To Live and Die in Beirut

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The assassination of his father catapulted Saad Hariri into office. Now his family&rsquo;s vast business empire, as well as America&rsquo;s Mideast hopes, hinges on whether he can survive.

Amid the Mercedes-choked broil of West Beirut&mdash;where it&rsquo;s not unusual to see a beautiful woman in Chanel and plastic-surgery bandages gliding past soldiers in armored trucks&mdash;sits a salmon-colored stone mansion. Called Koreitem, it is a monument to pride and paranoia that takes up an entire city block. In here, past bomb-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, and windows shuttered to foil snipers, lurks Saad Hariri. A 37-year-old former business executive with a fondness for Partagas cigars and vintage roadsters, he is one of Lebanon&rsquo;s richest men (worth a reported $2.3 billion), head of the country&rsquo;s ruling party, and a prisoner in his own vast home.

On a moist, sea-scented evening, at around dinnertime, angry crowds have blocked the downtown streets near the city&rsquo;s Mediterranean port. Amid blazing trash fires, burbling hookahs, and trucks blaring martial music, 100,000 or so protesters have turned the night into an antagonistic carnival. With banners and slogans, they mock Saad Hariri and curse his name. They accuse his family of thievery. They want nothing less than to destroy him and the government his party controls. Already, riots have broken out; shots have been fired. One man has been left dead. There are reports of tires burning on the airport road.

As the crowd outside grows increasingly agitated, Hariri skulks into a greeting room in Koreitem&rsquo;s fourth-floor offices. Here, his late father once received such dignitaries as former French president Jacques Chirac. There are no dignitaries tonight, only a lone army colonel with a prosthetic hand. The colonel announces that he lost the real one &ldquo;in service to my country!&rdquo; The Lebanese army is notoriously ill trained. When pressed for details, the colonel admits he lost it in an accident&mdash;while showing recruits how to safely handle a grenade. The sight of Saad shaking the proud colonel&rsquo;s fake hand and pretending not to notice seems telling.

&ldquo;If my father were still alive, we wouldn&rsquo;t have this,&rdquo; Saad says, collapsing onto a stiff chair in a nearby office, his own hand mysteriously bandaged in a splint. &ldquo;What has happened here in these two years has been a disaster. Tsunami after tsunami, bombs, terrorism.&rdquo;

With America&rsquo;s Iraq policy in shambles, Iran defying -Western powers by building a bomb, Saudi Arabia looking to erect its own nuclear plant to counter Iran&rsquo;s nuclear ambitions, and the entire Middle East worse for wear thanks in part to American efforts in the region, the last thing the Bush administration wants, the last thing it needs, is to lose Lebanon.

But two years after its vaunted independence revolution drove Syrian troops out of the country&mdash;ending a 29-year military occupation&mdash;Lebanon is once again in flames and looking like an Afghanistan of foreign-policy bungling. It was supposed to be a model for Arab states; a beacon of democracy; a liberal, modern, and Western-loving government that America could count on. Now there&rsquo;s this: a powder-keg standoff in the streets. On one side, the freely elected government of Saad Hariri; on the other, the Shiite militant organization Hezbollah and its hyperthyroid followers. With backing from Syria and Iran, Hezbollah-&mdash;which serves as Iran&rsquo;s proxy army and ideological placeholder on the scene&mdash;is trying to topple Saad Hariri&rsquo;s Sunni-dominated and Western-backed administration. If Iran and Syria can&rsquo;t have Lebanon, they want to mire it in conflict and chaos.

To prevent this, the U.S. has pinned its hopes on Saad Hariri, a businessman&rsquo;s son with little political know-how. Saad came to power as head of the Future Movement party in 2005, after assassins killed his father, Rafik Hariri, the nation&rsquo;s former prime minister and a critic of Syria, in a Valentine&rsquo;s Day bomb blast. The explosion cratered a city street and left 23 people dead. It so outraged the nation, which blamed Syria, that a populist uprising quickly forced Syrian troops to withdraw. Then, in one of the most stage--managed revolutions ever to play out on TV screens (midwifed by local advertising execs and spin-doctored by U.S. diplomats, who coined the term Cedar Revolution to sell it to Americans who might find its real name, Independence Intifada, off-putting), Saad rode his father&rsquo;s funeral procession into office. He now holds his father&rsquo;s old parliamentary seat and effectively controls the sectarian government through his majority party. This fall, if all goes as planned, he could be chosen as Lebanon&rsquo;s second-youngest prime minister ever.

It is not a job he wanted. Saad Hariri had been living a rewarding life in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, running the family&rsquo;s $8 billion construction, banking, and telecom group, Saudi Oger. The Hariris are one of the wealthiest families in the

Middle East, if not the wealthiest non-oil clan. They are part owners of the $37.5 billion Arab Bank, one of the largest financial institutions in the region. Their construction arm, second only to the bin Ladens&rsquo;, is taking part in a $1.5 billion rebuilding project in downtown Amman, Jordan. Their purchase of Türk Telekom last year for $6.55 billion, spearheaded by Saad, was the biggest private deal in Turkey&rsquo;s history.

Along the way, the family has also laid claim to some strategic trophy properties, including the 75-story Texas Commerce Tower (now known as the J.P. Morgan Chase Tower) in Houston. Rafik&rsquo;s name adorns the School of Management building at Boston University, where his eldest son, Bahaa, attended college and now sits on the dean&rsquo;s advisory council. When Rafik died at the age of 60, he was among the richest politicians on the planet. The fortune he left behind made three of his children the world&rsquo;s youngest billionaires.

Yet despite their vast wealth and investments across several continents, no real estate is more valuable&mdash;or more meaningful&mdash;to the Hariris than Lebanon itself. There is loyalty to the homeland, to be sure, as well as Rafik&rsquo;s legacy. But there is also the $2.5 billion of the nation&rsquo;s debt the Hariri bank holds (debt Rafik helped run up as prime minister). And there are billions more in development projects, including an $18 billion downtown Beirut rebuilding effort, which could be in jeopardy should Hez-bollah seize power. With its patriarch gone, the family empire is at risk. Without a strong hand to guide Lebanon, the country itself is at risk.

This past year has been the -bloodiest and most destabilizing for Lebanon since the fratricidal civil war from 1975 to 1990. Yet despite the car bombs, the shootings, and the attacks on United Nations peacekeepers that have beset the country all summer, the coming weeks could pose the darkest challenge to Saad Hariri and his U.S. patrons. On September 25, Lebanon&rsquo;s parliament is scheduled to elect a replacement for the current Syrian-backed president, Émile Lahoud, a man who openly despised Rafik Hariri and whom Saad considers an accomplice in his father&rsquo;s death. Political experts expect the Future -Movement-dominated parliament to elect one of its own to the presidency. With Lahoud out of the way, Western officials expect Saad&rsquo;s party to choose him as the next prime minister, giving him political stewardship of the entire government. Lahoud, however, has other plans.

In a veiled political threat, Lahoud has suggested he may form a par-allel government. The result could be a constitutional meltdown, if not civil war. The potential fallout is made more perilous by a U.N. report that new weapons are flowing across the Syrian border into the hands of Hezbollah, as well as to Islamic militants living in the country&rsquo;s Palestinian refugee camps, whom the army has been battling since May in the deadliest challenge to the country since the civil war.

This means that Saad is under great pressure to deliver. The pressure is coming not just from the White House but from his own family. Saad must succeed amid rumors that his stepmother, Nazek&mdash;who holds court in a gilded Paris mansion that once belonged to Gustave Eiffel and heads the family&rsquo;s powerful charity foundation&mdash;is not happy with his handling of the crisis. &ldquo;She herself has political ambitions,&rdquo; says a Western official. Saad must succeed as his older brother, Bahaa, a 41-year-old financier, expresses his own political ambitions in the Lebanese press. But most crucially, Saad must succeed under constant threat to his own life.

Since his father died, bombs or bullets have claimed the lives of seven of Saad&rsquo;s anti-Syrian political allies. The murders are part of a deadly chess game; with each parliamentarian killed, Saad comes closer to losing his majority control. (Five more dead and it&rsquo;s over for his group.) The most attractive targets are members of the Hariri-controlled cabinet. Almost two weeks before we first meet, on the eve of last December&rsquo;s demonstrations, Saad&rsquo;s closest friend, Pierre Gemayel, a 34-year-old cabinet minister who was expected to become the next president, was gunned down on a Beirut street in broad daylight. In this macabre standoff, Saad&rsquo;s death could lead to a dire endgame and turn Lebanon into a black hole of conflict.

&ldquo;This was not a choice,&rdquo; Saad tells me, gesturing to the darkened windows, the advisers who reek of cigarette smoke, and beyond to the guards brandishing assault rifles in the street, protecting the entrance to his refuge. He tears the Velcro off his splint, flexing his swollen fingers. Then, just as gingerly, he wraps it back in place. &ldquo;One has no choice in such situations,&rdquo; he goes on. &ldquo;The call that we had, as a family, we just had to do it. It&rsquo;s a burden, a responsibility.&rdquo; When I ask what happened to his hand, he reveals a streak of dark humor. &ldquo;When Pierre died,&rdquo; he says, studying the hand for a moment, then looking up with a smirk, &ldquo;I punched a door.&rdquo;

It&rsquo;s not easy to get into Koreitem or to gain an audience with Saad Hariri. He rarely grants interviews. Unlike his father, who built a media empire of radio and TV stations and newspapers, and cultivated journalists and enjoyed their gossip at local cafés, Saad prefers to issue statements. And when he does, it&rsquo;s usually in front of a nest of cameras feeding to the family-owned Future TV network. And it&rsquo;s usual to vent at Syria.

Saad is an awkward public speaker. He comes off as stiff, artless, flat. During a visit to the White House following his father&rsquo;s death and at a round of meetings with important Lebanese Americans around Washington, he struck many as in over his head. &ldquo;It was hard to see him and not feel sympathy for him,&rdquo; says Julia Choucair, who met Saad on that trip while she was an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. &ldquo;He doesn&rsquo;t have much political presence. You either have it or you don&rsquo;t.&rdquo;

Saad&rsquo;s friends, and even dispassionate local journalists, swear he&rsquo;s better one-on-one, that he&rsquo;s intelligent and warm, cultured, even funny. But when we first sit down together, the paunchy man slumped in a chair, absently stroking his goatee, sullenly windmilling a black Italian loafer, just seems out of it.

The months following his father&rsquo;s death&mdash;while emotionally draining for his family&mdash;were politically promising. Saad, a married father of three young children, stood arm in arm with his brothers, addressing adoring crowds of supporters. Then came last summer&rsquo;s war, instigated by Hezbollah but made worse by Israel. The U.S. ignored public pleas from Lebanon to stop the Israeli assault, which laid waste to large swaths of the country, crippling the Beirut airport and blockading the nation&rsquo;s ports.

Emboldened by its moral victory over Israel, Hezbollah and its opposition allies&mdash;prodded by Iran&mdash;demanded more seats in the ruling party&rsquo;s cabinet, which would have effectively given the group veto power. When Saad&rsquo;s bloc refused, Hezbollah withdrew from the government. Then it marched on Beirut in an attempt to bring down the government. The Hezbollah demonstration, in its sixth day when Saad and I meet, will drag on for months, paralyzing the state.

&ldquo;When I was a businessman, things were straightforward,&rdquo; Saad begins. He stares across the room as he speaks, focusing on a sofa-size portrait of his father. The mansion, which Rafik had built around an old stone villa, is filled with similar images, propped atop wooden easels and surrounded by funereal sprays of carnations. Everything inside is quiet. In a nearby room, men silently watch Leonardo DiCaprio in The Man in the Iron Mask with the sound turned down.

&ldquo;In business, you have only yourself to rely on,&rdquo; says Saad. &ldquo;There&rsquo;s much more freedom to make decisions on new strategies or new ventures. Nobody is guessing your agenda. But now you&rsquo;re living in the world of politics. You&rsquo;re dealing with affairs nobody can agree on.&rdquo; He stops and laughs. &ldquo;It&rsquo;s a far more complicated process,&rdquo; he says. &ldquo;It&rsquo;s a puzzle. And you have to fit all the pieces in the right place.&rdquo;

Lebanese politics is a down and dirty business, dominated by religious and ethnic allegiances, petty concerns, blood feuds, and personal agendas. No one managed it better than Rafik Hariri, who marshaled a powerful will, personal charm, negotiating savvy, and suitcases stuffed with cash to get things done. He paid off adversaries and those seeking a handout to halt violence and get his legislation approved. He single--handedly rebuilt Beirut following Lebanon&rsquo;s civil war, restoring the nation&rsquo;s pride and some of its lost luster. (He clearly relished his role as savior, telling Jamil Mroue, publisher of the English-language Daily Star, &ldquo;This work is more satisfying than sex.&rdquo;) But the rebirth came with a price.

Part of the anger and suspicion in the streets is aimed at the corruption of &ldquo;Hariri Inc.&rdquo; Saad has not only inherited this anger; he&rsquo;s inherited a government rife with patronage and cronyism. To appreciate this legacy, you must understand how Rafik Hariri ruled Lebanon.

The son of a Lebanese orange farmer, Rafik went to Saudi Arabia in the late 1960s to make his fortune in the oil-soaked construction boom. He struck gold when he and a business partner landed a contract with the Saudi royal family. By 1982, he had done $10 billion worth of work as a favored vendor of the Saudi king, building bridges, palaces, compounds, and the nation&rsquo;s Prince Sultan Air Base, becoming one of the richest men in the world. &ldquo;Rafik was lucky, in the right place at the right time,&rdquo; says Marwan Iskandar, a Lebanese economist and friend of Rafik&rsquo;s. &ldquo;He always said it could have been someone else.&rdquo;

As Rafik amassed his fortune, his homeland burned. The civil war that erupted in 1975, between Christians and Muslims, was ravaging Beirut&rsquo;s center, where Ottoman-era mansions, cafés, and souks had become a wasteland of snipers and wild dogs. Rafik used his wealth and political ties to stop the war and make plans to rebuild. First, as King Fahd&rsquo;s envoy, he used Saudi backing and cash to broker cease-fires. He was rumored to have given money to opposing militias, prompting accusations that he helped destroy Lebanon to rebuild it.

Syria had sent 7,500 troops into Beirut in 1987 to halt the fighting and then decided to stay put. Lebanon had formerly been a Syrian territory until the French took it over after World War I and ruled until Lebanon&rsquo;s independence in 1943. The Syrians, who have never accepted an independent Lebanon, wound up running its smaller neighbor like a mob syndicate, with a network of spies, army officers, and politicians all funneling graft back to their masters. If Rafik Hariri wanted to play, he had to play Syria&rsquo;s game.

By 1989, Rafik&mdash;working with the Saudis&mdash;had helped arrange a lasting peace among the various militias. But the deal he cooked up also formalized Syria&rsquo;s role in restoring stability to the shattered nation. Three years later, after much lobbying from Rafik, he became prime minister, with Syria&rsquo;s blessing. Family members were worried. They did not want him involved in Lebanon&rsquo;s fractious politics. &ldquo;We were against it, as a family,&rdquo; Saad says. &ldquo;We all tried to talk him out of becoming prime minister. It was a danger. We see how things turned out.&rdquo;

Rafik quickly began mixing his politics with his money. Prior to the civil war, Beirut&mdash;with its deep port and one of the longest commercial airstrips in the region at the time&mdash;had been a center of banking and trade, as well as a tourist destination for the entire region and much of the Francophone world. The 1970s jet set had dubbed it the Paris of the Middle East, both for its picturesque mix of colonial and Arab architecture and for its lax French-inspired mores. But the war wiped all that out and took Lebanon&rsquo;s economy with it. Rafik&rsquo;s dream was to tap into the growing global market created by free-flowing capital, financial service centers, and oil-rich sheiks looking to escape the burkas and the booze-free zones of their desert kingdoms. &ldquo;My father believed in Lebanon,&rdquo; Saad says. &ldquo;He believed in the people. He believed they deserved to rebuild their country.&rdquo;

Rafik Hariri created a reconstruction company called Solidere, seized all land in the bombed-out city center, and managed the rebuilding effort. The redevelopment would cover 472 acres and cost $18 billion. (Rafik would later be accused of bribing 40 parliament members with up to $100,000 each or interest-free loans from his bank of up to $1 million, in return for their passing the law that approved the new plan. Rafik always denied it, and no charges were ever filed.) Rafik then appointed men from his own companies to run the firm.

When Solidere went public in 1994, it raised $650 million from investors. Rafik bought in for $180 million, close to the 10 percent ownership cap, becoming its largest stockholder. To supporters, he was putting his money where his mouth was. But to critics, such involvement was a blatant conflict of interest; they felt that Rafik was treating the prime minister&rsquo;s post as his own private real estate office. &ldquo;Hariri was not a leader of Lebanon,&rdquo; says Mroue, who as publisher of the Daily Star chronicled Rafik&rsquo;s rise. &ldquo;He was chairman of the board.&rdquo;

But trouble was brewing between Rafik and the Syrians, who would come to feel their onetime vassal had become too powerful, with too many influential friends. In the immediate aftermath of post-Saddam Iraq, Rafik&rsquo;s ties to the West seemed suspect. &ldquo;If you want to understand what happened to Hariri, think The Godfather,&rdquo; a Lebanese journalist says. &ldquo;Two gangsters get into a fight over turf. One loses. Now his son is in the middle.&rdquo;

No one expected Saad Hariri to succeed his father in politics. Before he arrived on the scene, few people in Lebanon even knew him. He had spent much of his adult life in Saudi Arabia. (The Saudi goatee he still wears is a reminder to many that he is an outsider.) Unlike his father, Saad grew up privileged and connected; he had bodyguards, flew on private jets, socialized with Saudi princes. But Rafik, a devout Muslim, had schooled his children on modesty.

&ldquo;My father was against what you&rsquo;d call the capriciousness of the rich,&rdquo; says Saad&rsquo;s half brother Fahed, a 26-year-old architect. Fahed, who inherited $2.3 billion, discusses the family with me one January afternoon in his Paris apartment. It is a big place, stuffed with Nan Goldin photos (still crated), guarded by a couch-jumping Italian greyhound, and overlooking the Place de la Concorde, where Marie Antoinette lost her head. &ldquo;This is something the whole family learned in Saudi Arabia,&rdquo; he says, &ldquo;this nobility they have. We could have taken a car to a nightclub and done the whole flashy thing. My sister, Hind, could have been Paris Hilton. But our father was respected and admired by everyone. Why would we seek that?&rdquo;

After Saad graduated from Georgetown University in 1992 with a bachelor&rsquo;s in international business, Rafik put him to work learning the ins and outs of business at Oger. He supervised construction sites, and as a maintenance contractor for the Saudi royal palaces, he was on call night and day. But by the time he became general manager, he was eager to prove himself and diversify beyond rebar and poured concrete. He began spending billions of dollars of his father&rsquo;s money buying up cell-phone licenses, partnering with big boys like Virgin Mobile and Qualcomm in such places as South Africa, Pakistan, and Romania.

&ldquo;It took my father a bit of time, because my father was a very down-to-earth man,&rdquo; Fahed says. &ldquo;He liked buildings, things you could see. &lsquo;Money is here; why would it be over there?&rsquo; Telecom seemed like a wild gamble. Saad convinced him. He pushed Oger.&rdquo;

Saad was negotiating his crowning business achievement, the purchase of Türk Telekom, when assassins killed his father. In the days that followed, it was not Saad, but Bahaa, who took charge of the family&rsquo;s affairs and became the face of its grief. Bahaa addressed the angry crowds looking for answers to the murder and political solutions to the Syrian occupation. But it was not Bahaa who became the chosen heir. &ldquo;My brother wanted to go back to his private life,&rdquo; Saad told me in Beirut, then jokingly added, &ldquo;He is the older brother, so he pushed me: &lsquo;Listen,
you go and take that job.&rsquo;&thinsp;&rdquo; But when I pressed him about rumors that he himself orchestrated his ascent, he turned serious: &ldquo;I hear people say that I pushed myself on somebody&rsquo;s shoulders to make myself the leader. You don&rsquo;t take that seriously. Some people speak of a political dynasty, but it is not like that.&rdquo;

The family says it collectively agreed that Saad should be the one to assume his father&rsquo;s mantle. But according to

Western officials and people in Saad&rsquo;s party, the Saudis did the pushing. The royal family has long kept a strong hand in Lebanese affairs, and being Sunni Muslims, as are the Hariris, the Saudis have a strategic interest in keeping the Syrian regime and its Hezbollah allies at bay. They already knew Saad from his work in Riyadh and preferred his deferential style over Bahaa&rsquo;s unpredictable temper. &ldquo;Bahaa has a very strong personality,&rdquo; Fahed says. &ldquo;In Chinese astrology, he is horse and fire, which is very rare and strong. I love him for this because he is straight and direct. Saad is a different kind of intelligence. We can say he&rsquo;s more diplomatic than Bahaa.&rdquo;

Whatever diplomatic skills Saad Hariri may possess seem outmatched during that first week of last December. The Shiites from the hardscrabble south, an area that Rafik&rsquo;s vision of rebirth largely overlooked, have surrounded the Grand Serail, the prime minister&rsquo;s headquarters, where Fouad Siniora, whom Saad&rsquo;s family had picked for the job, is holed up like a prisoner. Thousands of protesters are pressed close to rolls of concertina wire, watched over by nervous soldiers. There is a real danger they could surge and storm the building. Unable to cool things down, Saad, blockaded in Koreitem, instead finds himself ratcheting up the tension, engaging in televised mudslinging with Hezbollah&rsquo;s eloquent and fiery media-savvy leader, Hassan Nasrallah. The nation, already tense, seems to teeter at the edge of the abyss.

&ldquo;Were it his father, he would have done things differently,&rdquo; Ghazi Youssef, an economics professor and former adviser to Rafik (and now a parliament member on Saad&rsquo;s ticket) says over coffee at Koreitem, as the clash unfolds that winter day. &ldquo;He would have calmed things down. The father would have picked up the phone and said, &lsquo;What are you doing? This is crazy. We should not do this. We should do that.&rsquo; It would have all been done behind closed doors.&rdquo;

But there is also a shrewd political calculation behind Saad&rsquo;s outbursts. As the power broker for all Sunnis in Lebanon, Saad must make sure Shiites don&rsquo;t infringe on his base&rsquo;s interests.So when Hezbollah pinned Siniora behind barbed wire, it was understood as a threat to Sunni power, not just to the government. Saad made sure Sunnis rose up in their strongholds at Sidon and Tripoli, staging massive rallies that were broadcast on his Future TV.

Saad has been willing to play that sectarian card in a way his allies consider risky. He has been accused of funding Al Qaeda-inspired Sunni jihadists in Lebanon. A close adviser told me that doing so was a necessary evil. But less than 24 hours after the adviser&rsquo;s admission, in early May, one such group attacked the army. Saad&rsquo;s Western patrons say they&rsquo;re worried about such ties. &ldquo;We&rsquo;re not particularly comfortable with some of his relationships,&rdquo; a Western official tells me just days before the fighting breaks out. But the U.S. is also playing a similar game in the region, backing Sunni militants as a way to counter Iran. After all, the U.S. may very much like&mdash;and need&mdash;Saad&rsquo;s combative friends.

It may be unfair to judge Saad against his statesmanlike father. But he has made some bad calls. Worried about his safety, he left Lebanon for six months after the 2005 elections. At times, he was holed up in a $4,000-a-night suite at the Plaza Athénée in Paris, a rococo affair done up in reds and golds, with views of the Eiffel Tower. &ldquo;His security people have total control over him,&rdquo; says a family intimate. &ldquo;His security has become so important that it overshadows everything in his life.&rdquo;

Then, during last summer&rsquo;s war&mdash;as Nasrallah gave orders from a bunker and Siniora managed the crisis from the Grand Serail&mdash;Saad hit the road again. He said he was traveling to promote &ldquo;diplomatic resistance,&rdquo; using his family ties with such people as Chirac to pressure Israel. &ldquo;It was a mistake,&rdquo; says a Western observer who was in Lebanon during the war. &ldquo;Given the displacement of people, the bombardment, he should have been here.&rdquo; The absences hurt his street credibility, as does his inability to stop the ongoing standoff.

Saad has also had to fend off skirmishes within his own circle. Political observers in Lebanon, Western officials, and members of his party say that from the start, he easily fell prey to his father&rsquo;s warring former advisers, each jockeying for influence. &ldquo;Hariri ran the store, and everyone else was&mdash;I&rsquo;m not going to say a puppet, but they were accessories,&rdquo; says Mroue, the Daily Star publisher. &ldquo;Rafik pulled the levers of state. Now the levers are trying to move themselves, and it&rsquo;s a mess.&rdquo;

One of the biggest internal threats has come from the man the Hariris themselves chose to succeed Rafik in the top office. While Saad is head of the parliamentary majority, Fouad Siniora&mdash;who had served as his father&rsquo;s finance minister&mdash;heads the government as prime minister. Saad could have taken the job for himself, as many had expected him to do, but he wisely deferred to Siniora. &ldquo;I wasn&rsquo;t ready,&rdquo; Saad tells me. Instead, the Hariris anointed Siniora as a caretaker prime minister who would lead until Saad could mature politically.

But after last summer&rsquo;s war, Siniora&rsquo;s rise in stature&mdash;from backroom technocrat to battle-tested leader who now has Condoleezza Rice&rsquo;s ear&mdash;irked Saad. &ldquo;Saad was very insecure about his relationship to -Siniora,&rdquo; says one Western analyst in Beirut. &ldquo;And the family started feeling that -Siniora had usurped the role that belonged to a Hariri and that he had forgotten who put him there. And for his part, Siniora felt that Saad was treating him as a paid hand.&rdquo; But over the past year, Saad has come to appreciate Siniora and their separation of roles, and the value in having an internationally recognized prime minister who doesn&rsquo;t have to give in to political wrangling the way Saad must.

&ldquo;I really think that Saad has grown into the job very credibly,&rdquo; says Jeffrey Feltman, the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, who cautions against simplistic criticism of Saad. &ldquo;I think he&rsquo;s done better than most people thrust into that position could have done. There&rsquo;s a lot of things to criticize. He has had to learn on the job. And I think he has.&rdquo;

In January, Saad finally achieved a major political victory, the first real success of his short tenure. Thanks to Chirac and Saad&rsquo;s lobbying of the White House, the U.S. agreed to give Lebanon $770 million as part of a $7.6 billion -international-aid package. The money is meant to help the country rebuild following last summer&rsquo;s war, bolster its military, and offset Lebanon&rsquo;s $41 billion in public debt. (Per capita, that makes this tiny nation of 4 million the most debt-ridden on the planet.) The aid package requires the Lebanese government and parliament to weed out corruption, privatize the $6 billion telecom sector, and create an independent judiciary. &ldquo;We need to make the government more clean,&rdquo; Saad tells me. &ldquo;We need to reform the laws to make companies feel at ease doing business here. We want to be a free market and a clean market.&rdquo;

Saad and his party, however, had promised those things early on, even before the 2006 war and the deadlock with Hezbollah. As a result, say experts, they squandered their early political capital. The personal losses could also pile up. The Hariris&rsquo; stake in Solidere&mdash;the reconstruction entity Rafik established to rebuild the old city center&mdash;has already netted the family millions of dollars in profit. That stake could be worth hundreds of millions more if the entire revitalization zone is ever fully developed. If they lose control of the government, the project would almost surely stagnate.

&ldquo;In terms of financial power, Saad has that,&rdquo; the Daily Star&rsquo;s Mroue says. &ldquo;Is he going to use that in Lebanon? We know that Saad hasn&rsquo;t exhibited the passion. The reason that Rafik was successful is that he had the passion for politics. Every kid dreams of Santa Claus. But every Lebanese kid dreams of being Rafik Hariri, of saying, &lsquo;I want to strike gold; I want to come back; I want to own five airplanes; I want to have an entourage of 200 people. I want to create a movement that has offices across the nation, in every village, and be able to pay lavishly for it.&rsquo;&thinsp;&rdquo;

As winter turns to spring in Lebanon, Hezbollah&rsquo;s followers tire of their tent city and go home to the south. They leave behind their tents and a few bored acolytes, who still manage to draw a couple hundred faithful on weekends, but nothing compared with the frenzied crowds of last December.

Overall, there seems to be a sense of relief in those early weeks of May. Saad is on the verge of a second political victory; the U.N. Security Council is just days away from approving the special court that will try his father&rsquo;s killers. The upcoming presidential election, if scuttled, is the only thing that can halt the momentum now. &ldquo;My belief is that the Syrians will try to stop this election,&rdquo; Saad says. &ldquo;They want a constitutional void. First of all, because they want to cripple the tribunal in the murder of my father.&rdquo;

We are once again inside the fortified confines of Koreitem, but this time there are fewer guards and less tension, and Saad appears upbeat and confident. In fact, he appears just as friends describe him: warm, open, and slyly comical. He has asked our photographer if he should put on a tie for a photo shoot. His advisers all nod eagerly. (Saad has managed to jettison or marginalize those among his father&rsquo;s former advisers whom he doesn&rsquo;t like. In fact, one Western official says, &ldquo;There&rsquo;s a courtesan atmosphere in that house, where everyone tells Saad how wonderful he is and how terrible everyone else is.&rdquo;) When he returns with a silk tie, he shoves it against his neck, mugging in a preening manner that makes everyone laugh.

Realizing his earlier missteps, Saad has been spending much of his time in Lebanon. But he still manages to jet between international capitals, conferring with the Saudis, courting the Russians, seeking Security Council support in Africa, visiting his old friend Chirac (who, after retiring, moved into a Hariri-family-owned Paris apartment), or spending long weekends with his wife and three children in Riyadh.

Feeling safer, Saad has even managed to slip out to impromptu public lunches, including a recent one in the Beirut neighborhood of Verdun, a mall-saturated zone of fashionistas and young supporters, where he received a standing ovation. &ldquo;But my wife scolded me,&rdquo; he says to me during my visit in May. It&rsquo;s little wonder she did, since 48 hours after that meeting, the Palestinian camps explode and a bomb goes off in Verdun, plunging Lebanon into another bloody summer.

Though Saad is hardly in control of his country, his assertion when we first met last December that he is trying to learn on the job at least seems to bear out. With this newest bit of chaos and bloodshed, Saad shows himself to be, of necessity, politically agile and decisive. First, he publicly backs the army against the Sunni radicals. Then, he uses his own money&mdash;and plane&mdash;to fly in bulletproof vests for the Lebanese army. When President Bush called him from aboard Air Force One, Saad asked him to expedite the assistance program to the Lebanese army and add more weapons and ammo. Bush promised he would.

Saad uses his Future TV network to keep his Sunni constituency, many of whom sympathize with the extremists, on the army&rsquo;s side. Hezbollah&rsquo;s Nasrallah seems momentarily neutered; after he publicly warned the army not to go after the extremists inside the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, calling a potential invasion of the camp a &ldquo;red line&rdquo; that must not be crossed, the army disregarded his warning and went into the camp anyway. It&rsquo;s remarkable: The Sunnis have always viewed the Christian-dominated military as suspect. But here is Saad&mdash;a Sunni&mdash;backing the Christian-led army against a Sunni foe.

For a moment, Saad almost looks like a national leader. But really, he is very much an old-school clannish chief. And he can&rsquo;t be a national leader until he fixes the problem with Nasrallah.

When I ask about Hezbollah&rsquo;s gridlock protest, Saad says he is looking for a compromise that will allow Hezbollah supporters to leave &ldquo;with a face--saving way out.&rdquo; In truth, Saad&rsquo;s coalition cannot govern without Hezbollah. Nor can Hezbollah govern without Saad&rsquo;s Sunnis. In this power-sharing society, they&rsquo;re stuck with each other.

But in his approach to Hezbollah these days, Saad seems to have taken on a new persona. He no longer waffles over Hezbollah&rsquo;s demands that it be allowed to keep its arms as a hedge against Israel. &ldquo;Nobody can give this guarantee,&rdquo; Saad tells me firmly when I ask about Hezbollah&rsquo;s being allowed to keep its weapons. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has amassed an enormous stockpile of new rockets and says it has the ability to hit anywhere inside Israel. Each side has accused the other of being a tool of larger regional players, which both clearly are. Saad seems solidly focused on his primary enemies next door, Syria and Iran.

&ldquo;Hezbollah takes an action like this, and yet there is a country&rdquo;&mdash;Iran&mdash;&ldquo;that is streaming all these weapons and all this money to Hezbollah and nothing happens to them,&rdquo; Saad says. &ldquo;We don&rsquo;t want a war with Hezbollah and Syria. But we want everyone to be responsible for their own actions. Lebanon should not be a battlefield for Israel against Iran. Or Syria against Israel. Or Iran against Israel. Or anyone for that matter.&rdquo;

As for his old life, Saad says he misses using the business part of his brain. He has now handed over the reins of Oger to his half brother Ayman, who had been living in Washington, D.C., and running a Maryland-based software firm when he was called back home after his father died. Saad is now playing the role Rafik once played with him, that of mentor. &ldquo;Saad is the one who carried Oger for 12 years while my father was in office,&rdquo; Fahed had told me in Paris. &ldquo;He is still on the board, and he still makes major decisions. The final decision is in his hands. You can say he is like the Godfather.&rdquo;

When I repeat the analogy to Saad, he laughs. &ldquo;Maybe mentor is a better word,&rdquo; he says, &ldquo;although Godfather is not bad. It is my favorite movie.&rdquo; He then turns wistful, philosophical. &ldquo;One thing I keep saying to my brothers is that, beforehand, we had our father and we were living as a family,&rdquo; he says. We are upstairs now, in his father&rsquo;s old offices, a place Saad had not opened to outsiders in two years. A red rose and a photo of Rafik decorate every chair that Rafik used during meetings. It is disturbingly intimate. A dozen advisers and bodyguards hang back in the posture of penitents.

&ldquo;Things are different today,&rdquo; Saad continues. &ldquo;Today we are still a family, but my brothers and I are also partners. So this is something new. So now we have to get used to us being partners in addition to being a family. And I believe we have done so very well.&rdquo;

One decision Saad has not addressed is his next move. Family members very much want a Hariri in the role of prime minister. According to Western officials who know the family, it would be unwise to let -Siniora keep that job beyond the September elections. &ldquo;I think at that point, the family would start worrying that Siniora has become a juggernaut,&rdquo; an official says. &ldquo;I think Saad will end up taking the job.&rdquo;

When I ask Saad if he&rsquo;ll take the position, he considers for a moment and then offers a typically Arab answer: &ldquo;If it&rsquo;s something I have to do one day, I&rsquo;ll do it. But if I don&rsquo;t have to, I won&rsquo;t.&rdquo; He pauses and adds, &ldquo;I will not turn it down if it is asked of me.&rdquo;

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http://www.portfolio.com/careers/features/2007/08/13/Saad-Hariri-Profile/?

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