

Salam: Resistance subordinate to state

By Hussein Dakroub

BEIRUT: Prime Minister-designate Tammam Salam began navigating the formidable process of assembling a new government, addressing the key “tripartite equation” controversy Sunday, after receiving support from Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iran.

The Beirut MP said he would seek a government of “national interest” and stressed that the decision of war and peace belonged to the state, in comments that touched on the debate surrounding the phrase “the Army, the people and the resistance,” which March 8 insists be adopted by any new Cabinet while March 14 has ruled it out.

Salam, who won an overwhelming parliamentary endorsement during binding consultations to choose a new prime minister, including from Hezbollah and its March 8 allies, was officially appointed by President Michel Sleiman Saturday to form a new Cabinet to replace the outgoing government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati who resigned last month.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Salam defended Hezbollah’s armed resistance against Israel, but said the decision to go to war or make peace should be “a national decision.”

“I’m very clear about the resistance. The resistance is a national need in the face of all the threats we get from Israel, but that is something, and using the arms of the resistance internally is something else. Internally the arms should not be used, not to mention also that a general strategic policy should be governed by the government,” Salam said. “Even in the resistance field, the decision to make war or peace should be a national decision, not a factional decision.”

Saudi Arabia was the first Arab country to congratulate Salam on his appointment. Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz and Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz sent congratulatory letters to

Salam Saturday over his appointment to form a new government.

“The Saudi king, in the name of the people and government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia expressed the best congratulations [to Salam], wishing him good health and happiness and wishing the brotherly Lebanese people progress,” the official Saudi Press Agency said.

It added that Abdullah expressed his keenness to continue developing the distinctive ties between the two countries, and “to support efforts toward the stability and prosperity of brotherly Lebanon.”

Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Ali Awad Assiri praised the unanimity over Salam’s nomination to the premiership as “a positive turning point” that would take Lebanon to a new stage.

“We hope to see the flexibility and easiness in [Salam’s] designation applied in the [Cabinet’s] formation,” Assiri told Al-Jadeed TV Sunday night.

Analysts and political sources have said that Saudi Arabia played a key role in promoting Salam, an independent lawmaker allied with the Future Movement bloc, as a consensus candidate to the premiership because of its concern over Lebanon’s security and stability.

Salam said he received letters of support from both Iran and Russia through their ambassadors to Lebanon, who were among hundreds of officials, diplomats and politicians who flocked to the lawmaker’s Msaitbeh residence to congratulate him.

Salam said he could not decide about the shape of the new Cabinet before holding consultations with parliamentary blocs Tuesday and Wednesday.

“Only after that I might be able to gather some of their positions and gradually decide what sort of government we are going to have,” he said.

Salam said he expected a delay in the June parliamentary elections unless the polls were conducted under the 1960 law.

Russian Ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin voiced his country’s support for Salam’s appointment to form a new Cabinet.

“We will continue this support because its priority conforms with Russia’s policy toward Lebanon and stresses the need to maintain security and stability in this country and resolve all problems,”

Zasyppkin told reporters after meeting Salam in Msaitbeh.

Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Ghazanfar Roknabadi said after meeting Salam that he assured the prime minister-designate of “Iran’s support for Lebanon and all the Lebanese and for the country’s stability and security.’

Maronite Patriarch Beshara Rai expressed hoped that the formation of the new Cabinet would be as fast as Salam’s appointment with the same national consensus. Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun vowed to help Salam with the difficult task of forming a government. “We will facilitate the formation of the government and we hope that there won’t be spiteful political practices,” he told reporters after meeting Rai in Bkirki.

Sheikh Nabil Qaouk, deputy head of Hezbollah’s Executive Council, also pledged to facilitate the Cabinet’s formation.

“Hezbollah, the Amal Movement and the FPM have adopted a united stance on the nature and task of the new Cabinet,” Qaouk told a rally in the southern town of Kawthariat al-Siyyed. “We were positive in [Salam’s] nomination and we will be positive in the [Cabinet’s] formation. We are keen on the Cabinet’s success because this serves the interests of all the parties and all the country.”

Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said the priority of the next government should be to hold the parliamentary elections and work to reduce tensions in the country with a homogenous team of ministers. Speaking to reporters at his office in Sidon, Siniora said an opportunity emerged for Lebanon after Mikati resigned last month and Salam was appointed as a prime minister-designate.

“It is an opportunity to lessen the levels of tensions in Lebanon. [This] requires that we have a homogenous team [of ministers] in the government, and not people who will only transfer political disputes to the Cabinet’s work,” he added. “We don’t want a government formed by March 14 or one controlled by March 8.” – With additional reporting by Meris Lutz