and director of the Troubled Currencies Project at the Cato Institute. Facing a hole in their balance sheets, banks have locked depositors out of their accounts.

With reserves running low, the central bank has warned it may remove subsidies on fuel, medicine and some food, triggering panic-buying and hoarding.

Meanwhile, the small Mediterranean country of four million is recording more than 1,000 new Covid-19 cases a day, according to the health ministry. Hospital beds designated for coronavirus patients are nearing capacity, according to a Lebanese doctor.

The once jubilant atmosphere of the protests that toppled Mr. Hariri last year has given way to despair.

On the eve of Mr. Hariri's designation, a mob burned down a statue of a fist, a monument to Lebanon's protest movement, according to social-media footage reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. Young men chanted sectarian slogans in support of Mr. Hariri around the blaze.

On Thursday morning, activists brought in another fist and raised it in downtown Beirut, the focal point of antiestablishment protests.