

Hariri's Visit to Washington: Improper and Untimely

Maher Itani*

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The timing of MP Saadeddin Hariri's visit to Washington is reminiscent of the visit Hariri's father, the late Rafik Hariri, made to Damascus on the eve of the presidential elections in Lebanon in 2004. Then PM Rafik Hariri received orders from Bashar Assad to amend the Lebanese Constitution and reappoint President Emile Lahoud for another 3 years. And so it was, Hariri and his bloc in Parliament "The Future Bloc" were persuaded to compromise on principle and respond to the wishes of Syria's Assad. After Hariri's assassination and Syria's withdrawal, fourteen MPs of the "Future" signed a petition claiming they were coerced to back Lahoud.



It is against this background in dealing with the outside world that Hariri's visit comes this week; hence the seeming controversy vis-à-vis its timing and true purpose. The appearance of impropriety could have been avoided had Mr. Hariri been more open to internal advice rather than external invites, and more focused on building consensus inside Lebanon rather than making agreements abroad.

As a majority leader in Parliament, MP Hariri should have discussed the agenda of his visit with other Parliamentary leaders (mainly in the opposition) and his delegation should have included representatives of their blocs. ***Before you go abroad and claim to represent your country, you must have a unified country behind you or at least behind your message. That is how leaders in true democracies, including the USA, operate; that is what true leadership is about. It is not enough to be labeled a "Great Leader" by President Bush – considering the source!*** Mr. Hariri could have avoided the appearance of impropriety had he led a multi-partisan delegation in this visit; such a delegation, would have spared him the accusation of playing into the hands of the Americans in Lebanon and given his message more strength.

As a leader in the March 14 coalition, Hariri's visit does an internal disservice to the coalition's image. Claims by the coalition to oppose foreign meddling in Lebanese internal affairs appear now disingenuous given that Mr. Hariri discussed what should have been a strictly internal matter - the Lebanese presidential elections - with US authorities in the USA. He did not have to discuss names of candidates with Mr. Bush to raise the appearance of impropriety – Bush barely knows the name of the current President of neighboring Mexico. It was enough, however, to merely bring up the topic in the discussions; after all, unlike the Syrians, the Americans are less obvious and more subtle.

Lastly, as the leader of the "Future Movement" and against a political history of pandering to "friendly" persuasions and "brotherly" coercions - and then backpedaling, Hariri's visit raises again the specter of his dad's policy of consent to the powers that be; it has the appearance of impropriety at best and may be easily labeled as suspicious.

Mr. Hariri needs to dissipate these suspicions if he is genuinely interested in avoiding a confrontation with the opposition over the next President. He owes a duty to the Lebanese people in general and to the March 14 movement in particular to exhibit utmost transparency vis-à-vis this visit. The people, who rejected the secretive backdoor political deals during the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, demand no less today.

Mr. Hariri has yet to report directly to the Lebanese people on the substance of his discussions in Washington. That does not just mean reporting to the March 14 Coalition, or to PM Siniora or to Speaker Berri in one on one meetings. It means rather a detailed report filed with Parliament and accessible through official channels; it also means a formal press conference (not an Iftar dinner) held in Beirut, in which Hariri discusses openly with the press what was said on behalf of Lebanon. After all, his visit was by all accounts an official (not a personal) visit in which he discussed the Presidency, the tribunal, the arming of security forces, etc; in addition to being escorted around by Lebanon's new Ambassador in Washington.

I write this as a concerned citizen who stood against the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and staunchly supported the liberation and sovereignty movement. This movement appears today in dire need of a course correction to stay on the true path of freedom, sovereignty and independence.

* Maher Itani: Research fellow in public policy, activist in the Cedar Revolution (2005-2006), advocate for peace, sovereignty and democracy in Lebanon.