

Lebanese Conflict Threatens Civil War, Israeli-US Intervention

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On Tuesday, President Michel Suleiman called on Najib Mikati, who is backed by the Shia Islamist group Hezbollah and its allies, to form a new government after the collapse of Saad Hariri's coalition government. This is the first time that Hezbollah has determined the choice of a Lebanese premier and presages deep political convulsions, renewed sectarian strife within Lebanon and a new war in the region.

Hezbollah's ability to determine the prime minister-designate represents an enormous setback for the US-backed March 14 Alliance, led by Hariri and made up of Sunni Moslem parties, Walid Jumblatt's Druze party and the Phalangist Christian groups. Hezbollah and its Shi'ite allies, who are backed by Syria and Iran, have become the key players in Lebanon in yet another blow to Washington and its allies in the region, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Hariri had expected to be able to continue indefinitely with a caretaker government, following the pullout by Hezbollah from his coalition on January 12. But when Jumblatt and six members from his Progressive Socialist Party also pulled out from the coalition for their own political survival, Hariri's fractious "national unity" coalition, which had not met for some time, was left without a majority. Under the constitution, the withdrawal of one third plus one of the cabinet ministers requires the formation of a new government.

Hezbollah, cognizant of what followed the election of Hamas in the Palestinian Authority in January 2006, has always been reluctant to form a government and nominated Mitaki as a "consensual" Sunni politician, who now has the support of 68 members of the 120-seat parliament. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, said that Hezbollah hoped to form a national unity government with broad participation, saying, "We are not seeking authority".

The crisis was precipitated earlier this month when Hariri, at Washington's behest, went back on a Saudi-Syrian-brokered agreement with Hezbollah. Hezbollah had demanded that he convene a cabinet meeting to repudiate the United Nations' Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), withdraw Lebanese judges from the STL and cease funding it.

The STL, which is ostensibly about resolving who murdered Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, is a mechanism for controlling or subverting Lebanon in Washington's interests. It was expected to indict "rogue" members of Hezbollah in connection with the assassination of the former billionaire prime minister. Hezbollah has rejected any involvement in the killing. It blames Israel for the murder and maintains that the STL functions as an instrument for furthering Washington and Tel Aviv's objectives in Lebanon.

For years, the US claimed, without evidence, that Syria was behind Hariri's assassination, and four pro-Syrian Lebanese generals were held on suspicion of masterminding the plot. It

was only after Washington tried to bring Syria in from the cold, in order to isolate Iran, that the STL's focus switched to Hezbollah. Last October, Saad Hariri, the slain prime minister's son, repudiated the charges against Syria and admitted that the pro-Syrian generals has been imprisoned on trumped-up evidence.

The prime minister-designate, the US-educated Najib Mikati, is a Sunni Muslim, as required by the constitution. He was briefly caretaker prime minister in 2005 following Hariri's assassination and is the leader of the Glory Movement, which has two seats in parliament. He is, with his brother with whom he co-founded Investcom, the richest man in Lebanon, after making his fortune in Liberia, Sudan and Yemen, and selling the telecoms company for US\$5.5 billion.

Mikati was elected as a Hariri ally and has good relations with Syria, which is regaining its influence after being driven out in 2005. He is not close to Hezbollah and tried to reach out to all political parties, including Hariri's March 14 Alliance, in an attempt to form a national unity government.

But Hariri has refused to take part in a government headed by a Hezbollah-backed candidate, saying that there was no such thing as a "consensual candidate" backed by the opposition. He later called the appointment of the new prime minister a "coup d'état" that put the country under Iranian control.

His allies called for "a day of rage in all of Lebanon", setting off protest demonstrations in the northern city of Tripoli, where schools and shops were closed, Beirut where streets in downtown area were blocked, and in the southern coastal town of Sidon. Twenty people were injured, and protestors torched a satellite truck used by the news service Al Jazeera, which they view as an ally of Hezbollah.

The violence and vandalism were treated largely sympathetically in the US media, which only days earlier had denounced the brief appearance on the streets of Beirut by black-clad supporters of Hezbollah as a provocation and coup threat.

Washington has repeatedly made it clear that it views a Hezbollah-led coalition as a direct threat to its strategic interests in the region, and it can be expected to respond by cutting off all aid and initiating a concerted destabilisation campaign and possible military aggression.

The Obama administration expressed "great concerns" at the likelihood of Hezbollah playing a major role in the new government. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that a government dominated by Hezbollah would mean a major change in relations between the US and Lebanon. She stated, "A Hezbollah-controlled government would clearly have an impact on our bilateral relationship with Lebanon".

Hezbollah is on the US list of outlawed terrorist organisations and is subject to financial and travel sanctions. Since 2006, the US has spent US\$720 million shoring up Lebanon's military and police forces and US\$500 million on domestic programmes in an attempt to contain and undermine support for Hezbollah. It has also carried out surveillance of Hezbollah. The Obama administration has requested a further US\$246 million in aid for Lebanon this year.

The State Department said, "Any government that is truly representative of all of Lebanon would not abandon the effort to end the era of impunity for assassinations in the country."

In other words, if Mikati repudiates the STL, the Obama administration would refuse to accept the Miqati government, and put it in the same category as the elected Hamas government—a state terrorist organisation.

Israel made clear that it would not tolerate the new government. Silvan Shalom, Israel's vice prime minister, said that that it was, in effect, "an Iranian government on Israel's northern border."

Giora Eiland, a retired Israeli Army general and a former national security adviser, now a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, has argued that if Israel is to win the next war, it must attack not only Hezbollah, but also the public infrastructure of the State of Lebanon. He said, "If Hezbollah is behind the government, it will be much easier to explain to the international community why we must fight against the State of Lebanon".

In 2006, Israel launched a murderous war on Hezbollah and Lebanon, killing more than 1,200 people and destroying tens of thousands of homes and much of Lebanon's infrastructure. Last August, a military clash killing four Lebanese and one Israeli followed a refusal by an Israeli border guard to stop cutting a tree obstructing Israel's view. But for pressure from the US and France, Israel would have launched a massive assault then. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal last August, Israeli military leaders were urging and ready "to implement contingency plans to bomb Lebanese army camps, Hezbollah strongholds and Beirut's power stations".

Such plans are in place, as the publication of US cables by Wikileaks confirms. According to the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten, which summarised cables detailing a military briefing by Israeli Chief of Staff General Gabi Ashkenazi to a US congressional delegation, the Israeli military has been pressing ahead at full speed with preparations for a new war in the Middle East, including Lebanon and Gaza.

Aftenposten said that the cables quote Ashkenazi as saying, "I am preparing the Israeli army for a major war, since it is easier to scale down to a smaller operation than to do the opposite".

He told the delegation that Israel's unmanned drones had identified Hezbollah's rocket emplacements in southern Lebanon, with additional help from the US National Security Agency, which spies on communications. Ashkenazi threatened, "In the next war, Israel cannot accept any restrictions on warfare in urban areas."

Israel has recently launched a number of provocative sorties against Gaza, killing several militants, despite the fact that there have been almost no rockets fired from Gaza since the 2008-2009 war.

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