

Hezbollah's New Cabinet Push

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Mona Alami is a French Lebanese journalist focusing on political and economic issues in the Arab world. She has conducted extensive research on radical Islamist movements in Palestinian refugee camps, Salafi movements in Lebanon and Jordan, al-Qaeda's reach to the West, as well as Hezbollah. Alami is also a fellow at the Atlantic Council and senior associate at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and TRENDS Research and Advisory.



Brief Analysis

In spite of the [attempted deal \(http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/253227-alain-aoun-hariri-must-admit-march-8-has-right-to-get-additional-minister\)](http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/253227-alain-aoun-hariri-must-admit-march-8-has-right-to-get-additional-minister) to form a cabinet in the Lebanese parliament in late October, Hezbollah has now ramped up demands for the representation of its Sunni allies in the new cabinet. This new condition has led to a renewed political deadlock in the formation of the Lebanese government, which has now been paralyzed for seven months. Hezbollah's increased demands should not be interpreted as merely a local bargaining ploy, but rather as a direct response to the larger international escalation against Tehran and the Lebanese militant group.

Hezbollah's fresh stance demonstrates how the growing Iranian–American face-off across the region may play out on Lebanese soil. According to sources close to the party, a few months ago Hezbollah leadership believed that its interests were best served by encouraging the diverse Lebanese factions to reach a deal over the cabinet formation, regardless of the shares its own party and allies would receive. At the time, a catastrophic domestic economic forecast and growing sanctions proved strong motivators for Hezbollah to prioritize international legitimacy, which only a Hariri-led cabinet could provide.

However, escalating pressure on Hezbollah and its backer Iran—in particular the November reinstatement of sanctions targeting Iran, including a number of its trade partners and targeting Iran's major economic sectors such as oil exports, shipping, and banks—is pushing Hezbollah to reconsider its earlier plan to weather imminent economic restrictions. Vital to this recalculation is the evident willingness of European banks to comply with U.S. sanctions policy despite [statements \(https://www.apnews.com/4496abc9d8ac4d158d218e74cc5b3ab5\)](https://www.apnews.com/4496abc9d8ac4d158d218e74cc5b3ab5) from the European Union that they "deeply regret" the sanctions. Hezbollah is now apparently worried that even a Hariri-led government cannot provide the paramilitary group with the international cover it had hoped for, and that bolstering its position internally is a more effective domestic political maneuver for the time being.

Consequently, Hezbollah has shifted tactics. It is now pushing for Sunni allies to be included in the Lebanese cabinet to replace the [share \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-hezbollah/lebanons-hezbollah-insists-on-government-demand-warns-israel-idUSKCN1NF0M2\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-hezbollah/lebanons-hezbollah-insists-on-government-demand-warns-israel-idUSKCN1NF0M2) of the cabinet previously expected for the allies of Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri, head of the Hezbollah opponent the Future Movement.

Hezbollah has asked for the appointment of one of [six MPs \(http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/253515\)](http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/253515) : former minister Abdel Rahim Mrad and Adnan Traboulsi, Hezbollah bloc member Walid Sukarieh, Shiite Amal bloc member Qassem Hashem, Jihad Samad, and Faycal Karami, part of the Christian Marad bloc that also serves as a close ally of Hezbollah.

Allies in the cabinet would allow Hezbollah a greater control of government finances, a particularly attractive prospect given concerns over Hezbollah's diminishing financial support. Iran's broader financial woes may lead to restrictions on its funding to Hezbollah, which would compound the latter's reportedly systemic financial issues.

Sources close to the organization report decreases in services offered. This could explain Hezbollah's [request for the health ministry portfolio \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/why-does-hezbollah-want-lebanons-health-ministry\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/why-does-hezbollah-want-lebanons-health-ministry), as the group is increasingly unable to meet its healthcare expenses. Mounir Rabih, an Al-Modon columnist who focuses on Hezbollah and Lebanese politics, recently reported to the author that the militant group was also closing down some of its offices or moving to smaller offices in order to decrease its expenses.

These financial problems are putting a toll on the organization despite its military might. With control over government ministries, such as the aforementioned Health Ministry, Hezbollah would potentially be able to outsource financial commitments to its supporters to the government. A pro-Hezbollah government would also be more likely to stall the adoption of sanctions or scrutiny over targeted organizations.

In a recent incendiary speech, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, underlined that the party had no intention of backing down from this request, [emphasizing \(https://english.almanar.com.lb/618994\)](https://english.almanar.com.lb/618994) that it would not stop supporting its allies "no matter how much time their issue would take." Sayyed Nasrallah also [accused \(http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/252970-nasrallah-bassil-meet-discuss-government-formation\)](http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/252970-nasrallah-bassil-meet-discuss-government-formation) the PM of "sectarian incitement" that would lead nowhere. "The more Hezbollah and Iran feel victimized, the more their positions will be extreme," says Rabih "Hezbollah's recent political push is to give hope to its popular base and the perception of strength."

Nasrallah's political demands allow the party to project a sense of political strength while also providing real political leverage that could push their opponents, such as Hariri, into negotiations. This threat is particularly effective given a broader political fear of escalation in a country that is currently relatively stable.

Escalation is no empty threat. Thanks to its participation in the conflict in Syria, the organization has morphed from an insurgency group to a more conventional and larger hybrid paramilitary, now capable of sophisticated maneuver tactics and coordinated operations. The organization has also beefed up its advanced weaponry over the past ten years. Hezbollah reportedly possesses more than [130,000 \(https://www.csis.org/analysis/hezbollahs-missiles-and-rockets\)](https://www.csis.org/analysis/hezbollahs-missiles-and-rockets) rockets and missiles, including sub-ballistic guided missiles fitted with large warheads. A long-term financial crisis could turn Hezbollah into a cornered lion—its military power and potential fiscal fragility could easily cause the organization to lash out.

Aside from increasing fiscal concerns, Hezbollah is also likely to see real opportunity in vocally pushing for an increased share of its Sunni allies in cabinet. Saudi Arabia, which has presented a counterbalancing force to Iranian influence in Lebanon through its support of Hariri's Future Movement, has recently become mired in a series of political and foreign scandals, most recently the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi attributed to close associates of crown prince Muhammad bin Salman. Hezbollah now believes the kingdom is less likely to meddle into Lebanon or take advantage of Hezbollah's weakened stance given its own internal politics.

Specifically, the increased isolation of Saudi Arabia—the traditional backer of the Sunni community in Lebanon—allows for Hezbollah to capitalize on its parliamentary gains, now providing it with the absolute majority with a

decreased threat of a regional response. Hezbollah thus wants to break the hold of the Hariri over the Sunni community. By promoting the appointment of Sunni ministers sympathetic to their cause, Hezbollah is working toward building for a popular base in traditional Future Movement territory, emphasizes Rabih.

In Lebanon, ministries help political factions create a network of loyalists by allowing those who control the ministry to provide employment possibilities and fruitful contracts with the state. A division within the Sunni community and the larger fragmentation of Lebanon's political scene would be largely beneficial to Hezbollah; in contrast to its political opponents, it has maintained a monopoly of support within its community. This is largely in thanks to the large popular support Hezbollah enjoys and the unrelenting backing of the Shiite Amal party.

Publicly, Hariri and his political allies reject Hezbollah's new political demands. "Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri will not back down and he has ruled out allocating any of his cabinet seats to Hezbollah's allies," said former MP and Future Movement member Dr. Moustapha Allouch in an interview with the author. Were both Hariri and Hezbollah to hold fast to the stances they currently express, this issue could end in the further paralysis of cabinet formation.

On the other hand, a cosmetic solution could be reached to form the cabinet, as is often the case in Lebanon. For example, president Michel Aoun, an ally of Hezbollah, could allocate one of his ministries to Hezbollah's allies, preventing Hariri from directly losing support in cabinet.

Yet it is the new cabinet's overall political alignment that will likely decide whether the Lebanese government aligns further with the Iranian-Syrian axis or attempts to maintain a semblance of neutrality. With Hariri deemed unable to protect Hezbollah with a veneer of legitimacy, at this point Hezbollah no longer needs Hariri. And given the current balance of power in Lebanon, which already largely favors Hezbollah, this overt claim of power in the Lebanese cabinet looks increasingly likely. ❖

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