

Lebanon cabinet lets Hezbollah keep its weapons

Contributed by Jack Khoury, Haaretz Correspondent, and The Associated Press
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Lebanon's new government Wednesday endorsed Hezbollah's right to keep its weapons, the latest sign that the Iran-backed group has no intention of meeting a United Nations resolution calling for it to disarm.

Lebanon's government is a shaky coalition of Western-backed factions and the militant group Hezbollah, which has virtual veto power over the government.

The group is believed to have thousands of rockets and missiles hidden in basements and bunkers throughout Shiite Muslim areas of the tiny country.

The government decision came as the Lebanese army opened fire at four Israel Air Force warplanes that were flying above southern Lebanon, a Lebanese news agency reported. According to the report, the jets were forced to leave Lebanese airspace and return to Israel as a result of the anti-aircraft fire.

Hezbollah's refusal to give up its weapons has generated division within the country as well as concern in Israel, which says it is preparing to deploy a defense system to shoot down rockets from Lebanon.

A United Nations resolution that ended the 2006 Second Lebanon war between Hezbollah and Israel calls on the group to disarm, but Hezbollah says it must retain its weapons to fight off any future Israeli threat and persistent violations of Lebanon's airspace.

The United States lists Hezbollah as a terrorist group and denounces suspected aid by Iran and Syria. Washington also says Islamic militants linked to Al-Qaida have taken advantage of instability to infiltrate Lebanon.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said recently that his group has replenished its weapons stock since 2006 and now has more than 30,000 rockets, which he said can strike virtually anywhere in Israel.

While Hezbollah remains determinedly anti-Israel, its new manifesto announced Monday showed signs of moderation on the Lebanese political scene, where Hezbollah holds sway with two members in the Cabinet and 11 of parliament's 128 seats. The group also has wide support mainly among Shiites in Lebanon.

All 30 Cabinet ministers voted Wednesday to approve the policy statement that endorses Hezbollah's right to keep its weapons. Five ministers from the pro-Western majority expressed reservations over the clause addressing Hezbollah, but did not vote against it.

The policy statement - which lays out the government's goals for the next four years - illustrates how the government is loath to take any strong action against Hezbollah for fear of sparking a crisis. The group has virtual veto power over the government's moves, most analysts believe, because sectarian violence could follow if it pulls out.

Many fear a renewed outbreak of the sectarian violence seen in 2008, when Hezbollah militants swept through Sunni neighborhoods of Beirut to briefly seize control after the government moved to curb the group's military communications network.

More than 80 people were killed in the violence that followed, pushing the country to the brink of civil war.

The new Lebanese government formed last month is headed by U.S.-backed Prime Minister Saad Hariri, head of the Western-backed alliance which narrowly defeated the Hezbollah-led coalition in June elections.

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