

Rifi mulling transition to political career

By Mirella Hodeib

Retired head of the Internal Security Forces Maj. Gen. Ashraf Rifi is preparing to dive into politics and seriously considering running in the upcoming parliamentary polls, a source close to the former security chief told The Daily Star on Monday.

“If there are no legal hindrances, Rifi will run for elections in his hometown of Tripoli,” the source noted. “But he has plenty of other options if he isn’t able to run for elections this year.”

According to Lebanese law a public servant cannot run for elections unless he leaves his post at least six months ahead of the elections date. Rifi handed over the ISF helm in March, only three months ahead of the polls scheduled for June.

“Unless a new electoral law is drafted or legal deadlines to submit candidacies are extended Rifi will not run,” the source said.

Regardless, Rifi’s determination to start a career in politics looks to be strong. He has already opened two offices – one in Beirut and the other in Tripoli – catering to the complaints and requests of voters, the source added.

Rifi’s interest in politics is also tied to his belief that peace and stability come through politics rather than the police and the military.

“Rifi is a firm believer that it’s politics rather than the military that resolve internal tension and keep things under control,” the source said.

Another option for Rifi would be to return to the leadership of the ISF, in case Parliament approves a petition put forth by Future Movement lawmakers calling to change the mandatory

retirement age for several high-ranking security officials expected to reach retirement age this year.

Rifi's term as the head of the ISF ended April 1 when he turned 59, the institution's retirement age. But if the draft law is approved it will have a retroactive effect as of Jan. 1, allowing Rifi to regain his post.

"The petition has so far won the signature of at least 69 MPs which is enough to secure its adoption [during a session of the Parliament's general assembly]," said the source.

The controversy over Rifi's term was one of the main factors that induced caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati to announce his resignation on March 22. The majority of his Cabinet from the Hezbollah-led March 8 group opposed extending the former police chief's term given that they view him as being close to their rivals in the Future Movement.

But Rifi thinks that the resignation of the government had positive impacts on both the political and security levels, according to the source. Rifi also seems unnerved by Hezbollah's stance despite near-daily contacts with the party's leadership during his eight-year tenure.

Being the pragmatist he is, Rifi kept strong ties with Hezbollah officials, considering such a relationship was an "integral component to stability." Rifi and Hezbollah's security chief Wafiq Safa reportedly held regular meetings.

"The Rifi-Hezbollah relationship has maintained the same warmth throughout," the source said. "Rifi considers that communication with Hezbollah falls in the interest of the country and considerably contributes to reducing tension on the political and security levels."

The source explained that Rifi believed that the Mikati government was the source of all tension because one essential component of the Lebanese political and social fabric – the March 14 alliance – was missing from it.

Rifi is also confident that the security situation will remain stable now that the Mikati government has resigned and considered his successor at the head of the ISF, Brig. Gen. Roger Salem, "fully competent" to carry out security tasks, the source continued.

As for accusations by the March 8 coalition against Rifi and the Future Movement of instigating trouble in Tripoli to increase pressure on the Mikati government, the security chief dismisses the

allegations as “unfounded,” according to the source.

“Tension in Tripoli is directly tied to two main factors: the unrest in Syria and the fact that the Sunni community felt it was not truly represented within the Mikati Cabinet,” said the source. “Now that Sunnis no longer feel marginalized, matters will be much calmer there.”

Rifi, who held talks with former Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Saudi Arabia last week, was one of the names the Future Movement was mulling for the prime minister’s post.

“Rifi was directly approached to head the new Cabinet,” the source divulged. “In addition to now Prime Minister-designate Tammam Salam, Sidon MP Bahia Hariri and Maj. Gen. Rifi were among the names the Future Movement was seriously considering to head the next cabinet.”

Even though Rifi left his post, he still closely follows up on the security situation in the country and is ready to pitch in if need be or if he is asked to, said the source.

“But Rifi doesn’t look back over his past,” the source continued. “His main focus now is to best serve his country and community.”

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