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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Lebanon: A New Government to Preempt a Presidential Vacuum

ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit | February 2014

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Introduction

Nearly a year after Tammam Salam's appointment as head of the prospective cabinet, an agreement has finally been reached to form a government in Lebanon—"the national interest cabinet". The new government includes 24 ministers, who represent all factions within the March 8 and March 14 coalitions (with the exception of the Lebanese Forces party), and the "centrist bloc," represented by President Michel Suleiman, Tammam Salam, and Walid Jumblatt. The cabinet was formed according to the 8-8-8 formula, which prevents any of the major factions from possessing a veto power, or the so-called "paralyzing third".¹

This agreement came nearly three years after the formation of Najeeb Miqati's government, represented by the March 8 camp, which in turn is affiliated with the Syrian-Iranian axis; this shift reflects changes in the balances of power in the region. The Miqati cabinet, in the March 14 leaders' view, was exclusionary and caused great national rift. The new government, they believe, will bring balance back into Lebanon's political life, and will contribute to relieving Sunni-Shiite tensions that have flared alongside the escalation of the conflict in Syria.

International and Regional Calculations

The formation of the Lebanese cabinet at this point in time is as closely tied to regional and international contexts as it is to the situation of the Lebanese parties and their local calculations. The United States and Europe want to guarantee internal stability in Lebanon, which dictates a government that will facilitate the conciliatory climate necessary to elect a new president before the end of President Michel Suleiman's tenure. In addition, the security and humanitarian aid promised by foreign donors can only be fulfilled in the presence of an effective government. In the past few weeks, Washington and other Western countries have appeared keen to see Hezbollah participating in the government, supporting President Suleiman and Tammam Salam in their efforts to

¹ This matter remains a subject of dispute due to the existence of a precedent when one of the ministers brought in by President Michel Suleiman, including state minister Adnan al-Sayyid Hasan who moved to Hezbollah's camp and resigned from the Hariri-led cabinet on January 12, 2011, making the total number of resigned minister 11 (i.e., the third of the cabinet plus one minister, which made the cabinet lose its quorum).

“distance” Lebanon from the Syrian crisis and isolate Lebanon from the repercussions of the regional conflict. Moreover, the international agreement to contain the crisis in Syria, and prevent it from spreading into neighboring countries, requires a stable situation in Lebanon, thereby averting a civil war based on Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria.

On the regional level, it would appear that Iran is responsible for deciding whether Hezbollah and the Amal Movement will participate in the cabinet.² In effect, Iran, which is busy preparing for difficult negotiations with the West regarding its nuclear program, will benefit from the formation of a government in Lebanon as it gives the impression that it is in agreement with the West’s desire to isolate Lebanon from the fallout of the Syrian conflict. Iran is also using its cooperation over the cabinet formation in Lebanon as a way to improve its relations with Saudi Arabia, though it remains intransigent on more strategic issues, evidenced by its increased support for the Syrian regime.

Domestic Calculations

The calculations of Lebanese parties, including Hezbollah, are intrinsically tied to developments in Syria and what comes out of the Geneva-2 conference, politically or militarily, as the repercussions of any agreement will effect Lebanon. Since nothing new occurred, political parties in Lebanon reached consensus on the necessity to form a cabinet that can fill the political vacuum and limit its exposure to the consequences of the Syrian crisis. In this, it seems Iran’s pressure on Hezbollah to acquiesce was complemented by mounting popular pressures in response to the deteriorating conditions and security for Lebanese in the Beirut’s southern suburbs after recent bombings. The punitive measures taken against Hezbollah and its sympathizers by Gulf states have also influenced the party’s decision to facilitate the formation of the government.

Hezbollah itself also wants to be included in the coming presidential elections, and negotiations with the West, which can only be achieved through the creation of a legitimate government, regardless of its form. However, the party’s most significant gain, also of benefit to the Future Current, was that the new government will provide political

² Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri appeared to have a clear understanding of the variables in Iran’s new foreign policy. He was the first to arrive in Tehran to congratulate President Rouhani for his election. He also returned to Tehran to inform Iranian officials of the details over the formation of the Lebanese government, which denotes Berri’s attempt to strengthen his relations with Rouhani’s Iran, while Hezbollah is more closely linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ establishment.

cover for the security agencies, so that the latter can perform their role in “combating terrorism”. The Lebanese Army Intelligence’s campaign, leading to the arrest of “terrorists,” also covered these agencies; in fact, many observers felt that the campaign was no more than a “charade” designed by Hezbollah to present itself as the “hero” in confronting “Takfiri terrorism,” similar to how the Syrian regime conducted itself prior to and during the Geneva-2 conference. The arrests in Lebanon, along with the media campaigns accompanying them, enshrined Hezbollah’s discourse on the existence of a “Takfiri” enemy that must be confronted through a national unity government. As such, the concessions provided by Hezbollah for the sake of forming a cabinet are presented as “national achievements” and a window for toying with the US, and the West in general, on the existence of a common language: that of “combating terrorism”.³

The swiftness with which the Lebanese Army and intelligence services moved in a specific direction, mainly against Sunnis supportive of the Syrian revolution, has raised many questions and much skepticism, particularly when detainee Naeem Abbas, described as one of the most dangerous terrorists, quickly confessed to committing terrorist acts that could not have been masterminded by a large sophisticated organization, let alone an individual.⁴ It was clear that the army’s achievement has been politically exploited to present its commander, General Jean Qahwaji, as a presidential candidate. Qahwaji was reported to have recently gathered his officers, offering what some political sources described as a presidential candidacy speech.⁵

Saad al-Hariri, another key player in these events, is intent to affirm his active role in combating terrorism and his position as a representative of Sunni “moderation” in Lebanon. His meeting with the Saudi king on February 14 demonstrated Saudi’s support for him; combating terrorism in Lebanon will require a Sunni cover that cannot exist without al-Hariri and Saudi Arabia, which has recently issued a new counter-terrorism law. In February, al-Hariri crowned this new demarche with a surprise visit to Egypt, where the regime is waging a campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorism.

³ This was the main content of Hassan Nasrallah’s speech on February 16, 2014. He noted the sacrifices and concessions Hezbollah and the Amal Movement had made for the sake of national unity and in order to confront “Takfiri terrorism,” which was presented as the first and most important item on the government’s agenda, thus justifying Hezbollah’s alliance with the Future Current.

⁴ “The weak story of the Lebanese Army Intelligence,” (in Arabic) *al-Quds al-Arabi*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=133552>. Also see, Harith Suleiman, “A security achievement: Should I laugh or scream?,” *Janoubiya*, February 13, 2014, <http://janoubia.com/154069>

⁵ “Qahwaji to the officers: Concerns are growing regarding the presidential elections,” (in Arabic) *al-Liwaa*, February 8, 2014, <http://www.aliwaa.com/Article.aspx?ArticleId=194262>.

On a different front, he and his current were in dire need to form the cabinet because his popular base has been slipping toward extremism in reaction to Hezbollah's implication in the Syrian conflict. Ahmad al-Assir in Saida, followed by that of the "fronts' leaders" in Tripoli, are clear indicators of the erosion of al-Hariri's support base in these two predominantly Sunni cities. Furthermore, al-Hariri's concessions (with Saudi blessings) in forming the cabinet aimed to bring the March 14 camp, specifically the Future Current, back into power, thus preventing their exclusion from the impending political challenges, foremost of which is the drafting of a law for parliamentary and presidential elections. From their perspective, this government constitutes a way of managing the political vacuum if a new president cannot be elected. Thus, Hezbollah's concern in light of the ongoing rapprochement between the Future Current and the Free National Current, Hezbollah's main ally, is understandable. Information regarding the new government disclosed during private meetings between Prime Minister al-Hariri and General Aoun, who met the prime minister in Saudi, was also leaked.⁶ Such scenes are familiar in Lebanon, where factional interests intersect and diverge in accordance with temporary circumstances and immediate alliances, which can easily be undone.

Scenarios for the Coming Phase

Given the circumstances of its formation, Prime Minister Salam's government can be expected to draft a brief ministerial statement that avoids delving into details and commitments, particularly since its main task of preparing for presidential elections is the only element of agreement over the new government. Additionally, this cabinet may not survive for more than three months. Avoiding controversial questions in the ministerial statement, by focusing on agreed-upon issues, such as the presidential elections and security and economic challenges, makes things easier.⁷ If the government succeeds in supervising the presidential elections, and President Suleiman's successor is chosen before May 25, the government will automatically transform into a caretaker cabinet whose final fate will be decided by the course of the presidential elections.

While the potential for a presidential vacuum remains real, the formation of this conciliatory government opens the door for a similar situation with the presidential

⁶ See the newspapers: *al-Safir*, *al-Nahar*, and *al-Mustaqbal* (in Arabic) from Tuesday, February 18, 2014.

⁷ "The 'rebalancing' government faces its first test—Nasrallah: Domestic flexibility and intransigence in Syria," (in Arabic) *al-Nahar*, February 17, 2014, <http://newspaper.annahar.com/article/109012->.

elections. However, this potential agreement will not extend to the person of the president; as such, Lebanon will be faced with one of the following possibilities regarding the presidential post:

1. President Michel Suleiman's term will be extended, as was the case with his two predecessors, Elias al-Hraoui and Emile Lahoud.
2. The army commander will be elected as president, as happened in the election of Emile Lahoud and Michel Suleiman. Such an eventuality threatens to make this practice a custom, demonstrating that the division of society and politics in Lebanon is such that the army has become the only unifying element in the country, leading each army commander to automatically become a presidential candidate. This tradition could eventually "militarize" the presidential post.
3. General Aoun would approve a president, since it is nearly impossible for Aoun himself to become president; the leaks' primary disclosure related to making Aoun as the decisive voter in the coming presidential elections.

At any rate, it appears that Prime Minister Salam's cabinet, initiated on February 15, 2014, has temporarily spared Lebanon the dangerous straits had a non-consociational government been formed instead. However, the challenges awaiting the cabinet, regardless of whether it succeeds in its main task of guaranteeing the election of a new president at the prescribed date, will force the government to make momentous decisions. That said, the cabinet was structured in a manner that prevents it from taking such decisions; it is a "realist" government, even if it were a "fait accompli" government as well. It is a government that reflects the Lebanese reality in a state of impasse.