

# Lebanon's New Government May Walk a Thin Line Between Promises and Compromises

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**The new cabinet appointments appeared to sideline Hezbollah's camp, but the group retained control over the crucial Finance Ministry and may find other ways of interfering with security decisions, the reconstruction process, and the next elections.**

**O**n February 7, Lebanon formed a new transitional government just three weeks after designating a new prime minister—no small feat. A process that usually takes months of political bickering was quickly overcome by Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and President Joseph Aoun just ahead of the looming deadline for [extending the Hezbollah-Israeli ceasefire \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/01/white-house-statement-on-agreement-extension-between-lebanon-and-israel/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/01/white-house-statement-on-agreement-extension-between-lebanon-and-israel/). Their achievement was greatly abetted by two foreign interventions: Israel's resounding victory over Hezbollah in their latest war, and last week's visit by U.S. deputy special envoy Morgan Ortagus, who clearly articulated Washington's red lines regarding potential Hezbollah participation in the cabinet.

After meeting with President Aoun, Ortagus held a [press conference \(https://lb.usembassy.gov/deputy-special-envoy-for-the-middle-east-morgan-ortagus-press-availability-at-the-presidential-palace-following-meeting-with-president-aoun/\)](https://lb.usembassy.gov/deputy-special-envoy-for-the-middle-east-morgan-ortagus-press-availability-at-the-presidential-palace-following-meeting-with-president-aoun/) laying out U.S. expectations for the new government: "I've never seen so much excitement in the United States and from the Lebanese diaspora around the world about the future of this country. And I think it is largely in part, of course, because Hezbollah was defeated by Israel...But it is also thanks to...President Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam, and everyone in this government who is committed to an end of corruption, who is committed to reforms, and who [is] committed to making sure that Hezbollah is not a part of this government in any form, and that Hezbollah remains disarmed and militarily defeated."

Ortagus then met with Salam and Speaker of the House Nabih Berri, who has been Hezbollah's main partner in

attempting to influence the government formation process. What was said behind closed doors is unclear, but the parties agreed immediately afterward to announce the **new government** (<https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/08/middleeast/lebanon-prime-minister-new-government-intl/index.html>). Hezbollah and its Shia ally Amal were permitted to name four of the new cabinet's twenty-six ministers—including the head of the crucial Finance Ministry (see below), a development that merits particularly close scrutiny and seemed to defy Ortagus's warning about barring Hezbollah's participation in "any form." In exchange for this concession, the government reportedly secured guarantees that Hezbollah's camp could not execute a so-called **blocking third** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-pm-forms-new-government-2025-02-08/>) in the cabinet and thereby veto government initiatives.

Lebanese observers concluded that the Ortagus visit had an impact on Berri, who had previously prevented the announcement of a new government until Nawaf agreed to all of his Shia cabinet nominees. Berri and Hezbollah preferred to delay government formation and threaten a vote of confidence rather than losing all of their Shia representation. Najib Mikati's caretaker government worked better for their interests, and the longer it lasted, the more they could delay reforms. Last week's developments seemed to shift their calculus, however.

On paper, the new cabinet is filled with qualified ministers and appears to be an improvement over many of its predecessors. The prime minister's supporters are also celebrating what they believe is the end of Hezbollah's blocking third. Yet the devil remains in the details—and eventually in the government's performance.

## Priorities and Plans

**S**alam's transitional cabinet will last until May 2026, when the next parliamentary election will produce a new government. Hence, he will not have enough time to achieve all of the country's needed reforms or fix its sundry economic and security problems. He can make progress on a few major issues, however, and prepare the ground for the next government.

His first priority should be to fully implement the ceasefire agreement and disarm Hezbollah in the south. This entails giving the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) the political support they need to fulfill the agreement's difficult terms, while also ensuring accountability for those LAF elements who continue colluding with Hezbollah. If the LAF does the job, Israel will fully withdraw from Lebanon, and the chances of war will significantly decrease.

In addition to implementing UN Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559, which call for disarming Hezbollah, Salam should take steps to enforce Resolution 1680, which calls on Lebanon to secure its border with Syria. This would serve three important goals: commencing good diplomatic relations with the new Syrian leadership, curbing the cross-border smuggling of cash and weapons to Hezbollah, and allowing Syrian refugees in Lebanon to return home safely and voluntarily.

The transition government will also focus on preparing and conducting the next elections: the parliamentary vote slated for next year, and the municipal elections scheduled for May 31 of this year. This means designing a fair, representational electoral law and making sure voting takes place on time and without violations. For Hezbollah, the next elections are vital. After losing so much of its military and financial clout over the past year, the group is keen on preserving its political representation in parliament and its control over various municipalities. This is another reason why electoral and judicial reforms are so crucial—by implementing measures that keep Hezbollah from siphoning off reconstruction funding, pilfering the government's coffers, and using violence to intimidate voters, officials can make sure that the group and its allies remain weak and contained, and that the Shia community can vote freely.

Salam's government will also be responsible for making three vital appointments: the head of the General Security Directorate, the head of the LAF, and the governor of the Central Bank. Each of these posts will play a major role in

limiting Hezbollah's weapons, cash flow, and points of entry for smuggling. In addition, the transitional government will fill hundreds of vacant state positions over the next year, greatly influencing the direction and performance of these institutions for years to come.

## Will Nawaf's Cabinet Fulfill Its Promises?

**S**alam has assured the Lebanese people that he will be able to take bold initiatives now that Hezbollah's camp has been marginalized in the cabinet. In addition to letting the group name only four Shia ministers, the cabinet excluded non-Shia Hezbollah allies such as the Marada Movement (headed by Sleiman Frangieh) and the Free Patriotic Movement (headed by Gebran Bassil).

Yet the notion that Hezbollah has fully lost its blocking third is tricky. The group may no longer block decisions on judicial and economic reforms. Yet given the cabinet's potentially fractious composition—of mostly independent ministers with no party affiliation and no track record of confronting Hezbollah—the militia and its allies may still wield influence on major security and political decisions such as dismantling Hezbollah military infrastructure, pursuing peace with Israel, and holding Hezbollah leaders accountable for political assassinations and other crimes.

The biggest question marks surround the Ministry of Finance, a sovereign institution that holds the power to hinder important decrees and appointments, since all such decisions require the signature of the finance minister. Berri insisted that this post be given to Yassin Jaber, presumably at Hezbollah's behest. In other words, a minister who owes his position to Berri and Hezbollah now has de facto veto power over all government decisions. Jaber has reportedly pledged not to block any initiative approved by a majority of the cabinet, but there is no formal mechanism forcing him to honor that promise.

## Policy Recommendations

**A**s Lebanon's new transitional government navigates the old political system and tries to implement international agreements and reforms, Washington and its partners need to maintain the pressure. Hezbollah is weakened but still has considerable representation in the government, a key ally as speaker of parliament, and a hand-picked candidate as penholder at the Finance Ministry. Accordingly, the main goals over the next year should be to defeat the group politically and block it from any source of funding.

The latter goal will require Beirut and its foreign partners to keep a close eye on the security forces that monitor Lebanon's entry points, mainly the airport and seaports. Visitors from Iraq and diplomatic delegations from Iran have already attempted to bring Hezbollah cash by flying it in with them via airline, with some success. As head of the mechanism monitoring the ceasefire agreement with Israel, the United States has great leverage over monitoring Lebanese security institutions and can therefore press the LAF and other forces to stop the cash flow to Hezbollah. This effort should be synchronized with Saudi Arabia and other regional powers, since they will have major leverage over reconstruction. As noted above, particular attention and pressure should be devoted to the new head of finance, making sure Jaber does not turn his ministry into a cash facilitator for Hezbollah and Amal.

The government also crossed Ortogus's red line when it allowed Berri (and, by extension, Hezbollah) to fill three other ministries: Rakan Nassereddine as the new health minister, Tamara al-Zein as the new environmental minister, and Mohammad Haidar as the new labor minister. Control over the Health Ministry could be especially significant because it allocates funds to hospitals and other vital services—a tool that Hezbollah could use to strengthen the health programs it provides to its base, potentially boosting its popularity ahead of the elections. The United States has traditionally been the world's top donor to Lebanon and leads the international institutions that oversee much of its foreign assistance. If the Trump administration **decides to maintain this status** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trumps-foreign-assistance-review-prioritizes-funding-over-policy>), it can exert substantial leverage on relevant Lebanese decisions—namely, by making clear to Salam

how these ministries are expected to perform, monitoring all of their expenditures, and threatening their ministers with sanctions if they collaborate with Hezbollah.

Coordination with other international donors is crucial as well. In addition to the Saudi outreach mentioned above, officials should not move forward with additional IMF deals and World Bank funding for Lebanon until more economic and judicial reforms are fulfilled. This would have the important benefit of constraining Hezbollah and affiliated ministers from manipulating state funds.

Extra attention should also be paid to the appointment of the next LAF commander, who will be responsible for making sure the ceasefire agreement **is fully implemented (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/so-far-so-good-israel-lebanon-ceasefire-largely-holding>)**, preventing Hezbollah from rearming, and working with Syrian authorities to secure the border. U.S. assistance to the LAF should continue, but with strict conditions tied to implementation of the ceasefire. Relatedly, the Trump administration should coordinate with the Saudis, Qataris, and other reconstruction funders to make sure ceasefire terms and economic reforms are properly implemented before any funds move.

Even if all goes well and international assistance begins flowing, Washington and its partners will need to make sure the reconstruction process does not benefit malign actors. This means avoiding not only Hezbollah (including its allies and the municipal institutions they control), but also the Council for South Lebanon. Established by the government in 1970 to compensate southern residents for damage caused by Israeli attacks, the council has since become completely beholden to Hezbollah and Amal. The international community will therefore need to closely supervise and audit the government to prevent corruption, ensure transparency about who is being paid for reconstruction, and prove that Hezbollah and its affiliates are not involved in any part of the process.

In the longer term, the Shia community will be looking for an alternative to Hezbollah if the group is unable to provide them with ample reconstruction benefits and decent postwar compensation. This alternative should take the form of new representation in the next parliament. Hence, in addition to further weakening the Hezbollah camp, Beirut's foreign partners should help **empower and protect (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/strategy-contain-hezbollah-ideas-and-recommendations>)** the Shia opposition as it plans its campaigns against Hezbollah in the next elections.

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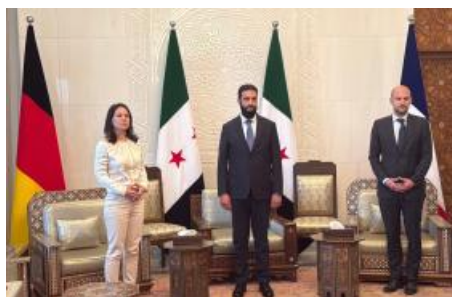
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