



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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LEBANON: A CASE OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

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Lebanon is in the international spotlight again. The UN-backed Special Tribunal indictment and accompanying arrest warrants were transmitted to the Lebanese authorities on 30 June 2011. It came as the newly-formed cabinet was meeting to draft the final statement of the government ministerial policy, including the state's commitments to international agreements.

The accused is innocent until proven guilty, Prime Minister Najib Miqati declared soon after he walked out of the meeting. Lebanon is committed to justice and liberty, he added, and Lebanese people need to be united in consolidating national sovereignty.

PM Miqati aims to reconcile Hizballah's demands with the expectations of the international community. The Ministerial Policy approved on 30 June maintains Lebanon's commitment to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) and preserves the trilogy of the Nation, the Army and the Resistance.

Miqati now faces two challenges. The Lebanese authorities need to take measures within 30 days to arrest the person(s) named in the indictment. PM Miqati promised to translate these obligations into responsible actions, asserting that he would prove to those who hoped the indictment would divide the Lebanese people that unity will triumph. At the same time, Miqati needs a ratification of the cabinet through a parliamentary vote of confidence. Yet negotiations might be obstructed by the release of the indictment. Despite Miqati's efforts to create consensus, political instability – and even the paralysis of the state's institutions – may be inevitable.

In forming his cabinet and introducing new codes of governance, Miqati has had to deal with immense political challenges, not least the opposition's boycott. When the cabinet was finally formed on 13 June, he had to cope with reshuffling, political gun fights in Tripoli, and angry demonstrations in Shouf, along with longstanding social turbulences and economic malaise. The new parliamentary opposition, the 14 March bloc that had held power since 2005, virulently criticized the cabinet. Meanwhile, international players such as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon urged Miqati to respect Lebanon's commitment to international agreements.

The final outcome is a government in which the majority supports the "resistance" and which will immediately face immense geopolitical issues, including a capsizing Syrian ally and an offensive Israeli rival. Miqati, a subtle self-made businessman and independent politician, and his team of technocrats, will need to paddle through waves of challenges that could break along ethnic lines.

PM Miqati is known for his major business success in telecoms in South Africa and, unusually, his reputation remains unsoiled. He is credited with successfully conducting the transition that followed Syria's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon, which included a free

general election. He exhibits no political allegiance to Saudi Arabia or Syria; to maintain an internal balance in Lebanese political society, he weighs both sensitivities. Otherwise, the dispute between the Arab poles may manifest itself on Lebanese soil.

On Lebanon's borders, Syrian turmoil and Israeli military alerts add sensitive issues of ethnic identity to the Lebanese dilemma.¹ Protesters in Syria are demanding regime change in the face of violent repression. The Syrian regime claims some of those protesting are armed and trained by Lebanese factions and other foreign 'saboteurs'. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad is supported by Hizballah, whose secretary general warned his Lebanese compatriots against plotting against the Syrian regime. In so doing, he is preempting the turmoil from weighing on the fragile Lebanese civil peace, but also fears losing a strategic ally in his coalition with Iran and Hamas. If this "axis of impedance" is weakened, Hizballah loses ground against an Israeli rival seemingly preparing for war. In June the Israeli army executed a record number military drills along the border and twice carried out mock raids at low altitudes over Lebanon. Indeed, Israeli planes violate Lebanese airspace on a daily basis.

This is the highly volatile situation in which the new Lebanese cabinet will begin its work.

From an institutional perspective, the new cabinet formation reflects changes to political practices and customs that have held since the 1989 Ta'if Agreement. Whilst revisions and amendments of this post-civil war constitution have been debated since May, the pact between PM Miqati and the "8 of March" coalition (Hizballah and supporters) has changed the rules of power distribution.

The Ta'if Accord of 1989 marked the end of a long and bloody power struggle between Lebanon's sectarian communities. The agreement curbed executive power in favor of a Sunni prime minister and balanced the government by allowing for parliamentary censure by a Shi'a leader. In 1990, the civil war concluded with the defeat of Christian leader General Michel Aoun and the entrance of the Syrian troops into eastern Beirut – the last part of the city yet unoccupied. While the Ta'if Accord stipulated the disarmament of militias and withdrawal of foreign armies, the latter did not happen until 2000, when Israel withdrew its forces, and then 2005, when Syria did the same. Hizballah, the steadfast Lebanese Resistance party, maintained its arms and the right to continue building its weaponry.

Post-civil war Lebanon embarked on two divergent paths towards reconstruction, and the Resistance could not reconcile itself with the capitalist rebuilding project of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Hariri was killed on 14 February 2005, and Syrian troops retreated under international pressure to the delight of the newly forming 14 March "Cedar Revolutionists". Their dramatic mobilization, however, achieved little politically. Paradoxical alliances and recourse to tailor-made electoral laws written during the Syrian occupation secured parliamentary seats for all players. Re-elected warlords and corrupt businessmen carrying the slogans of a hijacked revolution were legitimized by the democratic exercise.

Despite the heightened level of political discourse, Lebanon did not become a liberal state, and political reform was not the priority of the new power holders. A fault line emerged

¹ Sectarianism suffuses organizational life in Lebanon, and virtually all political events have ethnic consequences. However, in the Lebanese heterogeneous environment, ethnic affiliation also involves cross-sectarian assimilations. Thus, it is possible for individuals to claim more than one identity which doesn't necessarily transcend the sectarian identity. Example an Aouni militant could be "Christian", an "anti-corruption" militant and "hostile to the former civil war militias". These are all divisive labels that contribute to ethnic antipathies.

between those willing to enter into a pragmatic alliance with the emerging local player Hizballah, and those who coveted their sense of identity over peace and reforms.

When the prominent Christian General Michel Aoun met with Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in February 2006, he surprised observers who had perceived the Lebanese “Christians” as westernized liberals. Their puzzlement, however, belied the alliance’s deductive reasoning – a hallmark of Greek and “western” rational political thought. The Aoun-Nasrallah alliance constituted a core that has attracted more supporters and political players ever since. The western-aligned “14 of March” became a slogan without discourse.

In July 2006, Israel attacked Lebanon with the aim of defeating Hizballah. When a UN resolution a month later put an end to the fighting, Israel had failed to decisively defeat its rivals and thereby proffered a moral victory for Hizballah. The Shi’a party emerged stronger than ever, invincible in the eyes of Lebanese and Arab masses, and more assertive with its Iranian and Syrian allies. The West could only plan for more economic sanctions against Lebanon and to support the STL in hopes to weaken Israel’s rival.

The STL was a serious judicial enterprise that lost credibility following a scandalous false witness file. Thence, the contested investigations filed into the indictment made it impossible for Hizballah and their supporters to accept the outcome. Sayed Nasrallah requested the formal rejection of the STL, denouncing it as a political tool against his organization. He asked Mr. Saad Hariri, then Prime Minister, to halt financial support and withdraw the Lebanese judges from the Tribunal. Further, he advocated revoking the act of agreement signed with the United Nations, as the process was delegitimized by the false witness file and disappearance from the state’s coffers of \$11 billion. Four days later, on 12 January, the cabinet collapsed.

Over the past five months, the cabinet formation process fueled many controversies and took innumerable turns. It was complicated further by the uprisings and turmoil in the region. Political analysts could not predict when a consensus would emerge and what it would like.

The deadlock persisted until the turbulence reached Syria. Facing a popular uprising, the Syrian government needed a stabilized southern backyard. Political leaders in Lebanon harbored a mutual feeling – or fear – of ‘spillage’. This mutual need for stability translated into the formation of a Lebanese cabinet. Miqati’s supporters met in parliament on 8 June. MP Walid Junblat then paid a visit to Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in Damascus. Junblat returned to Beirut ostensibly having received approval for a Sunni majority cabinet made possible by a Shi’a ‘sacrifice’ of one portfolio. This compromise illustrates geopolitical concerns of the Shi’a in the region, and will not necessarily become a recurrent practice in power distribution.

In the end, Hizballah and his multi-confessional parliamentary coalition secured the majority of the portfolios with the nomination of 18 ministers in a cabinet of 30. Internal consensus allowed for the final agreement. MP Michel Aoun, for example, set a precedent in number of portfolios allocated to Christians (6) and their strategic importance, and Nasrallah can count on his Christian “partners in power”, as he calls them. The Party of God secured the sensitive Ministry of Foreign Affairs headed by Adnan Mansour, a diplomat who had previously served in Iran. More than ever, Hizballah seems diplomatically impervious knowing that Lebanon will soon assume the presidency of the UN Security Council.

Ironically enough, at a time when sectarian disputes haunt common conversations in Lebanese society, the new cabinet’s Sunni majority turned out to be its Achilles heel. The absence of Mr. Hariri and his Sunni allies from the new cabinet is remarkable. Whether the

bloc's absence reflects its self-proclaimed opposition or involuntary exclusion is subject to debate. But the majority of the Sunni ministers are Miqati's regional electoral allies from north Lebanon. This balance descended into armed confrontations in the sensitive neighborhood of Tripoli two days after Miqati entered the Serai.

Miqati was hit where it most hurts, in his hometown and on the very fragile scar of Jabal Mouhsen and Bab el Tebanneh. These two neighborhoods experienced violent clashes in 2008, becoming a front-line within the agglomeration and a potential landscape in civil war. When I visited this area in 2009, the marks of the fighting were still there: perforated buildings, barbed wires, and conspicuous calm in an overcrowded and loud city. I conducted my graduate research on conflicts in divided cities, namely Beirut (Lebanon), Mostar (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Mitrovica (Kosovo). The deep rift in northern Lebanon, as evidenced again during Miqati's visit, could easily rupture under any sensitive political circumstances. The common analysis made by observers regarding sectarian divisions that reflect the axes of the region understates the need for serious inquiry into the social, economic, and historical background of the neighborhood.

This is a political situation with all the makings of a Sisyphus Myth. For the last five years, and especially for the last five months, Lebanon has survived long periods without an executive government. On 30 June the Lebanese state woke up to a divisive indictment with a ministerial policy statement to be approved by the parliament. The country is a case study of political instability in a region overwhelmed by popular waves of protests, repressions and secessions. Political life in Lebanon has become an eternal "commencement", a stateless society devoid of God and thus looking for meaning and unity in their absurd violent past. Stuck between denial and ethnic grievances, Lebanese people have no single memory, and therefore a difficult future. As Cole Porter sang, "If you want a future darling, why don't you get a past"?

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