

“Today’s Youth is Tomorrow’s Future!”

Lebanese Politics in the Eyes of Young Sunni Activists

By **Francisco Mazzola**

Lebanese Politics is characterized by the social and political hegemony of its sectarian elites. Though undemocratic, this hegemony is somehow required for the stability of a consociational system such as Lebanon. Since the elite structures within the communities in Lebanon are pluralistic, sectarian elites have to constantly struggle with their rivals within their respective sect. Therefore, elites strategically use political rents or sectarian symbols to ensure they have enough supporters within their community and be its undisputed and strong leader. Saad Hariri, the son of the killed former Prime Minister and Sunni ‘martyr’ Rafik Hariri, has often been criticized for his political moves and considered to be a weak leader, e.g. towards the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition during the clashes in May 2008 or on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating on his father’s death. The latest political crisis in Lebanon, the fall of Hariri’s government on January 12th, 2011 and the appointment of Najib Mikati as designated Prime Minister, was somehow a defeat for Hariri. However, by constantly upholding the ‘martyrdom’ of his father’s death, he still manages to secure his power within the community, esp. since the appointment of Mikati with March 8 support was interpreted as an attack on the community and ‘martyr’ Rafik Hariri. Interviews with young supporters of Saad Hariri working for the youth section of his Future Movement showed that the ‘martyrdom’ is still an important pillar of his power. They also showed, that the Sunni community is in a precarious situation seeing itself as being threatened mostly by the Shia community and Hezbollah. The violent reactions of Sunnis on the streets of Beirut and Tripoli after the appointment of Mikati showed that Hariri does not have full control of his community. Violent clashes between angry Sunnis and Shia could easily erupt and lead to clashes similar to those in 2008 or worse. The role of political elites, such as Saad Hariri, is crucial in this situation. If the disparity between the masses and the elites grow, the possibility for uncontrolled streets violence increases and, therefore, the possibility for civil war-like scenarios in Lebanon.



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Lebanon is facing a serious intensification of its political crisis since 2005. The debate over the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) on the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the main point of contention between the two opposing camps March 8 and March 14¹, has hit its peak with the failure of the Saudi-Syrian mediation initiative, leading to the collapse of the government on January 12, 2011.

The killing of Rafik Hariri in February 2005 and the UN investigation on the murder case have dominated Lebanese politics in the last five years, leading to political deadlock and increasing sectarian tensions which have frequently erupted into street violence between supporters of March 8 and 14. The current crisis can be traced back to the withdrawal of March 8 ministers from the Sanyora cabinet in late 2006, leading to demonstrations by opposition supporters in Downtown Beirut and the clashes of May 2008.

The Doha Agreement, which solved the crisis for the moment, granted the opposition one third of the seats in the cabinet and, therefore, the power to veto and bring down the government. This so called 'nuclear option' was exercised on January 12, 2011.

Two weeks after the collapse of the government, the extreme reactions of Mustaqbal² supporters to the nomination of Najib Mikati as new Prime Minister showed again, especially in Tripoli, how quickly clashes can erupt over political issues in Lebanon.

This research paper consists of a survey on the opinions of young Sunni activists.

¹ Both blocks get their names from rallies they organized respectively on March 8 and March 14, 2005. March 8 is considered pro-Syrian, March 14 anti-Syrian.

² The full name of this organisation is 'Tayyar al Mustaqbal' (engl.: Future Movement)

The target group is formed by individuals affiliated to different youth organizations with direct or indirect links to Hariri and Mustaqbal working on the campus of the American University of Beirut (AUB): Future Youth (FY) and Students at Work. The aim was to find out, if and to what extent young Sunnis support their current political leadership and to determine their opinions on current political developments in Lebanon. This can help to predict future developments in Lebanese politics and assess the probability of violent sectarian clashes.

Research has been conducted in the form of interviews held with Sunni activists of Future Youth and Students at Work, before January 12, 2011. Subsequently, the interviewees were asked additional questions regarding the latest political events in Lebanon. The group interviewed is formed by the FY leadership, members of the FY committee and elected representatives of FY/Students at Work in the Student Representative Council at AUB. The questions asked aimed at the interviewees' opinion on four topics: the stance of Rafik Hariri in their political thinking, their perception of the Sunnis' political and economic situation since 2005, their opinion on Saad Hariri and other politicians and, finally, on the debate over the STL.

Saad Hariri and Mustaqbal

The Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, son of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, was born on April 18, 1970 in Riyadh, Saudi-Arabia. After pursuing his Bachelor's Degree in International Business from Georgetown University in 1992, he took over positions as senior official of several companies of the Hariri empire, e.g. as General Manager of Saudi Oger and Oger Telecom or Board Member of Saudi Investment Bank and

Future TV. While his father was deeply involved in and committed to politics, ending the Lebanese Civil War and leading Lebanon as Prime Minister, Saad Hariri focused on the family business. The day Rafik Hariri was killed in a bomb blast was also the day Saad Hariri entered the stage of Lebanese, regional and international politics, succeeding his father as leader of the Future Movement and, most important, of the Sunni community in Lebanon. He has gradually ascended to leadership of the March 14 movement and taking part in the so-called Cedar Revolution (also known as Independence Intifada), which led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. With the March 14 forces winning the elections in 2005, he became majority leader in the Parliament and one of the most influential politicians in Lebanon.

March 14's policy after 2005 was highly influenced by the interests of Mustaqbal and Saad Hariri. Both pursued to strengthen the Sunni community in Lebanon. The power of the community's rivals, Syria and its ally Hezbollah, had to be contained and weakened.³ The political steps taken by March 14 and its political tone were uncompromising and confrontational.⁴ The decisions taken actually broke an unwritten agreement between the two blocks, which had been reached after the elections of 2005 and stated that decisions, especially regarding the STL and Hezbollah's weapons, must be taken by consensus. Therefore, these decisions can be seen as triggers for the crisis of 2007 and the clashes of 2008.

³ *ICG Middle East Report Nr.96*, p.5-6, May 2010 available on: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/096-lebanons-politics-the-sunni-community-and-hariris-future-current.aspx>

⁴ The cabinet vote on the establishment of the STL is the best example. This decision-making process was considered as having been unconstitutional, since the ministers of March 8 resigned prior to the vote and therefore argued that the government was unconstitutional and not legitimated to vote on the document, as it finally did on November 25, 2006. Instead of granting the cabinet more time for consultations, as requested by March 8, March 14 pushed to vote on the implementation statute of the STL.

The reason for this confrontational policy lies not only in the international support, mainly from the USA and France, which Mustaqbal enjoyed, but also through the support for Saad Hariri of the vast majority of the Sunni community. Hariri's popularity relies most of all on the elevation of his father's death to martyrdom. The perception of Rafik Hariri's death as an attack on the community unified the Sunni masses and made Saad Hariri the sole leader of his community.⁵

Saad Hariri's source of power

The March 8 opposition protested since December 2006 against the government led by Fouad Sanyora, mainly because of the decision-making process on the implementation statute of the STL. March 8 has been blocking inter alia parliament and building up a tent city on Martyrs' Square. This protest against the government escalated early 2008 when the government took two controversial actions, dismissing the Hezbollah-close airport security chief⁶ and disabling Hezbollah's parallel communication network⁷. Armed militia men under the leadership of Hezbollah took over West-Beirut within 12 hours without having to face any significant resistance. By besieging not only the headquarters of Future TV and Mustaqbal, but also the private residences of Saad Hariri and other March 14 leaders, Hezbollah made clear that it will not accept any actions taken against it and the 'Weapons of the Resistance'⁸.

⁵ Compare *ICG Middle East Report Nr.96*

⁶ Due to the confessional power-sharing agreement, the heads of the different security agencies are usually appointed by every confession respectively.

⁷ This network is considered to be an important part of Hezbollah's so called 'Weapons of the Resistance'.

⁸ Hezbollah claims to be the only power in Lebanon capable of offering resistance against Israel, and using that as an argument to keep its weapons. In the Lebanese media, Hezbollah is often referred to as the 'Resistance'.

Although the crisis could be solved with the signing of the Doha agreement, inter alia granting the opposition a blocking minority⁹, it had long-term consequences for Saad Hariri and the Sunni community, esp. regarding their relations to the Shia community.

Since the Sunni community felt humiliated and powerless by the events of May 2008, esp. by the incapability of Mustaqbal to offer military resistance to Hezbollah, the political stance of Saad Hariri as sole leader of his community was expected to be significantly harmed after the parliamentary elections of 2009. However, Hariri did not lose power.

In fact, the biggest competitors of Hariri in the north, Najib Mikati and Mohammad Safadi, chose to join forces with Hariri due to his overwhelming power and popularity within the Sunni community. As a counterexample, Omar Karame in Tripoli and Abdel Rahim Mrad from the Bekaa, both pro-Syrian Sunni politicians who decided not to run with Hariri, did not win parliamentary seats.¹⁰ As pointed out in an ICG report, the Future Movement proved its "quasi-hegemonic position"¹¹ in the elections of 2009, mainly within the Sunni community. The same report comes also to the conclusion that Sunni Islamist did not gain more supporters, even though sectarianism, especially tensions between Sunnis and Shia, increased especially after the 2008 crisis.¹² But why is Saad Hariri still so powerful within his sect, even though on the one hand he supported governmental policies which facilitated the escalation of 2008 and on the other hand was not capable of defending his community during these clashes?

The answer to that question lies in the event of February 14, 2005. Among the majority of the Sunnis, the assassination of Rafik Hariri was considered an attack targeting the community as a whole. Therefore, Saad was considered almost a savior who would unify the Sunnis, lead and secure them, but most of all, take revenge for the death of his father. As Syria was and is regarded as mainly responsible for Rafik's death, the Sunni community sees Damascus, its Lebanese allies and everybody who opposes Saad Hariri as enemies of the community. This also explains the electoral defeat of Karame and Mrad, long-term allies of Syria, and the success of Mikati and Safadi, who benefited from not being necessarily anti-Syrian but at least joining Saad Hariri and his struggle to find and judge the murderers of his father.¹³ The same applies to Islamist movements.¹⁴

The perception of his fathers' death as martyrdom is the foundation of Saad Hariri's political power and hegemonic stance within his community.

Sunni vs. Shia: Increased Sectarian Tension over the STL

The events since 2005 increased sectarianism and worsened the relation between Sunnis and Shia. March 8's sit-in prior to Hezbollah's military action in May 2008 and this operation itself were interpreted as Shia attempts to directly target the interest of the Sunni community. Therefore, the Shia community, but especially Hezbollah, is seen as a major threat to the Sunnis. This perceived threat constituted an important factor supporting Hariri's foundation of power, since on the one hand, it facilitates the community's support for and gathering behind one sole political

⁹ Government decisions could from then on be blocked with the vote of one third of the cabinet members.

¹⁰ *Ebid.*, p.20

¹¹ *Ebid.*, p.21

¹² *Ebid.*, p.21

¹³ Compare *Ebid.*, p.6-9; p.19-20

¹⁴ *Ebid.*, p.21

leader. On the other hand, since members of Hezbollah are allegedly involved in the killing of Hariri¹⁵, it directly amplifies the effect of the martyrdom-narrative on the community.

These facts prove the high importance which the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) has for Saad Hariri. Besides his personal interest on finding those responsible for his father's assassination, the STL could prove the allegations against Syria and Hezbollah. Therefore, an indictment and sentence that proves the involvement of both in the assassination would not only respond to the community's demands for justice and, consequently, strengthen Hariri, it would also mark a victory of the Sunnis against the Shia community, the latter perceived as threat to the former.

The reality of the STL issue is, of course, by far not that simple. Not only do Hezbollah and Syria, logically, oppose the STL. Hezbollah tries to discredit the STL by claiming it to be an 'Israeli project' politicized and manipulated to target the organization. The so-called 'false witnesses'-issue¹⁶, the allegations brought up in a report by the Canadian CBC TV broadcaster linking Wissam al-Hassan, a close adviser of both Rafik and Saad Hariri, to the assassination and other theories questioning the involvement of Hezbollah in the killing¹⁷, at least complicate the situation for Saad Hariri. He himself contributes to this complication by communicating a dual message to his supporters, one as leader

of the community and one as Prime Minister¹⁸.

The Dual Message

This dual message consists, on the one hand, his efforts to push and support the STL, and, on the other hand, on his deescalating rhetoric and actions towards the suspects of his father's case, especially Syria.

As he did during a speech on the Founding Congress of Mustaqbal in July 2010, Saad Hariri reassures his supporters that he is truly committed to the support of the investigations on his father's murder. This has to be understood as both an effort to keep the martyrdom-narrative about Rafik Hariri alive, about the savior who ended the civil war and had a vision for his country, and serving his community's demands for justice. Shortly after the assassination, Saad Hariri and March 14 started to blame the regime in Damascus for the killing of his father. Especially after the Doha Agreement of 2008, Hariri had to face a shift of power in Lebanon, bringing back Syria as an influential player to the country. As Prime Minister, Hariri had to react to this new constellation and seek dialogue with Damascus in order to improve the bilateral relations. Therefore, Hariri admitted in September 2010 that he and his advisers "have at some point committed errors since [they] have accused Syria of assassinating Prime Minister Al-Hariri and this was a political accusation."¹⁹ This completely contradicts with the opinion still shared by his

¹⁵ At the beginning of the UN investigations, Syria and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah have been suspected of having killed Hariri. At the latest since 2009, the investigations are focusing more on members of Hezbollah as the only responsible for the killing.

¹⁶ This is a controversy about witnesses interrogated by UN investigators who were supposed to be credible but ended up modifying and withdrawing their testimonies, mainly targeting Syrian officials. Allegedly, Saad Hariri and March 14 officials pushed these witnesses to give false testimonies.

¹⁷ Compare Rosiny, Stephan: Heiße Spur im "Mordfall Hariri"?, GIGA Focus Nr.7, available in German on: http://www.giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_nahost_1007.pdf

¹⁸ This dilemma, being both a sectarian leader and a politician responsible to the whole nation, is faced by almost all Lebanese politicians.

¹⁹ Asharq al-Awsat, September 6, 2010:

الحريري لـ «الشرق الأوسط»: تسرعنا باتهام دمشق.. وارتكبنا أخطاء (Hariri: *We made mistakes and hurriedly accused Damascus*), quoted as Mideastwire.com,

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=11605&article=585516>

supporters, that Syria is responsible for the assassination. With respect to Hezbollah, it is a little bit more complicated.

On July 23, the day before the above mentioned speech, Hariri informed Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah that 'undisciplined' members of his organization might get indicted by the STL.²⁰ By putting emphasis on 'undisciplined' members, Hariri tried to defuse accusations against Hezbollah as a whole and therefore appease the Shia organization. Instead, Hezbollah is issuing demands towards Saad Hariri to quit his cooperation with the tribunal, by stating that "the hand that attempts to reach [its members] will be cut off"²¹, as Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, puts it.

What does this mean for the Sunni community? On the one hand, they have a leader who is eager to serve their demands for justice and, implicitly, punishment of their enemies. On the other hand, they have a leader who tries to protect the alleged enemies of the community and free them from accusations. This contradictory position of Hariri during his premiership, derived from the dual message, does not necessarily weaken his stance in the community since the perception of his father's assassination as martyrdom is still commonly shared, but it definitely makes him vulnerable for attacks from within the community, in case the indictment leads to civil strife or evidence appear that free Hezbollah from all allegations.

In this context, it is of major interest to obtain a clear image of the opinions among young Sunni activists towards Saad Hariri as their leader and Lebanese Politics. Did the popularity of Hariri among his supporters decrease, increase, or not change at all? What does that mean for future developments within the Sunni community and in Lebanese Politics?

The 'Martyrdom' of Rafik Hariri and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon

Rafik Hariri plays a significant role in the thinking of the young Mustaqbal activists that have been interviewed for this research. All except one said they attend the big annual commemoration on Martyrs' Square on February 14, the anniversary of Hariri's death, every year. Their attendance is not only a formal act, but rather very emotional since all stated that Rafik Hariri and his ideals have shaped their childhood and political thinking. Terms used to describing him vary from "fair" and "most important and true leader" to "inspiration" and "reason why I am a member of Mustaqbal".

This worship of Rafik Hariri also reflects the opinion of the interviewed activists on the STL. They all support the STL as it could and should bring light into the assassination since "the identities and affiliations of the hitmen are diffusing".

The answers to the questions about who might be responsible for the murder reflect conspiratorial ideas: All believe in networks of conspirators linking members of Hezbollah as executors with either Syria, Israel or the USA or all of them as organizers or backers; the USA and Israel as both executor and organizers; Syria as executor with approval of both Israel and the USA and other combinations of these actors in their role as executors, organizers and supporters.

²⁰ New York Times, July 22 2010: Hezbollah Chief Expects Indictments in Ex-premier's Death, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/world/middleeast/23briefs-Lebanon.html>

²¹ AFP/NOW Lebanon, November 12, 2010: Nasrallah warns against laying a hand on Hezbollah <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=215818>

Asked if they would still support the STL even if the indictment named Sunnis as individuals or organizations as backers or actual hitmen, the answers were always positive, though the activists do not think that this might be the case. If yes, then just as part of the above mentioned networks. The additional answers to that question were highly interesting. The only thing that would count is the search for the truth and to reach justice, "even if it was Saad Hariri". This proves again the undisputed role Rafik Hariri plays in the activists' thinking.

One could now argue that these statements are only lip services. Their answers to the question about the CBC report, shows that the activists already considered the possibility of Sunni hitmen or backers. Though no one really believes that Wissam al-Hassan was actually involved in the plot, the majority of them cannot completely negate the possibility of this since "every man has his price."

The activists opinion on the so called 'false witnesses' issue is more diversified. Some think these witnesses were placed and fed by Israel, the USA or Syria; others do not think the Lebanese government should deal with that, but instead the STL; and others think Saad Hariri should have worked to clarify that issue from the beginning in order to take the wind out of March 8's sails.

Even though the interviewed activists all support the STL, they also think it might become a threat to the country since Hezbollah might not accept a possible indictment against itself or its members. One pointed out that the STL harmed the relations between the sects, mainly between Sunnis and Shias. The statement by Wissam Akra, the Future Youth president and coordinator at AUB, was interesting. He said that it might become a threat if "we don't follow the STL." This can be interpreted as his fear

that large parts of the Sunni community would not accept the end of the cooperation between the Lebanese Republic and the STL and even react violently.

The opinions of the young activists about what is going to happen once the STL makes its indictment public are diverse. A lot of them think that Hezbollah is going to react to the indictment with actions similar to May 2008. But this time, according to the interviewees, the clashes could escalate to civil war. According to one activist, armed Sunnis "from the north" would retaliate upon Hezbollah and its allies for every military action taken against Sunnis. Only two activists do not see the possibilities for civil war, one for strategic the other for practical reasons. Since, according to one interviewee, Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, and Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal-Movement, would not support military actions from Hezbollah, the latter would not be able to and therefore not take military actions. The other activists said, since there are no armed force who could oppose Hezbollah, there will not be civil war, but clashes like 2008.

The Community's Situation since 2005

The overall perception by the activists of the community's economic and political situation since 2005 is negative.

A minority perceives the so-called 'Cedar Revolution' as an event which politically empowered Sunnis, since the death of Rafik Hariri unified the community in fighting for a common cause (justice for their murdered leader) and led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, but the majority feels that the economic and political situation deteriorated. The community is perceived as politically weak, since it has no power on the street like the Shia community and

Saad Hariri is considered to be a less strong leader as his father was. The community's weakness is, therefore, linked to its leader's weakness.

Two dates can be identified as significant for this negative perception of the Sunnis political power: the clashes of May 2008 and the government collapse on January 12, 2011.

As Wissam Akra, president and coordinator of Future Youth at AUB, stated, the events of 2008 caused fear among Sunnis. Additionally, US-President Barack Obama's new approach towards Iran reduced the international support Sunnis had after 2005. These are, according to him, the two decisive factors that lead Sunnis to back down from their political demands.

Though the Sunnis traditionally have the post of the Prime Minister of the Republic, due to the country's power-sharing agreement, these young activists feel that the Sunnis do not have power in the government. They see the government collapse on January 12, 2011 and the March 8 plans on forming a new government, without March 14 and Saad Hariri as Prime Minister, as proof of their political weakness. One activist even said that it seems that everybody can say anything about and against the Sunnis without the latter reacting.

The interviewed activists share the perception of what and who is the biggest threat to their community at the moment: mainly Hezbollah, but also the Amal-Movement and Iran. With one exception, the activists perceive this threat as exclusively facing the Sunni community. Regarding the government collapse on January 12, 2011 one activist said: "They [Hezbollah and Amal] just don't want us here!" This perception is not surprising. It reflects, on the one hand, the continuity of the rivalry between Sunnis and Shia and,

on the other hand, the Sunni fear of, again, becoming victims of, so perceived, anti-Sunni actions from the Shia.²² The example of the gatherings of Hezbollah and Amal members in predominantly Sunni neighborhoods in West Beirut one week after the government collapse was brought up by one activist as an example for the threat Hezbollah and Amal-Movement are representing to the Sunni community.²³ What some of the activists also fear is the growing political apathy among Sunnis, which impedes their ability to realize how serious the current situation is. As one activist stated, the community needs a spark, like the May 2008 clashes, to react.

Opinion on Saad Hariri and other politicians

When asked about Saad Hariri, the young activists proved to be very reflective and critical in their thinking. They all confirmed that Saad Hariri enjoys a lot of popularity within the Sunni community and especially on AUB campus, even though some supporters are disappointed that he is not being more firm on certain issues defending the community. However, especially regarding his supporters on campus, they see this support critical. As one activist stated, "they follow him like sheep. Nobody actually knows about the actual goals of Mustaqbal and that there is more about it than just Saad Hariri." Another activist said that there is a big influx of new members to Future Youth, especially at AUB, but these new members are not very political and therefore do not follow him for specific political reasons. Another activist said the

²² ICG Middle East Report Nr.96

²³ For an analysis of the military implications of these gatherings also compare: http://beirutspring.com/blog/2011/01/19/analyzing-hezbollahs-beirut-trapezoid/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+beirutspring%2Ffb_feed+%28Beirut+Spring%29

support for Saad Hariri is a consequence of the Sunnis' worship of his father.²⁴

The answers of the activists to the question who Saad Hariri is representing and working for, vary a lot. While some say he represents and works for all Lebanese regardless of their sectarian affiliation, some others say that his work benefits the aristocracy more than others. Some are convinced he works for the whole Sunni community, others say that he definitely does not represent all Sunnis.

When asked about their opinion on Saad Hariri's work as Prime Minister, the majority of the activists stated that they are not satisfied and even disappointed. One said that people supporting Hariri want something new; they have enough of the "blood-of-the-martyr" slogans. But Hariri fails in developing new slogans and ideas to rally more supporters and encouraging them to be active.

Regarding Saad Hariri's position in the STL issue, they are equally divided between those who think he will never compromise and those who think he might end his support for the STL since he "always backs down".

The opinions of the activists on non-Sunni politicians are overall negative. All interviewed activists stated they do not like the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Michel Aoun. In respect to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Amal-leader Nabih Berri the majority does not like either of them. The activists are divided in their opinion on March 14 ally and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. While most of them do not like him, the ones who do, emphasize they just do "as long as he does what he says".

²⁴ Compare *ibid.*

Hezbollah's secretary-general is disliked by the majority of the interviewed, although some support him in the 'Resistance'²⁵ against Israel. Needless to say that this marks a serious contradiction to March 14's demanding for disarming the party. Nasrallah is, according to the interviewees, currently the strongest leader in Lebanon. When asked about the best leader in Lebanon at the moment, the majority names Nasrallah since he "does what he says" and "does not lie". All activists named Saad Hariri as the one who should be the strongest leader in Lebanon. Asked about two other important Sunni politicians, Omar Karame and Najib Mikati, most activists are indifferent to the former and nobody said that he likes him. But everybody expressed sympathy with Najib Mikati. Therefore, he was also the one named by nearly all as a realistic alternative to Saad Hariri as Prime Minister. But the activists also emphasized that Saad Hariri is currently the strongest leader within the Sunni community and that Mikati is not popular enough to become a credible leader of the community. Hezbollah's attempt to elect him as Prime Minister changed the opinion of the interviewed activists. Mikati, who won his parliamentary seat as member of a Hariri electoral list, is now seen as a "traitor", a "puppet of Hezbollah".

Conclusions

The interviews revealed that Saad Hariri's stance as leader of the Sunni community is seen critical. It has been showed that his power is mainly based on his father's death as martyrdom, not on himself as a person. Even though they think it might lead to violence, none of the interviewees

²⁵ Hezbollah claims to be the only power in Lebanon capable of offering resistance against Israel, and using that as an argument to keep its weapons. In the Lebanese media, Hezbollah is often referred to as the 'Resistance'.

is eager to sacrifice the STL and therefore back down from their demand for justice for their killed idol Rafik Hariri.

The collapse of Hariri's government changed the situation. For once, the problem of the dual message is not relevant anymore since Hariri is no longer Prime Minister. In his speech on February 14, 2011 he made clear that he is in the opposition now. As part of the opposition he has the freedom to clearly formulate his stance towards issues like the STL, as he did in the above mentioned speech²⁶, without having to find compromise with other actors, as he had to do as Prime Minister.

His popularity has, at least, not dropped. Since the once popular alternative for Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, is now seen as having betrayed Saad Hariri, the latter could gain more sympathy among Sunnis and therefore expand his power. The crisis over the failure of the so called 'National Unity' government and the formation of the new government marked a decisive point in the political thinking of Sunnis. It is no more only about the STL, but about the government and the just representation of the Sunnis. Sunnis felt pushed out of the government, since the person they see as their leader is being pushed out of office himself. Hariri could now prove that he is not the one who "always backs down".

Rising tensions between Sunnis and Shias are to be expected since January 12 is seen as another humiliation for the Sunnis. The so-called "Days of Rage" on January 25 and 26, even though they had no direct sectarian implication²⁷, can be

seen as foreshadowing for major clashes between the two sects. The fact that non-Sunni politicians are mainly seen negative could be a hint for isolation of the Sunni community in the long term. Such a process could also be explained with the perceived threat of the community against itself and its interests. The worst case scenario would be growing disparity between the political leadership and the masses on the street. As I personally witnessed on Martyrs' Square on January 25, supporters of March 14 did not completely follow the directives of the leadership not to wave party flags and shout sectarian slogans.²⁸ This incident could be seen as being trivial, but it shows that the street does not exceptionally follow the orders, ideas and strategies of the leadership. The possibility of increasing uncontrolled street actions, i.e. violence, is therefore realistic and constitutes a serious threat to the relative political stability.

"[T]he way in which youth perceive their position in the social and political milieu of a multicomunal society"²⁹ shape their political thinking and action in the future. As the proverb "today's youth is tomorrow's future" points out, it will be them who will lead and determine politics in the future. The latest riots in Tripoli and elsewhere in Lebanon raise several questions: Will these riots be unique and Sunnis stick to the peaceful path of politics? Or will they start to confront their political rivals violently? Will Sunni Islamist maybe gain more popularity and support? But most importantly, how will this generation shape the politics of Lebanon once it takes over from the current leadership?

²⁶ Compare the transcripts of the speech in English (<http://beirutspring.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/PM-Saad-Hariri-speech-in-BIEL-English-14-02-2011.doc>) and Arabic (<http://www.lebanese-forces.com/web/MoreNews.aspx?newsid=126631>)

²⁷ Even though the protesters were mainly targeting Mikati and Hezbollah and shouting anti-Iranian and anti-Hezbollah slogans, explicit anti-Shia shouts were heard on protests, as personally witnessed.

²⁸ Compare also Dana Moukhalati's blog post "Shame on You: Notes from a failed protest" on NOW Lebanon: <http://nowlebanon.com/BlogDetails.aspx?TID=1076&FID=6>

²⁹ ESCWA/Heinrich Böll Foundation: Unpacking the Dynamics of Communal Tensions, A Focus Group Analysis of Perception among Youth in Lebanon, New York, 2009, p.3