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## Cabinet formation takes back seat

Chastened by warnings from March 8, PM-designate Salam is now in less of a hurry to form a government



Six weeks on from his appointment, Lebanon's Prime Minister-designate Tammam Salam is still yet to form a cabinet, with his efforts to do so continuing to stumble into seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Last weekend appeared to be the closest Salam had yet come, as speculation mounted regarding the imminent formation of a so-called "fait accompli" cabinet of 14-members. That option, however, was decisively buried by **warnings** from Hezbollah to Salam that such a cabinet would constitute "an uncalculated adventure [...] a dangerous game [whose] on-the-ground consequences will be more than you can handle" – remarks by MP Hassan Fadlallah interpreted in some circles as a direct threat of violence reminiscent of the May 2008 clashes – and Salam was thus sent back to square one.

The cabinet formation question was then further overshadowed this week by significant turns of events on the electoral law front, with the so-called 'Orthodox Law' favored by the March 8 coalition challenged by a new 'hybrid' proposal from rivals in the Future Movement, the Lebanese Forces and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). The latter in turn ran into opposition, including from March 14's Kataeb, sending the situation into further **disarray**, the resolution of which is widely seen as a pre-requisite for a cabinet formation.

"The cabinet is a postponed issue, the highlight now is on the electoral law," said Antoine Haddad, secretary-general of the Democratic Renewal (Tajaddod) Movement. "I don't think any decisive move will be taken before the outcome of the electoral law is clear," he told NOW.

With the 14-member "fait accompli" cabinet scrapped, the proposal currently on the table is one comprising 24 ministers, trisected into eight representatives of March 14, eight of March 8, and eight ostensible "centrists" appointed by President Michel Suleiman, PM-designate Salam and the PSP.

However, this too has been categorically **rejected** by Hezbollah, which insists on securing a veto-enabling 'blocking third' in any cabinet – a demand deemed unacceptable by March 14, which calls for a politically neutral solution.

"Hezbollah wants the blocking third so they can rule the country without anyone asking them about their activity in Syria," said Future MP Ahmad Fatfat. "This is not acceptable for us. We consider that this cabinet should be tasked only with overseeing elections and should stay away from political clashes," he told NOW.

In an apparent attempt to bridge this gap, Parliament Speaker and leader of the March 8-aligned Amal party Nabih Berri **declared** Tuesday he would approve the 8-8-8 formula on the condition that a minister from his party was appointed among the “centrists.” Interpreting this as a means of delivering March 8 a *de facto* ‘blocking third,’ Salam declined the proposal, according to Haddad.

“Salam knows that Nabih Berri is not a centrist. So he told him, ‘OK, if you are a centrist, let’s widen the quota of the centrists.’ Berri tried to play with the terminology, and he got his answer,” Haddad told NOW.

Despite this, a PSP insider, who spoke to NOW on condition of anonymity, was confident that some variant of the 8-8-8 formula would succeed sooner or later.

“It’s the only realistic option. Berri will find a way of tweaking it so that everyone ends up happy. He will keep suggesting names [of centrists] to Salam until they find one that’s acceptable.”

Unless and until that happens, Salam is now said to be preparing for the possibility of things taking longer than he initially expected.

“After the open threats in the press close to Hezbollah warning [Salam] against [the 14-member cabinet] over the weekend, Salam paid a visit to Berri and said he’s no longer in a hurry,” Haddad told NOW, referring to an **article** in *Al-Akhbar* in which editor-in-chief Ibrahim al-Amin wrote Salam’s conduct was “invit[ing]” Hezbollah “to mutiny as they did on 7 May 2008.”

“Anyway, Salam has clearly stated from the beginning his main mission is to have elections. So if the date and fate of the elections is still unclear after Saturday [the deadline for passing a new electoral law,] then this will not facilitate his mission. If the picture is less clear than before after Saturday, that would mean the formation of the government is as unclear.”

Would this possibly entail Salam’s resignation? Though the PM-designate has often stated his willingness to step down if delays in cabinet formation become excessive, Haddad thinks that moment has not yet arrived.

“I don’t think he will resign and I wouldn’t advise him to. He’s still got time. Remember [former Prime Minister Najib] Miqati took five months to form his cabinet, and that was within a homogeneous coalition. So asking Salam to put a government on the table in

under two months is unfair.”

The PSP insider, too, dismissed the idea of Salam resigning, suggesting the PM-designate still has one major hand he can play as a last resort.

“Constitutionally, he has the option of declaring an 8-8-8 cabinet with or without March 8’s consent. And I think President Suleiman would sign it. That would give the cabinet 40 days to prepare a ministerial statement before parliament voted on it. And if parliament’s term is not extended on Saturday, that means we could have elections after all.”

In spite of Hezbollah’s threats, the source told NOW he didn’t think such a step would provoke war. “It’s definitely dangerous. But if it’s just going to be an elections cabinet, only in place for a month or two, then it should be OK. Nobody will go to war over such a short-term government.”

*Yara Chehayed contributed reporting.*