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Confidence men



At the center of the wrangling over the distribution of cabinet portfolios in recent weeks has been the opposition's effort to determine who in the near future will head up Lebanon's security services – first and foremost, the army and its intelligence branch.

Last Saturday, the controversy emerged squarely from the backrooms when Hezbollah's International Relations Officer Nawwaf Moussawi declared, "There won't be at the head of any security apparatus in Lebanon, or in any army position, someone who does not enjoy the trust of the Resistance."

According to the official appointment process, the defense minister chooses the army commander, subject to approval by the cabinet and countersigned by the president. The cabinet vote must be by a two-thirds majority according to Article 65 of the constitution, which designates appointments of grade-one civil servants as a "basic national issue."

The army commander is certain to be a Maronite, because a tradition having virtually the force of law dictates so. As one retired general, Tannous Mouawad, explained, "All brigadier generals in the army, the Maronites, are eligible. There are perhaps 50 candidates in total. Perhaps 20 of these are known, and the other 30 are more low-profile guys. There are maybe 10-12 that are really discussed."

Prior to the Taif Accord, the president played a major role in selecting the heads of the security services. That changed after 1990, when the Syrians became the effective masters in Lebanon, and signed off on all senior security appointments. Though the formal selection process is relatively simple, it is what happens informally that is more important. As another retired general, Elias Hanna,

told NOW Lebanon, "They have to have a consensus before going to a cabinet vote, because you don't go to the cabinet in order to fight and discuss and reach a consensus."

The agreement reached at Doha, which imposed a compromise between March 14 and the opposition in the cabinet, implicitly mandated that President Michel Sleiman would be granted two "sovereign" ministries. That these would be the Interior and Defense ministries was natural, since neither the majority nor the opposition trusts the other to hold such sensitive portfolios. While Sleiman's voice will be significant in naming a new army commander, given that the president was in the post, the fact the opposition can filter who will be chosen, like the fact that it can reject anyone it doesn't like in a cabinet vote, gives it a double veto power.

Indeed, in the run-up to formation of the government, reports suggested that Hezbollah and the opposition sought to use the appointment of the president's choice for defense minister, Elias al-Murr, as leverage to ensure they would acquire vetting power over military appointments. Though Murr was once considered quite close to Syria – and his father, MP Michel al-Murr, was allied with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun until recently – Elias al-Murr moved relatively closer to the March 14 alliance after surviving an assassination attempt in 2005.

Mouawad explained the conditions that any future senior military appointee would need to fulfill.

"First, you must be strongly pro-Resistance. This does not necessarily mean that you love Hezbollah, but that you are very much against Israel. Second, you must be a friend of Syria and believe in the Syrian-Lebanese friendship. Without these, you will not be accepted."

One military source pointed to Hezbollah security head Wafiq Safa as the man in charge of approving the senior candidates. Senior army sources also identified a "short list" of five candidates (see box) who may be in the running, although in similar circumstances in Lebanon it is often the case that the least likely candidates are the ones who emerge on top.

Presented with the list, Hanna remarked, "All the names you have mentioned are 'acceptable.' But you have to wait until the last half an hour to see who is going to propose the names."

So Lebanon now waits for that last half hour, and the confidence of citizens in their own security and that of their families appears to be awaiting Hezbollah's confidence in the new army commander and his deputies.