

Lebanon Forms a New Government, but Popular Protests Persist

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Despite the January 21, 2020 formation of a government of technocrats in Lebanon, presumably in response to demonstrators' demands, protests have persisted throughout the country. In addition, there is marked popular dissatisfaction with the composition of the government and a lack of confidence in its ability to advance reforms necessary to alleviate the country's dire situation. Nor is it clear that how long this government can survive. Since the October 17, 2019 launch of the protest, demonstrators have demanded the formation of a government composed of professionals who are not members of the corrupt, ruling political elite, in the hope they might properly address Lebanon's deep-set problems. However, the demands met with only a partial response; although most of the 20 members of the government – including Prime Minister Hassan Diab – are academics without formal political affiliation, they are perceived as a "Hezbollah government," because the list was effectively decided, behind the scenes, by Hezbollah and the parties in the March 8 camp. The Sunni party of former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, along with other parties from the rival March 14 alliance, did not support the new Prime Minister and opted not to join the government. Thus while only two ministers are officially Hezbollah members, the rest represent the organization's partners. As such, the new government in fact reflects Hezbollah's strengthened influence over the political system in Lebanon and challenges Western countries, chief among them the United States, and the Gulf States with a dilemma regarding their economic aid to Lebanon, which is crucial for the struggling state.

On January 21, 2020, one month after he was named Lebanon's new Prime Minister, Hassan Diab formed a new government, composed of 20 ministers, including six women, the most senior of whom serves as defense minister and deputy prime minister (in the Arab world, this political representation is unprecedented for women). Hassan Diab and his Hezbollah supporters who pushed for his nomination and voted for it in parliament have stressed that this government is made up of technocrats not under any political sway and is led by a Sunni, as required by the Lebanese constitution. The Prime Minister has declared that it is a "salvation government" meant to meet the demands of demonstrators who sought to replace those in power and advance reforms that might help improve Lebanon's weak economic situation. Accordingly, he took immediate measures designed to prove his intention to deliver on promises. The 2020 budget was passed within the first

week of the government, and the publication of a financial "rescue plan" was approved. Nevertheless, this has not been enough to placate the protestors, who are now directing their criticism at the new government, viewing its members as representatives of the corrupt elite that they sought to replace.

These ministers are, in fact, professionals, many of them with advanced academic degrees, and indeed do not have political affiliation. But the composition of the government was decided by parties in Hezbollah's camp – the March 8 camp – which spent a long time wrangling over the ministerial appointments while taking care to distribute portfolios to their favored candidates in accordance with sectarian-partisan priorities. Only two ministers are identified with Hezbollah and two with its Shiite partner, the Amal movement. However ten ministers represent Hezbollah's Christian partners, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by Gebran Bassil, the unpopular former foreign minister and son-in-law of President Michel Aoun; and the Marada Movement. This government also includes two Druze ministers who are identified with a pro-Syrian party that supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Alongside them are four Sunni cabinet members (the Prime Minister and three other ministers) who are ostensibly independent. The government has yet to receive parliamentary ratification, but approval seems assured given the influence of the March 8 camp in parliament.

The new Prime Minister is not supported by the Sunni al-Mustaqbal party of former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, or by the other parties in the pro-Western camp that opposes Hezbollah – the March 14 camp. Hezbollah used the majority its camp earned in the 2018 elections to choose Lebanon's Sunni Prime Minister, and thus, de facto, created a precedent of disrupting the delicate balance struck in recent years between the various confessional groups in the country, requiring that the Prime Minister be a senior leader acceptable to the Sunni sect alongside a Christian president and a Shiite speaker of parliament. However, the Prime Minister and President are keeping their roles for now, despite demonstrators' demands to replace "everyone." This means, essentially, that although Hezbollah remains behind the scenes, this government will in effect operate under its aegis, and the government's formation marks another step in the deepening of the group's grip on the Lebanese political system and its ability to influence decision making processes at the main power junctions.

The new government was announced against the background of noticeably heightened protests in mid-January. At the outset the wave of protests was non-violent and brought together broad swathes of all sectors of the public and recalled a festive national holiday. For their part, the security forces took care to preserve order and not be drawn into confrontations with the demonstrators. However, in the week before the government was

formed the protest assumed a new direction and grew far more violent. The young demonstrators resorted to violence, mainly against banks (which are blamed for the difficult economic situation) and against symbols of the state, the parliament building in particular. They threw Molotov cocktails and rocks, smashed storefront windows, and destroyed ATMs. In parallel there has also been an escalation in violence on the part of the security forces, which used rubber bullets, truncheons, water cannons, and tear gas to disrupt the demonstrations. These confrontations caused hundreds of casualties, ruin on the streets, and led to arrests numbering dozens if not hundreds of demonstrators.

Although the violence has ebbed since the government was formed, the demonstrations have persisted, albeit on a reduced scale, given the fatigue and despair felt on the streets. The frustrated public does not believe the government has the ability to resolve the country's deep-set problems, which have only been exacerbated by the recent months of political and economic paralysis. During this time, limits have been placed on cash withdrawals due to capital flight from Lebanon (according to the central bank governor, since the protest began around \$1 billion has been taken out of Lebanon), many businesses have closed, unemployment has risen, the Lebanese lira has dropped in value, and Lebanon is finding it hard to settle state debts that amount to as much as \$90 billion.

The new government thus faces a double challenge: a need to calm the protest while urgently addressing burning problems, chief among them the economic crisis. In addition, the new government, which is perceived as a "Hezbollah government," will find it even harder than its predecessor to persuade Western countries – led by the United States – and the Gulf states that are potential candidates for helping Lebanon out of the economic crisis, to agree to transfer funds that might serve Hezbollah's interests. Furthermore, in tandem, there has been a rise in the number of countries designating Hezbollah as a terrorist group – (including, over the last year, Britain, Germany, Argentina, Paraguay, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Honduras) – which enables the broadening of sanctions. Thus far the international community has not voiced support for the new government, with the exception of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who announced he would cooperate with it to advance reforms. In contrast, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in his first statement about the government (January 22), refused to support it, declaring that the administration would not help a government that does not meet the people's demands for a war against corruption and progress with reforms.

Hezbollah's rising influence in Lebanon, manifested inter alia in its control over the new government formed in Lebanon, poses a dilemma, including for Israel. Are the Lebanese state and Hezbollah identical? This is a question of much significance, not just regarding Israel's position on international aid for Lebanon and international contacts with the new

government, but also, when the time comes, vis-a-vis the scenario of a military confrontation with Hezbollah.