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Last Update: Saturday, 23 March 2013

## Lebanon after Mikati's Resignation

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The resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati should not have come as a surprise to Beirut's political observers. Nevertheless, it leaves Lebanon at a critical juncture, between the risk of an extended political vacuum and instability, and the opportunity of forming a broad-based coalition government that paves the way for Parliamentary elections and shields the country from the regional upheaval.

Mikati announced his resignation late last night at the Grand Serail after disputes with the Hezbollah majority inside the cabinet over the elections law and extending the tenure of the

head of the Interior Security Ashraf Rifi, which was favored by the Prime Minister. Mikati's disagreement with Hezbollah was not the first. In his 20 months as Prime Minister, they clashed over Hezbollah's refusal to fund the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and to strengthen the country's security apparatus and lately over the Syrian government violations inside Lebanon.

The resignation, however, breaks the political deadlock inside Lebanon and could be an opportunity for a broader dialogue that Mikati had called for in his statement.

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### **Mikati's Calculations**

For Mikati, the prominent businessman from the city of Tripoli, this move was almost inevitable.

Frustrations inside his political base in Tripoli and in the Sunni street at large have been displayed in military clashes in the and increasing radicalization in the community. This combination would have surely brought more instability if the Prime Minister had signed off to Rifi's retirement, or accepted an elections law that does not enjoy consensus inside Lebanon. Mikati, who is known for his calm demeanor, has threatened twice before to resign. The first time in 2011 over funding the tribunal, and the second time came after the assassination of Wissam Al-Hassan, the former head of the Lebanese intelligence. In both instances, Mikati hinted to his international partners that he can not stake his political fortunes in a government whose policies are at odds with his community. Mikati's house in the Maarad Street in the heart of Tripoli, as well as his ties to the city will ultimately decide his future more than the support he enjoys in outside capitals.

By resigning, the Prime Minister has sent shockwaves across Lebanon's political class. For the international community, the move, coming in the shadow of unprecedented regional upheaval, is a cause of concern. Mikati has managed to maintain stability and relatively keep the Syrian crisis from spilling over into Lebanon. His resignation, if followed by an extended political vacuum might drag Lebanon into sectarian clashes already taking shape in Tripoli and some suburbs of Beirut and Sidon.

## **Political Options**

The resignation, however, breaks the political deadlock inside Lebanon and could be an opportunity for a broader dialogue that Mikati had called for in his statement. The opposition represented by the March 14 movement welcomed an all inclusive national dialogue towards negotiating a new electoral law and forming a new government.

The scenarios for the new government, based on reactions following Mikati's announcement, show thus far broad support for a larger coalition government and where Hezbollah and his allies will less likely have the majority. Unlike 2011 when the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt supported Hezbollah in forming the current cabinet, he was very critical of the party yesterday and indicated support for dialogue and for parliamentary measures tackling elections. With a closely divided parliament, Jumblatt is the kingmaker in the formation of any future cabinet. While his seven votes tipped the balance in favor of Hezbollah in 2011, they can force the opposition's hand if political parameters were agreed upon during dialogue.

Besides Jumblatt, key leaders from the opposition including Samir Gaagaa, Amin Gemayel and Fouad Seniora welcomed the national dialogue. Their votes, along with the President Michel Suleiman, would ensure a majority (65 out of 128) if a political agreement is reached. Such an agreement could either come in the form of a broad national unity government or a smaller cabinet of key figures to oversee the elections, or perhaps a technocrat government headed by a low key figure to manage the pre-elections period. The vote is scheduled for June but might be delayed if no electoral law is in place by then.

An extended power vacuum, however, is a scenario that many Lebanese fear. If the national dialogue did not launch effectively, or if the security situation takes a downturn, a vacuum is likely. For that reason, it is incumbent on the different Lebanese parties including Hezbollah to come to the dialogue table. Forming a broad-based government and holding Parliamentary elections will be essential to shield Lebanon from internal conflict regardless of the name of the next Prime Minister.

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