

Lebanese Cabinet Approves Policy Statement

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Lebanon's government spokesman, Information Minister Tarek Mitri read the long-awaited policy statement, requesting that parliament now officially vote to approve the government, nominally in place since July 11.

Lebanon's Orient le Jour newspaper headlined "Finally!" amid a sense of public frustration that it had taken politicians three weeks to cobble together a simple policy statement.

The new national unity government, which includes both the pro-Syrian Hezbollah and the pro-Western March 14 movement, appeared eager to reach a compromise, putting the final touches on their statement late last night, after a bitter and lengthy debate.

Several political leaders complained privately that the government had "given in" to Hezbollah demands, agreeing that the group can keep its weapons and continue to "resist Israel."

U.N. resolution 1559 calls on the Lebanese government to "establish its sovereignty over all of its territory and for Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias to "disband."

The new government manifesto is likely to cause some displeasure in both Israel and the United States.

The French Press Agency reported that four cabinet members from Lebanon's U.S.-supported March 14 Alliance expressed "reservations" over the right of Hezbollah to "keep its weapons."

The manifesto does, however, insist that the "authority of the state" will be the "guiding principle" of the government.

Omayma Abd al Latif, of the Carnegie Center for Peace in the Middle East, was more nuanced in her interpretation of the government policy statement, however, calling it a "compromise".

"This is meant to be a national unity government, so I think, in a sense, what came out, yesterday, was basically a compromise," she said. "I wouldn't put it in so many words as 'caving in' to Hezbollah. It needed a compromise statement that could sort of get the support and consensus of all the parties concerned."

No Lebanese government, she also argues, could have ignored the issue of Hezbollah's weapons, because Hezbollah is part of the new government.

"Hezbollah is a party in this government; it has ministers in this government, so the statement couldn't come out without a reference the right of the Lebanese people to resist and also the right to liberate occupied lands, of course in reference to Sheba'a Farms," said Abd al Latif.

Hezbollah possesses an 11 member minority in Lebanon's unity government, in accordance with the Doha Agreement of May 21, which put an end to months of political crisis, and bloody street-fights in May, which left scores of people dead.

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