In Lebanon, the political crisis associated with the inability to form a new government has kept the situation tense and complex. A number of countries have already joined in resolving it, knowing full well that the protracted Lebanese crisis has a very negative impact not only on the situation in this Middle Eastern country, but also on the entire region and its interaction with outside players.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who is at odds with the president of the republic over the government formation process, visited France in February and met with Lebanese President Emmanuel Macron. However, even though Hariri, in a meeting with Lebanese President Michel Aoun after the trip, noted that during his visit to France he "felt enthusiasm about forming a government," there are no concrete results in this regard. Hariri stressed that "his position on the matter is consistent and clear: the Cabinet should consist of 18 ministers-technocrats who do not belong to any of the parties of the country."

Official Paris blames Lebanese politicians, who have not fulfilled their responsibilities, for the protracted political crisis in Lebanon. As stated by Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian before the French National Assembly, "The Lebanese political forces are blind and are not trying to save the country, despite their promises. They deliberately persist and do not strive to get out of the crisis. The fact that Lebanese officials turn a blind eye and refuse to agree to the formation of a government is a crime." Le Drian emphasized: "Everyone knows what needs to be done, and yet the process is frozen because of private interests, and because politicians can’t participate in the process. Europe cannot ignore this crisis. When a country collapses, Europe must be ready. Lebanon is on the verge of collapse." The French Foreign Minister warned that "if some Lebanese politicians do not fulfill their responsibilities, Paris will not hesitate to assume its responsibilities in this regard." Paris is going to work on specific proposals against people who
“neglect the public interest in Lebanon,” French media reported.

On March 22, the 18th meeting between President Aoun and Prime Minister Hariri to form a government ended fruitlessly. Saad Hariri said that he rejected the new list of candidates for the new Lebanese government proposed by Michel Aoun.

Amidst this, the country is growing increasingly strained: bread prices are on the rise and there is already talk of a real danger of a new civil war. The country’s foreign exchange reserve at the beginning of April 2021 was $15.8 billion, with the required reserves to be kept on deposit at $15 billion. These funds cannot be used to finance imports, and the remaining amount only to pay subsidies will be enough for two months at most.

Under these conditions, foreign creditors, who previously fed the country’s economy, are severing ties with the Central Bank of Lebanon because of fears for their own investments. HSBC and Wells Fargo have already severed ties with the Lebanese Central Bank, closing their accounts in US dollars and British pounds, respectively. Earlier Deutsche Bank and Bank of America also suspended their activities in Lebanon. Lebanon’s economy is approaching collapse. To reduce the budget deficit, expenditures on health care, education, housing and utilities, and infrastructure are being cut. At the same time, VAT is rising, and more than half of the country’s population has fallen below the poverty line.

Saudi Arabia is trying to get involved in resolving the Lebanese crisis. The Lebanese media previously reported on the visit of presidential adviser Salim Jreissati to the Saudi ambassador. And recently Saudi Ambassador Walid al-Bukhari himself met with President Michel Aoun, reiterating that the KSA’s position is “commitment to Lebanon’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and the need to accelerate the formation of a government capable of meeting the Lebanese people’s aspirations for security, stability and prosperity.”

The Lebanese president also met with the head of the French diplomatic mission, Anne Griau, stressing his commitment to the French initiative as a project to save Lebanon.

Deputy Secretary of State David Hale was in Lebanon from April 13-15 for a series of meetings with various representatives of the political elite of the country. As the State Department stated about the purpose of the trip, Hale went to Beirut “to pressure Lebanese officials and party leaders to come together to form a government capable of and committed to economic and governance reforms so that the Lebanese people can realize their full potential.”

However, according to Israeli media reports, it is not so much the internal Lebanese crisis that worries Washington today as the problem of the unresolved maritime border between the US regional stronghold of Israel and Lebanon, two neighboring states that have been formally at war since 1948. Both sides dispute the ownership of offshore Block 9, which may contain large hydrocarbon reserves. It is about an area of 856 square kilometers and the negotiations are accompanied by mutual territorial claims.

That’s why, during his stay in Beirut, David Hale demonstrated US willingness to facilitate the Lebanese-Israeli talks on maritime border demarcation that began last October, mediated by President Trump’s administration. A round of talks also took place in November, but regular meetings scheduled for early December were postponed indefinitely because the dialogue has reached an impasse. This was the first civil dialogue between the two countries in 30 years. Under these circumstances, the new US administration, led by Biden, has decided to attempt to revive these negotiations.

For his part, Lebanese President Michel Aoun made a demand to David Hale that Israel stop all exploration work in the gas fields located in the disputed maritime territory. The Lebanese President also called to “pledge not to conduct any oil and gas operations and not to begin exploration in the Karish field and adjacent waters until the issue is resolved.” Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz responded to Lebanon’s demands by saying that his country would meet Beirut’s decision to unilaterally demarcate maritime borders with “parallel steps,” clearly hinting at the possibility of increased conflict between the two states.

Meanwhile, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, during his visit to Russia, asked the Russian authorities for economic assistance, including the reconstruction of Beirut’s port, supplies of coronavirus vaccine, and the construction of power plants. Issues of trade and economic cooperation that require mutual attention — from both the government of Lebanon and the government of the Russian Federation — were discussed in detail on April 15 at a personal meeting of Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and his Lebanese colleague Saad Hariri. On the same day Hariri had a telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, during which they discussed
the internal political situation in Lebanon, the measures taken to form a new government in the country and overcome the economic crisis, and current regional issues. The Russian party reaffirmed its principled position in support of the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Lebanon and expressed its readiness to work together “to create favorable conditions for the safe return of Syrian refugees currently living in Lebanon, to their homeland.”

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