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Nicholas Blanford. *Killing Mr. Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and Its Impact on the Middle East.* I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2006. 256 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84511-202-8.

Reviewed by Hannes Baumann (SOAS)

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Commissioned by Amy A. Kallander (Syracuse University)

Rafiq Hariri: A Journalist's Account of the Billionaire-Politician

The investigation into the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, which started in February 2009, is set to revive interest in Lebanonâs former prime minister. A good starting point to read up on the billionaire-politician is Nicholas Blanford's *Killing Mr. Lebanon.* It is a journalistic introduction to Lebanese politics from the civil war (1975-1990) to 2006 intended for a general audience.

In the first chapter, Blanford gives a minute-by-minute account of the morning of Haririâs assassination. In the second, he describes Haririâs wartime diplomacy in the 1980s as an envoy of Saudi Arabiaâs King Fahd. Hariri used money to gain a seat at the top table: âFor Hariri, money was a tool in negotiation as much as a plumber uses a wrench to stop a leak or a sculptor uses a chisel to fashion a block of woodâ (p. 30). Haririâs funds came from Saudi Arabia, either directly from the king or from Haririâs personal wealth accumulated through his work as a contractor for the Saudi royals. Blanford gives some revealing indications about Saudiâs Lebanon policy, Haririâs role in executing or even shaping it, relations with the Americans, and the rivalry with revolutionary Iran and its Lebanese ally Hizbullah. However, Blanford never explores these issues and the reader is left wondering what exactly it was that Saudi Arabia was trying to achieve in Lebanon and why the Saudi royals used a contractor as âtheir manâ in the country.

The third chapter describes Haririâs role as prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and the corruption associated with reconstruction under Syrian domination. Blanford contrasts the âmafia-style racketeeringâ of the Syrian regime with the billionaireâs âbribery and cronyism,â which he considers to have been essentially harmless (pp. 60-64).Yet if Hariri used money âlike a wrench,â then surely it is important to trace the mechanisms by which money was created in the postwar economy, Haririâs role in this, and how this shaped his politics. Hariri was in control of the institutional levers of the economy. He placed âsmart technocratic Lebanese professionalsâ (p. 4) at the head of the Central Bank, the finance ministry, and the Council of Development and Reconstruction (CDR). The government borrowed heavily from domestic commercial banks, thus stabilizing the currency by drawing in Lebanese-pound deposits.[1] However, very little of this money went into reconstruction; instead the policy represented a massive transfer of wealth to commercial banks and their depositors, and bank lending to private business was âcrowded out.â Blanford mentions this process in passing (p. 48). Hariri's role in the reconstruction of Beirutâs city center–a scheme heavily driven by profit maximization–is also somewhat glossed over. By eschewing a detailed analysis of these two rent-creation mechanisms, Blanford misses a chance to examine how the billionaire-politician continued to use money âlike a wrenchâ in the postwar era. While Hariri was in charge of government finance and reconstruction, former militia leaders, Syrian allies, and the prewar political elite used âservice ministriesâ (e.g., education, health, or refugees)

as patronage resources. Close Syrian allies controlled foreign affairs and security agencies. Lebanonâs post-war institutions were thus divided up among different groups and Hariri was a central actor both in the carving up and in claiming his share of the pie. Blanfordâs contention that Hariri was merely a hapless victim of Syrian racketeering–which certainly did exist–should therefore be treated with caution.

Chapters 4 and 5 track the decline of Haririâs influence in Syria due to the rise of a young âAlawite factionâ (p. 55) around president-to-be Bashar al-Assad, which sidelined Haririâs primarily Sunni allies, all from an older generation. This led to the election of pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud as a counterweight to the prime minister in 1998. The eventual âshowdownâ between the âHariri campâ and the âAlawite factionâ occurred in 2004, when the Syrian regime sought an unconstitutional extension of Lahoudâs term against Haririâs opposition. In September 2004 the United Nations Security Council passed the U.S.-French sponsored resolution 1559, demanding presidential elections without foreign (i.e., Syrian) interference but also the disarmament of Hizbullah and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Blanford maintains that Hariri opposed the latter two clauses but the Syrian regime accused Hariri of using his international connections–particularly with French President Jacques Chirac–to pressure Syria. Blanford writes that Hariri sought reconciliation with the Syrian regime through secret late-night meetings with Hizbullah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah. Moreover, Hariri refused to openly align himself with Lebanonâs anti-Syrian opposition. According to Blanford, Haririâs assassination is tragic because his efforts at reconciliation went unheeded.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with Hariri's assassination in February 2005 and its aftermath. Blanford holds Syriaâs âAlawite factionâ and Lebanonâs security agencies responsible. U.S. neoconservatives used the international investigation into the assassination to pressure Syria but Blanford does not discuss the potentially problematic nature of this type of politicized international justice. Haririâs son Saad assumed political leadership of the Sunni community and joined the predominantly Christian and Druze anti-Syrian coalition in organizing large-scale demonstrations. The biggest protest happened on March 14, 2005, earning the coalition the name âMarch 14.â They confronted âMarch 8,â led by the Shiite Hizbullah, which relied on an alliance with Syria to continue its armed struggle against Israel. Blanford laments the rising sectarianism among the two camps, yet he does not fully explore Rafiq Haririâs own role in sectarian politics: âAlthough he was the undisputed leader of Lebanonâs Sunnis, his talent, charm and muscle resonated across the confessional divide, making him a national figure capable of transcending Lebanonâs sectarian hurdles to steer the country independently from the clutches of Syriaâ (p. 210). This characterization does little justice to the complexities of sectarian leadership. Blanford does not examine how the Saudi billionaire became the âundisputed leaderâ of his community, what role his charities played, or how Hariri sidelined the established Sunni elite who resented âthis immensely wealthy Saudi-backed newcomerâ (p. 46). By considering these questions, Blanford could have examined the role that Lebanese political leaders play in reproducing sectarian and clientelist discourses and practices. Blanford mentions the growing sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shiites and accusations against Saad Hariri of pandering to sectarian prejudice in the parliamentary elections of 2005 (pp. 172-173), but fails to follow up on these accusations. Finally, an epilogue describes the authorâs experience of the Israeli-Lebanese war of 2006, and concludes that Hariri could have helped contain the war had he been alive.

Blanford relies almost exclusively on interviews conducted after Haririâs assassination. His choice of interviewees is strongly tilted towards former allies, advisors, and protÃ©gÃ©s of Rafiq Hariri such as Johnny Abdo, Nohad Mashnouq, Fouad Siniora, and Abdel-Halim Khaddam. Many of these individuals are now close to Haririâs son. Almost all the interviews were conducted in the midst of the political struggle between members of March 14 and March 8. Blanford does not pause to reflect what effect this may have had on the narratives of his interlocutors. Actually, some of the most interesting insights of the book come from those interviewees who were not an integral part of the âHariri camp.â Blanford describes members of March 14 in highly positive terms: Nayla Mouawad is âan energetic and attractive womanâ (p. 143), Saad Hariri is âtall and well-builtâ (p. 168), the late Gibran Tueni had âdark 1930s-matinee-idol looksâ (p. 182). In contrast, Haririâs opponents are described as physically unattractive and socially inept: Michel Aoun is a âshort, egotistical army generalâ (p. 170) while Omar Karami is âcolorlessâ (p. 41). Emile Lahoudâs surprisingly positive image has been created by a public relations campaign (p. 68). These characterizations stand in the way of dispassionate analysis.

Blanford should be applauded for digging up a lot of interesting material about Hariri. He constructs the most coherent account of Haririâs life in the English language

thus far, which is no mean feat. However, Blanford fails to evaluate his sources properly and he leaves many questions unasked. The book can be useful for researchers interested in the billionaire-politician or in Lebanese politics since the 1980s but they will have to evaluate the interview material that Blanford presents with a more dispassionate eye.

Note

[1]. For an account of Hariri protÃ©gÃ©s heading government agencies, see Guilain Denoeux and Robert Springborg, âHaririâs Lebanon: Singapore of the Middle East or Sanaa of the Levant?â *Middle East Policy* 2 (1998): 162. The following account of postwar government finance policy is based on Toufik K. Gaspard, *A Political Economy of Lebanon, 1948 â 2002* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 210-221; and Samir Makdisi, *The Lessons of Lebanon: The Economics of War and Development* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 90-159.

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