

RELEASE IN PART
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Subject:

Lebanon Sit Rep, 10/21 at 1500: Large Crowds Gather for Funeral as Political Fallout Continues

1. (SBU) Hundreds of thousands of people are expected to gather in Martyrs' Square the afternoon of October 21 to participate in Brig. Gen. Wissam al-Hassan's funeral and to protest against Syria under high security presence. Key developments from 2030 on October 20 to 15:00 on October 21 included:

- Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who has spurned outreach from foreign governments, was reported to have arrived in Beirut to attend the gathering in Martyrs' Square. The Ambassador's security detail confirmed he was present at that site, but had yet to appear publicly as of 1500. The Ambassador and Embassy staff who worked with Hassan will pay their condolences to the family following the funeral on October 21. This comes after the Chargé paid condolences to Internal Security Forces (ISF) on October 20 (reftel).
 - Ambassador and DCM have continued to reach out to Prime Minister Najib Mikati and March 14 leadership to ascertain their intentions in response to the growing political predicament following Mikati's announcement of his willingness to resign on October 20 (septel), should President Michel Sleiman accept it. Sleiman and Druze Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt are reportedly spearheading an effort to identify a solution to the potential political gridlock through consultations with the key political party leaders.
 - The DCM participated in a planning session with Ambassadors from the Saudi, French, EU, and British Embassies to determine the best course of action for foreign missions in response to the situation in Lebanon. All attendees agreed that it was important to ensure Lebanon's stability, and EU ambassadors agreed that it was important to encourage all parties to avoid a political vacuum during the likely government transition process. The Saudi Ambassador, however, took a sharper line in this meeting on the future of a Mikati Government than he had the day before, echoing the March 14 line that without a quick Mikati resignation the Sunni community would grow angrier and prospects for sectarian confrontation increase.
 - There continued to be intermittent road closures throughout the country and reports of violence centered in Tripoli. All Embassy personnel are safe and accounted for and there have been no threats to the Embassy.
- Political Developments: Saad Hariri's Return and Prime Minister's Willingness to Resign 2. (SBU) ISF contacts indicated on the morning of October 21 that former Prime Minister Saad Hariri would attend the funeral, and press as of 1500 was widely reporting that he was in Lebanon. As of 1500, our Embassy security detail—which was in Martyrs' Square in advance of the Ambassador's arrival—confirmed that the former Prime Minister was present. Hariri's aides have remained tightlipped on his arrival and appearance, although contacts confirmed on the morning of October 21 that there was an enhanced security presence around the Hariri family residence in Beirut. 3. (SBU) Prime Minister Najib Mikati told the Ambassador on October 20 that President Michel Sleiman had asked that he refrain from formally resigning in order to avoid the creation of a political vacuum that would be destabilizing to Lebanon. Mikati—who will travel to Mecca on Tuesday, October 23 to participate in the Hajj—reiterated his willingness to resign, if necessary. President Sleiman and Druze leader Jumblatt are expected to lead efforts to identify a solution to this political crisis. Jumblatt reportedly strongly opposes a hasty resignation, as does Hizballah.

Diplomatic Outreach Emphasizes Need for Stability

4. (SBU) Several March 14 leaders continued to issue statements blaming Syria for the murder of Wissam al-Hassan and demanding Mikati's immediate resignation (or that of key ministers and the Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon) through the morning of October 21.

Funeral Procession and Anti-Syria Rally Underway

5. (SBU) Brig Gen. Hassan and Sergeant Ahmad Sahyouni's funeral commenced at 14:00 local today with a ceremony at the ISF headquarters in Achrafieh. Large crowds had begun gathering as of 11:00 local time in Martyrs' Square where Hassan and Sahyouni are expected to be interred. President Michel Sleiman and Internal Security Forces chief Gen. B1 Ashraf Rifi delivered straightforward eulogies that praised Hassan's contributions to Lebanon and termed his death a crime against all Lebanese. Prime Minister Mikati attended the funeral ceremony but did not speak. Television images showed individuals carrying placards bearing the images of Hassan and former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and waving the flags of Lebanon, of March 14's political parties, the Druze Progressive Socialist Party, and the Syrian opposition flag. There were also signs calling for Mikati to resign and holding him responsible for Hassan's death. As part of the gathering for the funeral, March 14 supporters are expected to demonstrate against Syria and tents had been erected by the Future Movement, Lebanese Forces, Kataeb, and National Liberal Parties as of 11:00 near the Grand Serail, which is immediately to the west of Martyrs' Square. Nearly all roads in downtown Beirut have been closed as people made their way to the gathering in Martyrs' Square. Press reports indicated that participants had traveled from all over Lebanon to attend the funeral and rally. ISF interlocutors report the ISF has planned and staged resources to be able to respond to any violence, should it occur, including with the deployment of 3,000 ISF forces in addition to a significant number of forces from the Lebanese Armed Forces. Local staff recall that the funeral procession of Rafik Hariri in 2005 was chaotic, but did not lead to significant violence. The Ambassador and Embassy staff who worked with Hassan planned to pay condolences to his family following the funeral at the al-Amin mosque.

Investigation and Calls to Refer to Special Tribunal for Lebanon

6. (SBU) There have been no public developments in the investigation into the explosion (reftel), although politicians and pundits continue to point fingers at Syria being the perpetrator of the blast. The Cabinet agreed on October 20 that the Prime Minister would have authority to refer the case to or request assistance from any international or foreign entity or organization, which could potentially include the UN or the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. (Note: the STL currently has jurisdiction over the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and any similar attack between October 1, 2004 and December 12, 2005, which currently includes attacks against the politicians Marwan Hamadeh, George Hawi, and Elias Murr. The Tribunal's mandate allows for the extension of this jurisdiction at the Government of Lebanon's request and with the UN Security Council's approval, however STL officers in the past have noted that they expected any effort to extend or expand the court's responsibilities would only come after a lengthy political process. End note.)

Other Security Developments

7. (SBU) Additional security incidents were reported overnight, including road closures and armed clashes between the Sunni and Alawite neighborhoods of Bab El Tebbeneh and Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli. No incidents were reported in the vicinity of the Embassy, and all mission staff remain accounted for. All non-official moves off the embassy compound were cancelled for October 21, and official moves have been scrubbed carefully to vet for security considerations. Security forces have kept the airport road open via an alternate route.

Consular Updates

8. (SBU) There has been no word of any American citizens injured in the explosion on October 19. American Citizen Services has not registered a significant change in the number of registrations following the release of a Security Message on October 20, although some individuals have directly emailed the consular section and indicated that they are monitoring events in case an evacuation is necessary.

9. (U) Minimize considered.