A Window of Opportunity Opens Up for the Lebanese

After 13 months of political vacuum, a new government was finally announced in Lebanon, led by Najib Mikati, a 65-year-old Lebanese billionaire who headed the cabinet in 2005 and also in 2011-2013. He ranks 446th in the list of the world's wealthiest people with at least $2.6 billion in capital. Initially, he played the role of a compromise prime minister to lead the country to parliamentary elections. At the time, Mr. Mikati had only been head of government for three months.

After the end of the political battles, Najib Mikati held his first press conference, tearfully dwelling on the Lebanese' troubles while their leaders tried to find common ground. Today, the country is in financial collapse, and most citizens are on the verge of starvation. Lebanon stresses that the government in the country would not have emerged without international pressure. In particular, the great importance of the September 5 telephone conversation between the Presidents of France and Iran, Emmanuel Macron and Ebrahim Raisi was cited as significant considering that stability in Lebanon is of fundamental importance for both of these countries. Earlier, Emmanuel Macron had repeatedly discussed the options of power transit with Lebanese politicians. Still, no compromise had been reached primarily because of the position of Hezbollah, a Shiite movement close to Tehran, which supported Lebanese President Michel Aoun.
Given the problematic socio-economic situation, Lebanon relies on the aid pledged at the three donor conferences organized by Paris over the past year, and IMF assistance. At the same time, Beirut is aware that the new Lebanese government will have to meet the demands of external donors for economic and political reforms in the country.

To help the country as quickly as possible amid its severe energy crisis, the energy ministers of Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon agreed on a roadmap in Amman for supplying natural gas to Lebanon from Egypt via Jordan and Syria. Damascus, for its part, agreed to the Lebanese side's request to allow Egyptian gas and Jordanian electricity to pass through Syrian territory into Lebanon. The US has expressed willingness to ease sanctions against the Syrian energy sector to help resolve the problem. However, it remains unclear what state the pipeline is in because it was abandoned ten years ago. And who will pay for the gas supplies? Alternatively, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah has taken the initiative to bring Iranian fuel to Lebanon. The first tankers carrying Iranian oil products have already been offloaded in Baniyas, Syria.

Major General Abbas Ibrahim, head of Lebanon's General Security agency, managed to organize the first official meeting between the two neighbors. In early September, a delegation of Lebanese officials, including outgoing Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Zeina Akar, paid their first official visit to the Syrian Republic since 2011. Syrian authorities welcomed the resumption of relations and set three conditions for cooperation with Beirut, the continuation of bilateral official visits; Syria receiving its share of the Egyptian gas flowing through its territory to Lebanon; and assistance in restoring the damaged electricity grid during the fighting.

As Lebanon has declared bankruptcy, its capacity as a sovereign state has diminished, and receiving money is dependent on accepting the demands of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In this context, Russia has become the only country whose companies have taken serious initiatives to help Lebanon, allowing it to rely on Russian investment before joining the IMF program or wait for its status to improve with the ability to pay its foreign debt. The essential Russian projects in the Lebanese direction could be Moscow's participation in the reconstruction of two oil refineries and the construction of a grain elevator in the Port of Tripoli. In addition, Moscow proposed two projects: the restoration of the Port in Beirut and the expansion of the Port of Tripoli, creating an industrial zone inside it. Lebanese experts estimate that the projects proposed by Moscow would give Lebanon much more than the International Monetary Fund, and they could change the economic situation in the country by creating a productive base.

Earlier obstacles to the development of the Lebanese-Russian relations created by the Western-sponsored political forces because of the provocative information spread about the "Russian trace" in the strong explosion that took place in the capital of Lebanon on August 4, 2020, were removed as a result of the new information obtained by the Lebanese investigation bodies. Remember, that ammonium nitrate exploded in the warehouses of the Port of Beirut, killing about 190 people, leading to the destruction of entire neighborhoods. Six thousand people were injured, and more than 300,000 residents of Beirut were left homeless. Damage from this catastrophe exceeded $15 billion, and mass protests swept the city, forcing the Lebanese government to resign. Interpol even then issued a so-called "red notice" against two Russian citizens allegedly responsible for the explosion.

However, according to an investigation by OCCRP, the ammonium nitrate that exploded did not belong to a Russian businessman but a chemical trading network controlled by a Ukrainian citizen. The actual owner was hiding behind numerous proxies and shell companies. Although the firm called Savaro Limited is based in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro, it is registered in the UKg, and its actual owner turned out to be 62-year-old Ukrainian businessman Volodymyr Verbonol, who hid behind numerous proxies and bogus companies. In August 2021, a class-action lawsuit was filed in a London court against Savaro on behalf of the Beirut Bar Association and the victims of the port explosion. The plaintiffs believe that the firm's complex and intricate system of ownership was devised by the owners of Savaro Limited precisely for Kyiv to avoid liability for improper storage of hazardous cargo and the consequences of the explosion. OCCRP previously revealed that the largest scam call center in Ukraine is operating in the center of Kyiv.

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