100 Days

on The Mikati Government

Lebanese Information Center Assessment Report

December 15, 2021

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The government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati was formed on September 10, 2021 following a lengthy vacuum that has further exacerbated Lebanon's severe economic crisis.

100 days following its formation, the cabinet remains in near complete paralysis due to pressures exerted by Hezbollah and its allies.

Background

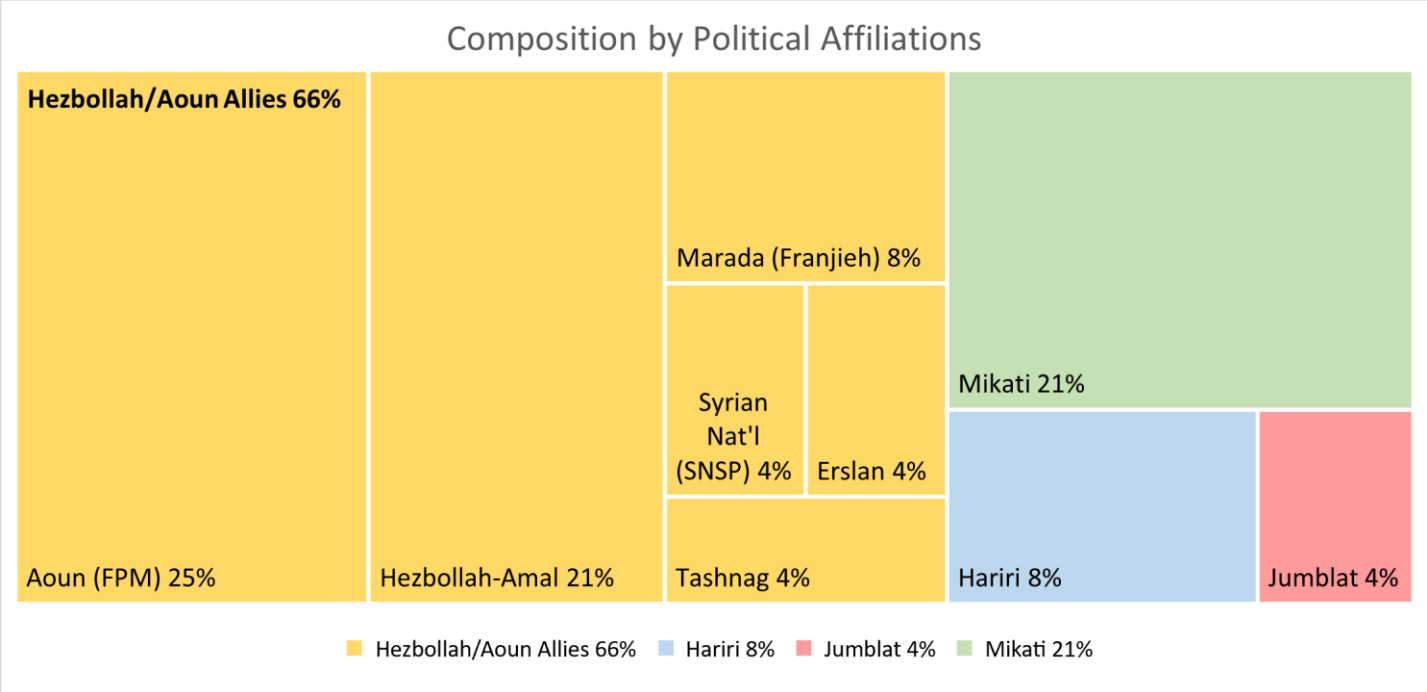
President Michel Aoun tasked Najib Mikati, the 65-year-old billionaire businessman from Tripoli, to form the government following the decision of Saad Hariri in mid-July to step down from that task after nine months of his designation. Hariri claimed that he was not able to avoid the sharp differences with President Aoun over his numerous proposed government composition. Hariri also accused Iran and its proxy Hezbollah of "disrupting" the birth of the government. Prior to Hariri, Ambassador Mustafa Adeeb, who was tasked with forming the government at the end of August 2020, apologized for not completing the task due to differences between political forces.

The government consisted of 24 ministers, most of whom had not been involved in politics before. Mikati claimed that is was impossible for him to form a "Government of Technocrats," as stipulated in the French initiative, stating "We can't bring in specialists alone without them having political affiliations."



Government Composition and Political Affiliations

Name	Political Affiliations	Sect	Portfolio
Najib Mikati	independent	Sunni	Prime Minister
Saade Al-Shami	Syrian Nationalist (SNSP)	Orthodox	Deputy Prime Minister
Maurice Selim	Aoun (FPM)	Orthodox	Defense
Walid Fayad	Aoun (FPM)	Orthodox	Energy
Abdullah Bou Habib	Aoun (FPM)	Maronite	Foreign Affairs
Bassam Mawlawi	Mikati	Sunni	Interior and Municipalities
Amine Salam	Mikati	Sunni	Economy
Henry Khoury	Aoun (FPM)	Maronite	Justice
Hector Hajjar	Aoun (FPM)	Catholic	Social Affairs
George Kordahi	Franjieh (Marada)	Maronite	Information
Yusif Khalil	Berri (Amal)	Shiite	Finance
Najla Victor Riachi	Mikati	Catholic	Administrative Affairs
George Kallass	Mikati	Catholic	Youth and Sports
Walid Nassar	Aoun (FPM)	Maronite	Tourism
Firas Abyad	Hariri (Future Movement)	Sunni	Health
Nasser Yassin	Hariri (Future Movement)	Sunni	Environment
Abbas Al Haj Hassan	Berri (Amal)	Shiite	Agriculture
Issam Sharafeddine	Erslan (LDP)	Druze	Displaced
Johnny Korm	Franjieh (Marada)	Maronite	Communications
Ali Hamieh	Hezbollah	Shiite	Public Works and Transport
Mohamed Murtada	Hezbollah	Shiite	Culture
Abbas Halabi	Jumblat (PSP)	Druze	Education and Higher Education
George Bujikian	Tashnag	Armenian	Industry
Mustafa Beyram	Berri (Amal)	Shiite	Labor



The Formation

Several internal and external factors contributed to the success of Mikati in forming a government following the failures of both, Mustafa Adib and Saad Hariri, the over the earlier year.

Internally, Hezbollah and President Aoun had a vested interest in Mikati's success. Hezbollah's "Loyalty to the resistance" parliamentary bloc even handed Mikati the names of its Shiite ministers, Mustafa Beyram and Ali Hamieh, from the onset of the designation in clear contradiction to their approach with Adib and Hariri.

Externally, the daily French, American and Arab pressures on President Aoun have also contributed to facilitate the formation of this government. Several news outlets in Lebanon have also attributed the change in attitude of Hezbollah and Aoun to the call between French president Macron and Iran's president Ra'issi.

The Disrupting Third

Analysts vary in their assessment of whether Michel Aoun or Hezbollah each effectively controls a "disrupting third" of the members in Mikati's government. Aoun's son-in-law and head of the FPM party, Gebran Bassil, likes to brag in closed circles that they do but insists otherwise in public. Regardless, almost everyone agrees that this government has at least one third of its ministers belonging to Hezbollah and its allies, and at least another one third who fear Hezbollah. In short, there are no doubts on who has effective control over this government as admitted by Mikati himself in one of his interviews.

The Ministerial Statement and the Parliamentary Vote of Confidence

Less than a week after its formation, the Cabinet released its ministerial statement. The main focal points of the statement were:

- Economic reforms, especially the resumption of negotiations with the IMF
- Reforms related to the electricity and telecommunications sector
- General employment and public procurement
- Privatization and decentralization
- Government subsidies and the cash card [The cash card is a new proposed program similar to food stamps]
- Supporting judicial independence and fighting corruption
- Organizing the Parliamentary elections to be held on time in May 2022
- A policy of disassociation from regional conflicts
- Completion of all investigations into the Beirut port explosion to determine the causes of the disaster, uncover the truth and punish the perpetrators
- Abide by the provisions of the Constitution and the Taif Agreement, respect the international laws signed by Lebanon and affirm the commitment to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701

Remarkably, and in stark contradiction to the last point listed above the statement also affirmed the right of "Lebanese citizens" to resist the Israeli occupation, respond to its attacks and restore the occupied territories of shebaa farms, the hills of Kfar Shuba and the Lebanese part of the village of Ghajar. This affirmation remains similar to earlier ministerial statements and legitimizes Hezbollah's weapons and activities.

Following an eight-hour-long parliamentary session to discuss the ministerial statement, Mikati's government received the vote of confidence with 85 members of parliament voting in favor, 15 voting against and 17 absent.

In addition to some independent members of the parliament that voted for the new government were the following blocs:

- "Strong Lebanon" (Gibran Bassil/Aoun)
- "Future" (Saad Hariri)
- "Democratic Gathering" (Walid Jumblatt),
- "Development and Liberation" (Nabih Berri)
- "Loyalty to the Resistance" (Hezbollah)
- "Independent Center" (Najib Mikati)
- "National Coalition" (Suleiman Frangieh)
- "Syrian Nationalist Social Party"

The only no-confidence votes were from the "Strong Republic" bloc (Samir Geagea).

Regional and International Reactions

Initially, the Arab League, Qatar, Jordan and Egypt welcomed the creation of the new government. Shortly afterwards, however, statements by the newly appointed Lebanese Information Minister, George Kordahi, about the war in Yemen, in which he described Saudi Arabia's defense of its borders against the repeated attacks of the Iranian-backed Houthis as an act of aggression by the Saudis. These statements further strained Lebanon's relationship with the Gulf states leading to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, except Qatar, expelling of the Lebanese Ambassadors and withdrawing their own Ambassadors from Lebanon.

Immediately following this unprecedented diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, PM Mikati declared that he would spare no effort to resolve this crisis in accordance with the "proper rules." Unfortunately, and up to the time of the writing of this report, Mikati remains incapable of making any serious progress on this front.

Internationally, the International Support Group for Lebanon and the UN Security Council reaffirmed their support for Lebanon's stability and sovereignty, in accordance with the many international resolutions on Lebanon, and stressed the importance of Baabda's declaration of disassociation from regional conflicts, the need for free and fair elections, the implementation of a concrete reform agenda, as well as a quick and independent investigation into the port explosion.

More specifically, the United States and France both welcomed the formation of the government and reaffirmed their commitment to providing social and humanitarian assistance.

Judge Bitar and Hezbollah's Tantrum

13 days following the formation of the government, news came out of Wafiq Safa, Hezbollah's head of the Liaison and Coordination Unit, threatening to "usurp" judge Tarek Bitar in a verbal message to the judge.

Judge Bitar, who was appointed to investigate the Beirut port explosion in February of this year has been relentless in his investigation and has also sought top political and security officials for questioning.

Hezbollah, on the other hand, have also been relentless in their verbal attacks against the judge and in their insistence on replacing him.

Shortly following the Safa threat, Hezbollah and their ally Nabih Berri, having unsuccessfully exhausted every possible legal means to replace Bitar, announced that their ministers will boycott the council of ministers' meetings unless its first order of business would be the removal of Bitar.



Hezbollah Militiamen attacking the Christian-majority district of Ain El-Remmeneh in Beirut – October 14, 2021

The tension caused by the Shiite duo's insistence on replacing judge Bitar also translated into major security escalations on the streets. On October 14, a presumably peaceful protest against Bitar by members of Hezbollah and Amal turned into an armed attack on the predominantly Christian area of Ain Al-Rummana in Beirut which resulted in 7 deaths.

The Kordahi Crisis

The diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states could not have come at a worse time for Mikati who had always emphasized, most recently in his government formation speech, Lebanon's need to maintain the best of relations with the Arab world. Hezbollah's numerous transgressions which range from arming and training dissidents and terrorist groups to expanding its drug trade in these countries had already stressed their relations with Lebanon to the extreme and the Kordahi statements were the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Bolstered by unequivocal support from Hezbollah, Kordahi refused to resign from his ministerial position insisting that this was a matter of Lebanese sovereignty. He later changed course early December and announced his resignation. Kordahi timed his resignation to coincide with President Macron's meeting with Saudi crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, on December 4 in what can be perceived as a goodwill gesture by Hezbollah towards the French President.

However, this resignation did very little to change the Saudi position towards Lebanon, or more accurately, Hezbollah, as evidenced by the Saudi-French joint statement, which stressed the need to limit arms in Lebanon to the legitimate state institutions and to stop Lebanon from being used as a launching pad for "terrorist acts that undermine the security and stability of the region and a source of drug trafficking."



Resigned Lebanese Information Minister, George Kordahi

Mikati's Agenda

From the onset, Mikati asserted that "the main task of the government is to "stop the economic free fall and put the country on the path to recovery." On Mikati's agenda are the following key points:

- Mobilizing Arab and international support: Mikati insists on the need to build good relations with the international community and Arab countries and has announced that he will be visiting Arab countries including those in the Gulf region as well as other European countries to mobilize support. Mikati has also alluded that he did not mind visiting Syria, or any other country, on condition that such visits would not subject Lebanon to any international sanctions.



Mikati visits Pope Francis at the Vatican on November 25, 2021

- Elections: Mikati insists on holding the parliamentary elections on time and supports the vote of expatriates in accordance with the most recent parliamentary amendments.
- Energy: He stated that "bids for electricity plants will be taking place" and added "Currently, we are trying to secure fuel oil from Iraq and natural gas from Egypt."
- Contact with the IMF: Mikati expressed his commitment to completing the negotiations with the IMF and announced that his government is already in the advanced stages of the negotiations and the revision of the fiscal recovery plan including the 2022 budget.
- The rights of the depositors, the fate of the governorship of the central bank and the forensic audit: Mikati considers that protecting small depositors and getting them access to "fresh dollars" is a priority. He also announced that he will be working to complete the "Capital Control" plan. On the topic of the governorship of the central bank, Mikati stated that the law protects the governor of the bank, effectively opposing the political pressures to replace the current governor. In regards to the forensic audit, Mikati stressed that he is in full support of the audit across all ministries and departments. Unfortunately, this audit remains pending given that the council of ministers has not been able to convene yet.
- The investigation into the port of Beirut explosion: In what can be perceived as a defiance to Hezbollah, Mikati stated that it would not be appropriate to change the judge that is investigating the port explosion again because this undermines the credibility of the investigation. Hezbollah had accused the current investigating judge, Tarek Bitar, of being biased and insists on replacing him.
- Education and health: On the subject of schools and the scholastic year, Mikati revealed that they have devised a "good solutions for teachers," but has not elaborated further. On the topic of health, he stressed that "subsidies will remain in effect but only on medications for chronic illnesses."

Signs of a Looming Crisis

There are several indications that Mikati's agenda might not be in alignment with President Aoun's or Hezbollah's. From day one of the government's formation, key differences on several issues between Mikati and the Hezbollah/Aoun camp were obvious:

Shortly following the birth of his government, Mikati formed a delegation to negotiate with the IMF. The delegation included Deputy Prime Minister Saada al-Shami, Finance Minister Youssef Al-Khalil, Minister of Economy and Trade Amin Salam and central bank governor Riad Salameh. To Mikati's surprise, Aoun insisted on including two "advisers" from the FPM circle, Charbel Kordahi and Rafik Haddad.

While Mikati insists that the administrative, judicial, security and diplomatic appointments are not a priority for his cabinet, the Aoun/Bassil camp are pushing for these appointments and consider them an opportunity to get their people in and to consolidate their influence prior to the end of Aoun's term and the next parliamentary elections.

Furthermore, and while Mikati is attempting to rectify the relations with the Arab world, Hezbollah keeps ramping up its aggression against them as evidenced by the recent apprehension of the Hezb's sleeper cells in Kuwait on November 18.

Hezbollah is also challenging Mikati's attempts at improving relations with the US whether it's in terms of smuggling Iranian fuel into Lebanon or in terms of its consistent verbal attacks on the Americans and its insistence on "cleaning up" the government institutions from what it calls "the remaining U.S. influence."

A Government in Paralysis

100 days after the government's formation, the council of ministers has yet to convene. The ministers affiliated with the "Shiite duo" (Hizbollah and Amal) refuse to attend unless the session will address the replacement of judge Tarek Bitar who is leading the investigation into the Beirut port explosion.

The diplomatic crisis with the Arab Gulf States following Kordahi's remarks has further exacerbated the tensions in the cabinet and highlighted the sharp political division between the parties who are in favor of good relations with the Arab world and those who are not.

This paradoxical government and paralyzed cabinet was probably best summarized by Mikati himself when he said "the government is on the move, but the cabinet is not."

