

Iran rounds off grab for Lebanon with figurehead prime minister

Contributed by Debka
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The two days Iran's new foreign minister Ali Salehi spent in Damascus from Saturday night, Jan. 22, were enough to keep Syrian president Bashar Assad in place for Tehran's final steps in its grab for Lebanon: the installation of a puppet government in Beirut, debkafile's intelligence sources report.

Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah's performance Sunday, Jan. 23, was a crucial piece of misdirection: He stepped out of character to call in dulcet tones for a unity government in Beirut. This sounded as though he was following Assad's orders last week to go for a broad coalition which left the prime minister he toppled Saad Hariri out in the cold and strengthened Syrian influence in Beirut. But meanwhile, a parliamentary majority had been put together to install as prime minister Najib Mikati, a 55-year old Lebanese tycoon, who was willing to pledge in advance to cut Beirut's ties with the UN tribunal – STL – investigating the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri and declare its summonses and rulings null and void.

Mikati has built a business empire in Europe, Africa and the Middle East through his personal connections with the Syrian president and Hizbullah leader and the use of their intelligence facilities to promote his interests. He was awarded the premiership in return for a commitment to disqualify the STL as his first order of business, thereby saving Iran, Damascus and Hizbullah the embarrassment of a head-on clash with the international court over its summonses – not only for the extradition of Hizbullah's top security officials, but also against Iranian and Syrian regime officials suspected of complicity in the Hariri assassination.

By having the duly appointed Lebanese prime minister delegitimize the tribunal, all three can insist they are obliged to disobey its decrees in respect of the Lebanese government and the will of its people and barred from following the orders of a body declared illegitimate and operating at the behest of Washington and Tel Aviv.

By a single stroke, therefore, Tehran has checked one of President Barack Obama's most critical Middle East policy moves, one which hinged on support for the Hariri tribunal and the strengthening of a pro-West administration in Beirut. Instead, Washington wakes up to find an Iranian puppet ruling Lebanon. Tehran accomplished this two days after fatally stalling the world powers' attempt to bring Iran around to a diplomatic resolution of its drive toward a nuclear bomb. In two days of talks with six powers in Istanbul, ending Friday, Jan. 21, the Iranian delegation refused to budge an inch.

A day later, Iran's foreign minister was already in Damascus tying up the ends of its grab for Lebanon.

Monday night, realizing the Mikati appointment was in the bag, supporters of the ousted prime minister Saad Hariri and his March 14 alliance, were out in the streets, burning tires, firing off shots and trying to block the highways from Beirut to the north, south and east to Damascus. They declared Tuesday, Jan. 25, a day of anger and called for mass rallies in support of their pro-Western leader.

But there is not much they can do beyond this for three reasons:

1. The Sunnis and Christians who find themselves in opposition a Shiite-dominated government backed will be reluctant to go all the way and ignite another civil war of which Lebanon has had more than its fill – especially when the national army will obey the pro-Iranian government.
2. Although the Obama administration pledged its support for Saad Hariri in his struggle against Hizbullah, Tehran and Damascus, and Friday, Jan. 21, the USS Strike Force with 6,000 marines and sailors aboard moved into place opposite Lebanese shores, not a single marine has landed in Beirut to save the day. And Tehran was not impressed.

Two days later, Iran dared the US, Israel and Egypt to do their worst by provocatively announcing the dispatch of an Iranian war fleet to the Red Sea, Suez Canal and Mediterranean. (Click here for debkafile report.)

3. The Netanyahu government, though aware of the tectonic change making its northern neighbor an Iranian vassal, refrained from even a demonstrative step that might have made Iran and Syria hesitate before going through with the total subjection of Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt likewise, though heads of the moderate Arab Sunni bloc of nations committed to curbing radical

Iran's domination of the Middle East, have held silent and not lifted a finger to help their Arab ally survive the pro-Shiite tide swamping Lebanon.