

US-led campaign against Syria destabilises Lebanon

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27 March 2013

Lebanon's prime minister Najib Mikati announced his resignation and that of his Hezbollah-backed cabinet Friday, following months of political conflicts. He called for the formation of a national unity government. Mikati will continue as acting prime minister until a new government can be formed.

Growing social and political tensions in Lebanon have been stoked by outside intervention, most powerfully from Washington, Paris and Riyadh via their client politicians, as part of their broader plans to topple Syria's regime of President Bashar al-Assad and reorganise the oil-rich Middle East in their interests. Mikati's resignation pits the Washington and Riyadh-backed Future Movement of Saad Hariri, part of the March 14 coalition, against Hezbollah and its allies, known as the March 8 coalition, which are allied with Syria and Iran.

In the eyes of the US, the major European powers and the Gulf monarchies, the key issue in Lebanon is to neutralise Hezbollah. To this end, they have mounted the Special Tribunal for Lebanon to investigate and pin the blame for the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 on Hezbollah; put pressure on the European Union to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation; sought to press Mikati to weaken Hezbollah's role in the government; and fomented a new controversy over "Hezbollah's role in Syria".

A campaign has been mounted about the possibility that Syria's chemical arsenal could fall into the hands of Hezbollah or Islamic extremists among the rebels battling Assad in order to provide a *casus belli*. Earlier this year, Israel carried out an airstrike in Syria on a convoy it claimed was transporting sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles to Hezbollah.

The end of Lebanon's Hezbollah-backed government

signifies a new period of political turmoil in the country, which carries with it the threat of renewed sectarian strife and direct involvement in the imperialist-backed war to unseat the Assad regime in Syria.

Mikati, a Sunni billionaire who was formerly part of the Future Movement and had close business ties with Syria, was appointed as a compromise prime minister in January 2011 to hold the middle ground between Hezbollah and its Sunni rivals. This perspective has now collapsed.

He said, "I announce the resignation of the cabinet in the hope it will open the way for a solution to the major political blocs to take responsibility and come together to bring Lebanon out of the unknown".

Mikati had tried to resign twice before, in 2011, over the funding of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and then in October 2012, following the assassination of Sunni intelligence chief Wissam al-Hassan—a supporter of the Free Syrian Army—that led to days of violent, anti-government demonstrations.

The immediate cause of Mikati's resignation was President Michel Sleiman's suspension of a cabinet session following the failure to agree the basis for new elections slated for next June. New arrangements seeking to overturn the 1960 electoral law that gives the March 14 movement an inbuilt majority and jeopardised the "balance-tipping" power of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt raised the ire of the various factions and their international backers. The June elections are now unlikely to go ahead, and the hand of the Future Movement has been strengthened.

A second factor was Hezbollah's refusal to support the renewal of General Ashraf Rifi's tenure as the head of the Internal Security Forces. Rifi is a Sunni allied with the pro-Washington camp of the Future Movement. His officers were involved in the US-

backed UN Tribunal for Lebanon whose investigation indicted four Hezbollah members for their alleged role in the murder of Hariri in 2005. Rifi took over following the assassination of al-Hassan—blamed on pro-Syrian forces—in October 2012. Washington, Paris and Riyadh had pressed for Rifi's reappointment.

Lebanon faces a worsening economic situation. The influx of more than 100,000 Syrian refugees into a country of just 4 million people has caused a sharp slowdown in the economy, an increasing burden on already stretched utilities and social services, and a 67 percent surge in the budget deficit last year. Public sector workers and teachers have been on strike since February 19 demanding the payment of higher wages agreed to last September.

Lebanon has become increasingly embroiled in the civil war in Syria, which has deepened the sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shi'ites. There have been repeated clashes in the northern port city of Tripoli, which has been used to bring in arms for the Syrian opposition forces, between rival armed groups.

On Friday, six people died and more than 20 were wounded. There were clashes between residents of the Sunni neighbourhood of Bab Tabbaneh, which supports Syria's rebels, and those in the adjacent Alawite neighbourhood of Jabal Mohsen, which supports Assad. The Lebanese army reported that a soldier had been killed and several others wounded during an army raid to capture gunmen.

In Beirut, four Sunni Muslim scholars were beaten up in two separate attacks, prompting outrage and protests. Hezbollah and Amal, the two main Shi'ite groups, were quick to disassociate themselves from the attack, handing over five suspects to security forces.

As well as refugees, many of them armed, there are hundreds of Syrian opposition fighters and some dissident Syrian officers moving freely inside Lebanon, forming networks of fighters in North Lebanon.

They are supported by prominent politicians from the Future Movement and military figures, and form a kind of military shadow government, based in Tripoli at the home of General Rifi. They arrange the finances provided by the Gulf countries, Turkey and the major powers, send Sunnis to fight alongside al Qaeda-linked forces such as Jabrat al-Nusra, plan the logistics and clandestine arms supply, and organise care for the wounded in Lebanon.

Earlier this month, Syrian fighter planes fired on areas along the Syria-Lebanese border near the Beka'a valley in an attempt to prevent aid from reaching the Syrian opposition.

Mikati's resignation follows US president Barack Obama's visit to the region to coordinate the plans for a direct intervention against Syria. Obama issued his orders to his regional allies, insisting that Israel apologise to Turkey over its killing of eight Turkish citizens and a ninth person who held joint US-Turkish citizenship during its attack on the Mavi Marmara flotilla that had sought to break Israel's blockade of Gaza in June 2010. He offered aid for Jordan's beleaguered economy and the Palestinian Authority to ensure they were fully on board.

Washington appears to hope that Hezbollah can be sidelined as a political force in Lebanon and that Hariri's Future Movement will be able to take power. Hariri, whose business empire is based in Saudi Arabia, has lived in Paris since his coalition government fell in January 2011, leading to a political vacuum filled by Sunni extremists who have actively supported Islamist opposition forces in Syria.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the US was "watching the situation in Lebanon very, very carefully". She added, "Our basic view of this is that we believe the Lebanese people deserve a government that reflects their aspirations and one that will strengthen Lebanon's stability, its sovereignty and its independence. And we have grave concerns about the role that Hezbollah plays".



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