

Miqati's New Government Faces Challenge of International Tribunal, Hizbullah Arms

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Prime Minister-designate Najib Miqati, who has vowed to maintain national unity, will start consultations to form a new government after President Michel Suleiman appointed him Lebanon's new premier.

Miqati's appointment on Tuesday came amid a "day of rage" by fellow Sunnis who accused him of being a traitor to his sect and betraying former PM Saad Hariri.

The March 14 coalition, to which Hariri also belong, views Miqati's candidacy as a bid by Hizbullah to impose on the Sunni community their choice for the premiership.

Pro-Hariri protesters on Tuesday blocked roads and burned tires in anger at Miqati's nomination, prompting France and Washington to voice concern.

Miqati offered to cooperate with the various Lebanese political parties to confront major challenges facing the country.

But the big question is: What stance will Miqati's government take with regards to the international tribunal in the wake of the Hizbullah-led campaign to oust Hariri and replace him with Miqati. And what about the other thorny issue of Hizbullah arms?

Shortly after his appointment, Miqati rejected attempts to cast him as "Hizbullah's man" and said he would cooperate with all Lebanese to form an inclusive government.

Miqati is not a member of Hizbullah and is considered a relative moderate.

Minister Fadi Abboud believed that government formation will "not take too long," particularly since Miqati promised to launch consultations with parliamentary blocs as early as Thursday.

"Don't prejudge me or my behavior, please, especially the international community," the 55-year-old told AFP in an interview.

"I say in all honesty that my nomination by Hizbullah does not mean I am bound by any of their political positions, except as concerns the protection of the national resistance," he said, referring to Hizbullah's struggle against Israel.

Hizbullah and its allies brought down Hariri's government January 12 after a long-running standoff over the U.N.-backed probe into the 2005 assassination of his father, former PM Rafik Hariri.

Hizbullah has said it believes some of its members will be indicted by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Hizbullah has denounced the STL as part of a U.S.-Israeli conspiracy.

Hizbullah can now either form its own government, leaving Hariri and his allies to become the Opposition, or it can try to persuade Hariri to join a national unity government.

In a speech Sunday night, Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said he favored a unity government.

Hariri said Monday he will not join a government headed by a Hizbullah-backed candidate.

Mikati told AFP that he would seek to address the explosive issue of the STL through dialogue.

"Stopping the tribunal today is no longer a Lebanese decision," he said, adding that Lebanon's cooperation with the tribunal was another question altogether. He did not elaborate.

Mikati, who is close to Syria and is considered a centrist, earlier told reporters that he would reach out to all parties in forming his government.

A technocrat government was not ruled out, however, if a national unity Cabinet was impossible to achieve.

Speaker Nabih Berri said in remarks published Wednesday that he does not veto a technocrat government on condition that it receives the support of the various political parties.

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Miqati Says Only Committed to 'Protecting Resistance' after Hizbullah Nomination

Prime Minister-designate Najib Miqati on Tuesday rejected attempts to cast him as "Hizbullah's man" and said the dispute over a U.N. tribunal that brought down his predecessor could only be resolved through dialogue.

"Don't prejudge me or my behavior, please, especially the international community," the 55-year-old billionaire businessman told Agence France Presse in an interview at his Beirut home shortly after being appointed to form a new government.

"I say in all honesty that my nomination by Hizbullah does not mean I am bound by any of their political positions except as concerns the protection of the national resistance," he said, referring to the armed group's struggle against Israel.

Miqati said he felt no shame in the fact that the Iranian- and Syrian-backed Hizbullah had supported his appointment and wished outgoing premier Saad Hariri's Western-backed party had done the same.

"I say 'thank you to them', I respect them as I respect those who did not vote for me," he said. "Now I will work in the interest of all Lebanese.

"Let my actions speak for themselves."

A centrist who has good ties with Syria, Miqati recalled that in 2005, when he served briefly as premier, he had been labeled "a Syrian puppet" but was later recognized as a capable statesman.

"During my tenure ... I did everything in the interest of Lebanon and everyone was surprised by what I achieved," he said.

The PM-designate added that the thorny issue of the Netherlands-based Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which has been at the center of a long-running standoff between Hizbullah and Hariri, would be tackled through dialogue.

"Stopping the tribunal today is no longer a Lebanese decision," he said. "Lebanon's cooperation with the tribunal is something else.

"So before (jumping to conclusions) we have to look at the file again, study it and if there is any issue of dispute, it will be solved through dialogue."

Miqati said he would begin two days of consultations with parliamentary groups on forming a new government on Thursday and hoped that Hariri's coalition would back his efforts.

"I sent a message to Hariri today to reconsider his position," he said. "Let us be together in the same boat, in the interest of Lebanon."

He also sought to reassure Washington, which has expressed concern about his appointment, saying Lebanon "cannot have but very good relations" with the United States.

"I hope they will maintain their support for Lebanon," he said. "They know my history.

"It may not be a personal relationship but they know what I am capable of," he added. "My actions will speak for themselves."

Addressing worries that his appointment could adversely affect Lebanon's economy, Miqati said he believed otherwise.

"I have a background as a businessman, and the business community knows that I am liberal who believes in the private sector and freedom of the economy," he said.

He added that his government would seek to implement institutional reforms, tackle rampant corruption, address the day-

to-day needs of the Lebanese and boost ties with Europe.

He said it was a given he would entertain warm relations with neighboring Syria, believed to have played a role in his nomination and which was forced to pull its troops from Lebanon in the wake of Hariri's murder.

"It goes without saying that relations have to be very good and that there has to be mutual respect," he said.

Hizbullah for months had been pressing Hariri to reject the tribunal which it believes will implicate party members in ex-premier Rafik Hariri's 2005 murder.

Earlier Tuesday, President Michel Suleiman assigned Miqati to form the new government.

Miqati's appointment came in a presidential decree.

"The president informed me of the outcome of his consultations with parliamentarians, which have resulted in my appointment as prime minister," Miqati told reporters from the Baabda Palace.

"I will cooperate fully with all Lebanese to form a new government that protects their unity and sovereignty," he vowed.

He also pledged to maintain a centrist position.

Later Tuesday, Miqati said that he "cannot sever the relation with Hariri."

"After he calms down he'll know that I'm one of the closest people to him," the PM-designate told LBC TV network.

Responding to a question, Miqati said: "The Council of Muftis had asked me for a solution to the issue (of his nomination) and I had told them that I would accept any solution that pleases Sheikh Saad (Hariri) and preserves my dignity."

"Let no one speak of preserving Sunnis in Lebanon, because I was the one to receive 87% of their votes, an unprecedented result in Lebanon," Miqati stated.

"When I had decided to run for premier, I contacted all parliamentary blocs. Was I supposed to reject the nomination after the backing I had received from many blocs?" he added.

Miqati revealed that during a dinner banquet Friday evening he told the invitees that he would vote for Saad Hariri. "But later some developments happened -- which history will reveal -- and made me take the decision of nominating myself to rescue Lebanon," he added.

"I don't expect any antagonism with Saad Hariri and I cannot get engaged in a confrontation with anyone inside or outside Lebanon," he told his interviewer.

"No (regional or international) contacts were made to support my candidacy for the premiership and I had never visited Syria following the Cabinet's collapse. I had only discussed the step with Arab and foreign friends," Miqati noted.

He said that no "restrictions" had been imposed on his candidacy, adding that he has imposed his "own conditions."

"I won't disclose them now. Days will demonstrate Najib Miqati's policy of openness toward everyone."

The newly designated premier described the U.N.-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon as a "controversial issue among the Lebanese," noting that "such issues should be settled inside Lebanese institutions."

"I'm not the one to disregard the blood of the martyrs and the issue of the tribunal will be thoroughly studied," he vowed.

Miqati received the backing of 68 of parliament's 128 MPs, who had been meeting with Suleiman since Monday after Hizbullah and its allies brought down the unity government of Saudi- and Western-backed Saad Hariri on January 12.

The remaining 60 MPs backed Hariri for another term.

Miqati's appointment has sparked widespread anger within the Sunni community. They view it as a bid by Hizbullah to sideline Hariri, the most popular Sunni leader, and even take control of the government.(AFP-Naharnet-AP)

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