

The Lebanese Cabinet Wears Hezbollah (And Iranian) Colours

Written by John Corner

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JOHN CORNER, JUN 28 2011

It took five months, but on June 13th the new Lebanese cabinet was announced by Prime Minister Najib Mikati. At first glance, the formation of a new Lebanese government looks like a positive development in a region wracked with political instability since the 'Arab Spring' revolutions; the past few months have confirmed that the quest for liberty and freedoms still remains fraught with danger for many across the Middle East. Yet a closer look at Lebanon reveals that 'democracy' isn't always what it seems. Indeed a week after the new Lebanese government was formed, reports have emerged that Lebanon's former Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, has fled the country, seeking refuge in France amid fears for his safety.

Hariri was Prime Minister until January this year, when he was forcibly removed by the Iranian and Syrian sponsored terrorist group Hezbollah. Ironically (or tragically), Saad Hariri's departure from the Lebanese government came as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) – the UN body set up to investigate the 2005 murder of Saad's father Rafik Hariri – was set to publish its findings. It had been widely speculated that Hezbollah was to be indicted for the murder of Rafik, resulting in Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warning that the 'Resistance' would 'cut off the hand' of any who attempted to arrest or bring to justice Hezbollah members accused by the tribunal.

Hezbollah's influence over Lebanon has been on the rise since the end of the 2006 Israeli- Hezbollah conflict, as United Nations Resolution 1701 (ordering the disarmament of the Shiite militia) has continually failed to halt Iran and Syria bolstering the group's forces with a mass of weapons (most notably rockets). Indeed, it is now strongly believed that the national Lebanese Army is inferior to Nasrallah's forces in the south of the country, and around the Bekaa Valley, where Iranian influences hold sway. Recent reports from the towns of Southern Lebanon indicate the area is being further armed by the transfer of weapons from Syria to Lebanon, due to fears that Syria's Assad regime may fall. If this happens, then a vital supply line of goods, ranging from construction materials and civilian assistance aid to rocket launchers, may be under threat.

The formation of the new Lebanese government has seen Hezbollah strengthen its political grip on the country as well. The March 8th Alliance, a pro Syrian coalition that includes Hezbollah, now controls 18 of the 30 cabinet seats. However, far from being divided on purely sectarian lines, the Lebanese cabinet still shows all the intricacies of the nation's political and social fabric. Indeed, Sunnis actually outnumber their Shiite counterparts within the cabinet, and a main supporter of the March 8th Alliance is Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, whose followers are largely Christian in faith. The dominance of the Hezbollah led coalition leaves the country leaning heavily towards an Iranian-Syrian axis; a move exemplified by Nasrallah's vocal support of disgraced Syrian President Assad, despite the fear of a local backlash, and the high profile visit of the Iranian President late last year to the Hezbollah strongholds close to the Israeli border, where the Iranian leader praised the 'Resistance' for their ongoing aggression towards their southern Israeli neighbours. Former MP Fares Soueid, part of the Western- backed Hariri alliance who refused to be part of Lebanon's new government, summed up the mood of March 14th coalition supporters in Lebanon after the cabinet announcement was made claiming that Lebanon is now 'held hostage by the Syrian regime and Hezbollah'.

For now, Lebanon's handling of the upcoming STL results will go a long way to indicating the full persuasion of the

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new government. International reaction has been characterised by fears, on both a regional and international scale, of the advancement of the Iranian backed party, with the US signalling that the new government will be ‘judged by its actions’, while France has affirmed its opinion that the Lebanese must honour their ‘international obligations’. For many of the Arab nations, who would normally extend a note of congratulations to a new government, their failure to endorse the new Hezbollah dominated cabinet has been telling.

Looking ahead there are two major concerns for Lebanon. Firstly, if a new government cannot kick start the ailing economy and publicly support the Lebanese people by providing much needed water and electricity projects, then Hezbollah’s influence will grow, as Iranian money will finance vital social programmes, as witnessed already in the south of the country. Here, Hezbollah will be further ‘legitimised’ by the Iranian government within Lebanon, while at the same time the Shiite group will build its military power to unrivalled levels vis-a-vis the Lebanese Army.

Secondly, and crucially for Israel, as long as Hezbollah is allowed to flourish, either through non action by the STL or from Iranian military funding, the probability of conflict along Israel’s northern border will increase. For the next few months at least, Hezbollah may be content to sit back and stockpile weaponry, safe in the knowledge that Israel currently has to deal with an increasingly uncontrolled Gaza, and disillusioned Syrians around the Golan Heights. In the longer term, however, a repeat of the 2006 Israeli- Hezbollah conflict seems inevitable, except that this time while Hezbollah may be more entrenched into the political make-up of the Lebanese state, the arsenal at their disposal will no doubt be considerably larger.

John Corner is a Defence Analyst based in London. He holds a MA with distinction from King’s College London in Intelligence and International Security, and a First Class honours degree in Politics and American Studies from the University of Sussex. He has worked previously for AKE Group within the Middle East Intelligence department, and also at the Henry Jackson Society as a Research Assistant. He writes on security related issues for Risk Intelligence. He can be contacted at: johnmccorner@gmail.com