

# Lebanon names Salam as prime minister

Tammam Salam, British-educated former minister, vows to work towards ending divisions and preventing civil war

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Once Tammam Salam cobbles together a cabinet, his new government must win a vote of confidence in parliament to be approved. Photograph: Hassan Ammar/AP

A British-educated lawmaker from a prominent political family was named Lebanon's new prime minister on Saturday, and vowed to work toward ending divisions in the nation and preventing the civil war in neighbouring Syria from spilling over into the country.

Tammam Salam, a 68-year-old lawmaker and a former culture minister, was asked by President Michel Suleiman to head a new government. Lebanon's parliament strongly endorsed Salam, who is widely seen as a consensus figure, with 124 lawmakers in the 128-seat legislature voting in favour of his nomination.

The country faces rising sectarian tensions linked to Syria's civil war, with Lebanon's two largest political blocs supporting opposite sides in the fight between Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces and rebel fighters trying to oust him. The conflict also has forced some 400,000 Syrians to seek refuge in Lebanon, putting a severe straining on the country of 4 million to cope with the influx.

"I start from the necessity of taking Lebanon out of divisions and political tensions that were reflected in the security situation," Salam said in his first public statement after being chosen.

He added that he also wants to mitigate threats from the "catastrophic situation next door," remarks aimed at trying to allay fears in Lebanon that Syria's 2-year-old civil war, which has killed more than 70,000 people, will spread to Lebanon.

Salam said he would do his best to form a "national interest government," a process that could take time because of the sharp divisions among Lebanese politicians as a result of the Syrian crisis.

Once he cobbles together a cabinet, his new government must win a vote of confidence in parliament to be approved. Many will be keeping close tabs on how Salam will deal with the militant Hezbollah group and its arsenal, which is one of the biggest dividing issues among Lebanese.

Hezbollah's armed wing is the strongest military force in the country, outstripping even the national army, and many Lebanese are wary of the Shia militant group's power and refusal to set aside their arms.

Hezbollah and many other Lebanese, however, counter that the weapons are necessary to defend Lebanon against any Israeli attack.

Salam went straight home from the presidential palace where he was seen kissing the hand of his Syrian mother, Tamima Mardam Beik. "I took my mother's blessing," he told reporters while sitting between her and his wife, Lama Badreddine.

Outgoing Prime Minister Najib Miqati abruptly resigned last month over a political deadlock between Lebanon's two main political camps and infighting in his government. Miqati, who had served as prime minister since June 2011, headed a government that was dominated by the Shia Muslim Hezbollah group and its allies.

Miqati stepped down to protest the parliament's inability to agree on a law to govern elections set for later this year, as well as the refusal by Hezbollah and its allies in the Cabinet to extend the tenure of the country's police chief.

"I start from the point of uniting national visions and to quickly reach an agreement on a new elections law that gives justice of representation," Salam said.

Salam is the son of the late former Prime Minister Saeb Salam, and politically leans toward the Western-backed anti-Hezbollah coalition. He studied in Britain and has degrees in economics and business administration.

He will be holding the top post in the country that a Sunni Muslim can hold.

Salam was first elected to parliament for four years in 1996. He became minister of culture in 2008 under then prime minister Fuad Saniora. He was elected to parliament for the second time in 2009 when he ran for a seat in Beirut and joined a Western-backed coalition led by former prime minister, Saad Hariri.

Salam headed the Makassed Philanthropic Islamic Association of Beirut, a non-profit organization that runs schools, cultural centres and a hospital, between 1982 and 2000. He is currently the honorary president of the association that was headed by several members of his family.