

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Anne-Marie Slaughter [redacted]
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B6

For the ride back (if you are not already there..)

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Lebanon charts a new path

Posted By Elias Muhanna - Wednesday, June 15, 2011 - 10:17 AM · Share



This week, Beirut achieved an underwhelming milestone: after 140 days, Sunni billionaire Najib Mikati finally managed to form a government. This may not seem like much, compared to the paroxysms of political change which have toppled dictators and shaken the foundations of the Middle East's most entrenched authoritarian regimes. Traditionally one of the region's most politically turbulent countries, Lebanon has seemed **positively serene** by comparison to its neighbors. There has yet to be a replay of the seas of chanting protesters and billowing flags in the streets of Beirut which followed the 2005 **assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri**.

But while forming a new government may not be as stimulating as the million-person marches, Google-exec-turned-revolutionary-heroes, and fake lesbian bloggers who have populated the rest of the region's struggles, it is nonetheless highly significant and augurs the beginning of a sensitive new phase in Lebanese politics. The direction of the new government could profoundly re-shape Lebanon's relationship with America and the international community, just as it will play an important role in determining the fate of the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime.

The new prime minister of Lebanon, Najib Mikati, is, like his predecessor, a Western-educated Sunni billionaire with extensive commercial interests around the globe. He was nominated to his post last January by the coalition known as "March 8," which includes the two principal Shiite political parties in Lebanon -- Hezbollah and Amal -- as well as the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a Christian party led by General Michel Aoun. In recent years, the Syrian-backed March 8 parties have served as the major counterweight to the Western and Saudi-supported "March 14" coalition, whose leader, Saad Hariri, has been the main champion behind a **UN Special Tribunal** investigating the murder of his father.

The younger Hariri's cabinet collapsed earlier this year over its failure to come to consensus over Lebanon's participation with the UN investigation. Extensive rumors and media leaks at the time suggested that the UN was preparing to indict members of Hezbollah for participating in the crime -- an allegation which the party hotly denied and claimed was part of an Israeli plot against it. When Hariri proved unwilling or unable to cast doubt upon the credibility the UN investigation, Hezbollah and its allies **resigned** and ended his brief tenure as prime minister.

The international media and many Lebanese politicians have rushed to portray **the new cabinet** as being dominated by Syria and Iran because of the preponderance of March 8 figures in key ministries. In response, Prime Minister Mikati has insisted that he has no intention of threatening Lebanon's relationship with the West, and that he

is not a fig leaf for a "Hezbollah government." For the time being, the Obama administration has opted to wait and judge the government "by its actions," but there have already been calls by a few U.S. lawmakers to cut Washington's aid and adopt a hard-line stance toward the new government in Beirut.

The claim that Mikati's government will actually be controlled by Hezbollah is an oversimplification, but there is no question that this new cabinet marks a watershed in Lebanese politics. As per its usual custom, Hezbollah only opted to accept two relatively insignificant portfolios out of a total of 30, while its allies (with whom it does not always see eye-to-eye) occupy the important ministries of defense, justice, telecommunications, labor, etc. It should be noted that the very fact that Mikati was chosen as prime minister rather than a more divisive "pro-Syrian" figure suggested from the very beginning that the March 8 coalition was wary of letting this government be painted as being "Made in Damascus and Tehran." Mikati's international stature, strong ties to Saudi Arabia, and his possession of a (rather tenuous) cabinet veto will likely be sufficient to calm fears that he can be steamrolled by the parliamentary majority, at least in the short term.

However, proof of Syrian and Iranian influence will ultimately be revealed by how his government deals with several challenges that are looming ahead, foremost among them being the UN Tribunal's indictments, which are likely to be made public later this year. Before Mikati's cabinet can be voted into office by the Lebanese Parliament, it has to draft a policy statement which outlines the government's position on a range of issues, including the tribunal. Finding a way to satisfy Hezbollah's demands vis-à-vis the Hariri investigation while maintaining Lebanon's international obligations will be Mikati's first and most critical test. If he does not commit to continued material and moral support of the tribunal, he runs the risk of alienating Lebanon's Sunni community, along with Saudi Arabia, the United States, and various European states. If, on the other hand, he does not sever Lebanon's ties with the tribunal, his government may not win the confidence of the Lebanese Parliament. The good news is that he only has 30 days to succeed or fail.

The other major litmus test for the Mikati government will be its response to the events taking place in Syria. If clashes between the opposition and the Assad regime's security forces escalate such that refugees and activists begin spilling over the border into Lebanon (as they have in Turkey), Mikati will find himself in **another uncomfortable position**. Syria will almost certainly demand that Lebanon shut its borders to those it deems to be "insurgents" and "terrorists" and extradite those who manage to get across. However, among Lebanese Sunnis (and particularly in Mikati's home town of Tripoli), sympathy for the protests in Syria runs very high. Once again, Mikati will have to walk a very fine line between the competing demands of many different constituencies.

Thus far, Saad Hariri and his March 14 allies have opted to sit out of the Mikati cabinet, rebuffing his offers to join in a national unity government. The clear calculation here seems to be that Mikati will not be able to balance the pressures and opposing forces bearing down upon him, and that his government will be riven by its contradictions. The next parliamentary elections are only two years away, and March 14 is banking on the belief that Hezbollah and

its allies -- who have perfected the art of political back-seat driving -- will send the country careening into the ditch of isolation and instability, when they finally slip behind the wheel.

This is a high-stakes gamble, and one with which many March 14 partisans are **uncomfortable**. If it succeeds, Hariri may be able to capitalize on March 8's blunders in time for the next election (much as his father did during the 1990's). If it fails, on the other hand, Hezbollah and its allies will be in the perfect position to consolidate their gains and shape the next electoral law to suit their own purposes. As usual, all of these contingencies will be refracted through the lens of foreign influence and interest in Lebanese affairs, which is a lens that is being re-shaped as the region itself is transformed by the Arab revolutions. Prognostication, never a safe business in Lebanese politics, is becoming more difficult by the day.

Elias Muhanna writes the Lebanese political blog qifanabki.com, and is currently a Visiting Fellow at Stanford University's Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law.