

A Mikati Government Will Not Save Lebanon

by [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Jul 28, 2021

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hkwmt-myqaty-ln-tnqdh-lbnan\)](/ar/policy-analysis/hkwmt-myqaty-ln-tnqdh-lbnan)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow at The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



Brief Analysis

Instead of resuming a shell game that the country's beleaguered people no longer have the luxury to play, Europe and the United States should proceed with additional sanctions against corrupt leaders.

On July 26, ten days after the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, former premier Najib Mikati was chosen to form a new government in Lebanon. Claiming he enjoys international support from the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and other countries, Mikati pledged that he will name a cabinet as soon as possible. Yet despite being nominated by President Michel Aoun and winning votes from 72 of parliament's 128 members, he represents the same fundamental problem that plagued previous attempts to form a legitimate, effective government—namely, the political class persists in proposing options that represent their own elite interests rather than pursuing the serious institutional reforms the country and the people so desperately need (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-wheels-justice-do-not-grind>).

Among those voting for Mikati were legislators affiliated with Hezbollah, Amal, and even Hariri's Future Movement. The two main Christian factions—the “Lebanese Forces” party and its rival, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement—did not support him. So what has really changed, and why did Hezbollah and its allies back this particular outcome? The answer is obvious by now: they prefer controlling a failed state over allowing reforms that chip away at the power they gained in the 2018 parliamentary election.

Like the majority of the political class, Hezbollah and its allies seek to maintain the illusion that the country's political process is still functional. Two main concerns are driving this approach: the looming EU sanctions on Lebanese leaders, and the prospects of a new round of mass protests at home. To delay this backlash at home and abroad, elites continue to stoke false hopes that an internal solution exists.

Another reason why certain parties pushed to nominate Mikati is so they can use the resultant government to manage the next parliamentary election in May 2022. Over the past two years, political elites have lost drastic amounts of public support, faced waves of protests, and watched opposition elements win various student and syndicate elections, so the outcome of next year's vote has become their primary concern.

Thus, if Mikati is able to form a government, its mission will likely be to sidestep serious reforms, oversee the election of its hand-picked replacement, and otherwise preserve the status quo. This entails managing Lebanon's slow-motion collapse, not reversing it. After all, Mikati is no outsider—a billionaire from Tripoli, he has always been part of the corrupt order, repeatedly using his political influence to grow his businesses and assets. Accusations against him include a [2019 charge \(https://apnews.com/article/government-and-politics-middle-east-business-lebanon-biden-cabinet-1789da845621ebcb35e79f3176c9a6bf\)](https://apnews.com/article/government-and-politics-middle-east-business-lebanon-biden-cabinet-1789da845621ebcb35e79f3176c9a6bf) that he illegally profited from housing loans due to deals he struck with Central Bank governor Riad Salameh. The case was not brought to trial, but the charge was never cleared either.

Moreover, Mikati has already served as prime minister twice: in 2005 and again in 2011-2013. In both cases, Hezbollah essentially imposed him on the country to serve its own interests. In January 2011, for example, he was chosen to paper over the militia's Beirut coup—an infamous incident in which Hariri was purposefully humiliated by learning of his government's collapse while he was in a meeting with President Obama. When Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and other factions sought to reinstate Hariri, Hezbollah dispatched additional armed members throughout the capital and outlying Druze communities. The literal and potential threat conveyed by these “Black Shirts” was clear, and Mikati was unanimously nominated soon thereafter.

Given this heavy baggage of Hezbollah conditions, opposition criticism, and misplaced foreign expectations, any government formed by Mikati will ultimately be a waste of time. The international community should not wait and see if he succeeds or not, let alone whether his government will implement reforms. This game of buying time is one that Hezbollah and other elites have mastered over the years, most recently during Lebanon's [maritime border negotiations with Israel \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lines-sea-israel-lebanon-maritime-border-dispute\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lines-sea-israel-lebanon-maritime-border-dispute). The United States and Europe should not let Beirut use this tactic to delay punitive measures against those who perpetuate corruption or hinder reforms. Doing so would only play into Hezbollah's hands and extend the humanitarian crisis indefinitely.

Accordingly, if the EU has decided to sanction Lebanese leaders, it needs to implement these sanctions as soon as possible. At the very least, such action would make clear to Mikati the risk of avoiding reforms. In parallel, Washington should continue using the Global Magnitsky Act to sanction additional corrupt leaders as a message of support to the Lebanese people.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)



Ido Levy,
Craig Whiteside

(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region

Feb 9, 2022



Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Middle East at the Olympics: Six Countries Compete While Great Power Politics on Display

Feb 9, 2022



Carol Silber

(/policy-analysis/middle-east-olympics-six-countries-compete-while-great-power-politics-display)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

