



Lebanon: New Mikati Government Faces Challenges

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After thirteen months of paralysis, and facing economic crisis, Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and President Michel Aoun agreed on the composition of a new government in September 2021, following mediation efforts by France and Iran. The new government—dominated by a coalition of Hezbollah and its political allies—faces pressure to implement wide-ranging reforms sought by international donors as a prerequisite for urgently needed economic assistance. The government’s mandate will expire following parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2022. The government will administer these elections amid concerns that amendments to the electoral law could limit the impact of opposition voters and candidates.

The New Government

What is the political composition of the new government? The new government allots cabinet seats in [equal thirds](#) to the President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament (the country’s most senior Christian, Sunni, and Shi’a officials, respectively). Although each leader’s “share” within the government is equal, the March 8 political coalition—which seeks close ties with Syria and Iran—holds a large majority of seats (see [Table 1](#)). This reflects the March 8 majority in Parliament as well as the decision by some parties in the rival March 14 coalition—which opposes Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon—not to participate in the new government. Ministers were nominated by political parties, but many are technocrats.

Does any party hold the blocking third? A major obstacle in government formation was the reported [insistence](#) by March 8-aligned President Aoun that the Free Patriotic Movement (led by his son-in-law) be permitted to name one-third plus one of cabinet ministers (known as the “blocking third”) which would carry de facto veto power. Prime Minister Mikati has stated that there is no blocking third in the new government. However, ambiguity as to the alignment of two independent Christian ministers appointed as part of the prime minister’s share “makes it difficult to analyze the balance of power within the government,” according to one Lebanese [analysis](#).

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Table I. Lebanon's New Government
Seats by Share, Coalition, Nominating Party, and Sect

Seats by Political Share	Seats by Coalition and Nominating Party
<p><u>Prime Minister's Share (8)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prime Minister (Sunni) • Interior (Sunni) • Economy (Sunni) • Health (Sunni) • Environment (Sunni) • Education (Druze) • Administrative Development (Christian minorities) • Youth & Sports (Greek Catholic) <p><u>President's Share (8)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense (Greek Orthodox) • Foreign Affairs (Maronite) • Justice (Maronite) • Energy (Greek Orthodox) • Social Affairs (Greek Catholic) • Tourism (Maronite) • Industry (Armenian Orthodox) • Displaced (Druze) <p><u>Speaker of Parliament's Share (8)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy Prime Minister (Greek Orthodox) • Finance (Shi'a) • Public Works & Transportation (Shi'a) • Labor (Shi'a) • Culture (Shi'a) • Agriculture (Shi'a) • Telecommunications (Maronite) • Information (Maronite) 	<p><u>March 8 Coalition (16)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free Patriotic Movement (Christian): 6 seats: Foreign Affairs, Defense, Justice, Social Affairs, Energy, Tourism. • Amal Movement (Shi'a): 3 seats: Finance, Agriculture, Culture. • Hezbollah (Shi'a): 2 seats, 3 ministries: Public Works, Transport, Labor. • Marada (Christian): 2 seats: Telecommunications, Information. • Lebanese Democratic Party (Druze): 1 seat: Displaced. • Tashnag (Armenian Orthodox): 1 seat: Industry. • Syrian Social Nationalist Party (secular): 1 seat: Deputy Prime Minister. <p><u>March 14 Coalition (3)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future Movement (Sunni): 3 seats: Interior, Health, Environment. <p><u>Other (5)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Azm Movement (Sunni): 2 seats: Prime Minister, Economy. • Progressive Socialist Party (Druze): 1 seat: Education. • Independent: 2 seats: Administrative Development (Christian minorities), Sports and Youth (Greek Catholic).

Source: "Who's in Lebanon's new government?" *L'Orient Today*, September 10, 2021; "Who is in the new Lebanese Cabinet?" *The National*, September 10, 2021.

Notes: Ministers are not necessarily affiliated formally with the political party that nominated them.

Who is not represented in the new government? The March 14 coalition has minimal representation in the new government, with the coalition's two Christian parties—Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces—choosing not to participate. (Despite the absence of Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces, Christian ministers comprise half of the cabinet.) The Mikati government is composed of 23 men and one woman; six women served in the previous government.

Key Actors

What was the role of external actors in government formation? Lebanese press has [described](#) French-Iranian diplomacy as pivotal to breaking the impasse over cabinet formation. In late August, French

President Emmanuel Macron traveled to Iraq, where he met with Iran’s foreign minister. Macron reportedly [expressed](#) France’s desire to cooperate with Iran in Lebanon, and a willingness to invest in Lebanon and Iraq. French oil and gas company TotalEnergies subsequently [signed](#) a \$27 billion deal with the Iraqi government. In a call with Macron, Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi, Raisi reportedly stated that Iran would facilitate government formation in Lebanon.

What is Hezbollah’s role in the new government? Hezbollah nominated two ministers in the Mikati government, spanning three portfolios—Public Works, Transport, and Labor. Some analysts maintain that the Ministry of Public Works, likely to play a key role in administering funds for the reconstruction of the port of Beirut, had long been sought by Hezbollah. Hezbollah’s share in the Mikati government is comparable in size to the seats it held in the 2020 Diab government (Health and Industry) and in the 2019 Hariri government (Health, Youth and Sports, and Parliamentary Affairs).

Challenges

Escalating Violence. On October 14, unknown assailants fired on a [protest](#) in the Tayyouneh area of Beirut, killing seven and injuring more than 30. The protestors, mostly Shi’a supporters of Hezbollah and Amal, had called for the removal of Tarek Bitar, the judge assigned to investigate the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Hezbollah [accused](#) the Lebanese Forces (a Christian party aligned with March 14) of instigating the conflict; the Lebanese Forces have denied involvement. The violence was [described](#) as the worst sectarian clash in Lebanon since 2008.

Economic Crisis. The World Bank has [described](#) Lebanon’s economic crisis as possibly among the “top 3 most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century.” In September 2021, Lebanon received \$1.1 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as part of its [Special Drawing Rights](#) (SDR). The recent allocation for Lebanon is separate from the rescue package that Lebanon has sought from the IMF (\$10 billion in May 2020). The government has not said how SDR funds will be used, and some are [concerned](#) that SDR funds could be used to bolster existing patronage networks [particularly](#) in anticipation of upcoming elections. Lebanon has [resumed](#) negotiations with the IMF over a rescue package but a forensic audit of the country’s central bank—reportedly a [prerequisite](#) for economic aid from the IMF and other donors—remains [pending](#).

2022 Elections. Prime Minister Mikati has stated that parliamentary elections will be held in March 2022, six weeks early. Some analysts have [speculated](#) that the push for early elections seeks to limit the participation of Lebanese abroad—expected to vote largely for opposition parties—and the ability of newer opposition parties to mobilize. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections has [warned](#) early elections would negate “the desired goals and objectives of elections, which are accountability, fair and proper representation, and equal opportunities in exercising the right to vote and to run for office.” As of October, parliament is debating [amendments](#) to the electoral law that will determine whether expatriates will vote for a newly created international constituency of six seats (increasing the number of seats in parliament from 128 to 134), or whether they will be permitted to vote for candidates in their home districts—where they potentially could sway key local elections.

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