

Lebanon government rules against Hezbollah

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Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem (L) said the group's telecommunications network was part of the resistance weapons and that "whoever is targeting the network is targeting the weapons; they're telling us not to fight Israel." Qassem is shown in this file photo sitting with Iran's Foreign Affairs Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in February. (Photo by Balkis Press/ABACAUSA via Newscom)

In an audacious move that has shaken Lebanon's delicate political balance to the core and is expected to provoke disturbing civil repercussions, the pro-Western Lebanese government has announced a number of security decisions against the powerful Shiite Hezbollah organization.

After an 11-hour marathon overnight cabinet meeting, the government Tuesday declared Hezbollah's telecommunication network, which the group regards as instrumental to its resistance against Israel, as "illegal."

Information Minister Ghazi Aridi told reporters early Tuesday the cabinet declared the private telecom network as an "attack on the state's sovereignty," and decided to launch a judicial investigation against "all those involved, whether they are individuals, [political] parties, institutions or companies."

He went further, indicating the government would bring the Arab League and the international community in on this issue.

Aridi said that all documents concerning "this new attack on the rule of law in Lebanon and the details of the past and current role of Iranian institutions in this regard" will be handed over to international parties.

Sources close to Hezbollah in Beirut told the Middle East Times that the organization, whose armed wing has been credited with liberating southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation in 2000 and fiercely fought the Israeli military in the 2006 war, sees the decision as part of a Western campaign to weaken the resistance movement.

Hezbollah's second-in-command Naim Qassem told the group's Al-Manar TV the telecommunications network was part of the resistance weapons.

"Whoever is targeting the network is targeting the weapons; they're telling us not to fight Israel," he said.

The cabinet, in another decision that is expected to provoke the Shiite community, dismissed airport security head Brig-Gen. Wafiq Shuqair for sympathies to Hezbollah, and following earlier accusations that he was aware that spy cameras had been installed near the capital's airport to allegedly monitor the movement of anti-Syrian politicians and foreign officials.

Aridi said Shukair was being reassigned to the army while the government "will pursue the issue of the cameras installed by Hezbollah to monitor the airport runway."

A probe has been launched into allegations first publicized by anti-Syrian MP and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, head of the Progressive Socialist Party, that the group installed the cameras to monitor traffic at the airport and to possibly fly in weapons from Iran.

Hezbollah has strongly denied the charges as "hallucinations" and implicitly accused Jumblatt of colluding with Israel to launch operations in Beirut's Shiite-dominated southern suburbs, a Hezbollah stronghold closely located near the airport.

Officials from the ruling majority – a coalition of anti-Syrian Sunni, Christian and Druze parties and figures known as "March 14" – have often expressed to the Middle East Times that Hezbollah, with its military and political wings, acted like a "state within a state."

The ruling majority and the Hezbollah-led opposition have been locked in the worst crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war.

The government has been virtually paralyzed since six opposition cabinet ministers – five Shiites and one Christian – resigned in November 2006, and the country has been without a president since last November as the two camps quarrel over the make-up of the next government.

Hezbollah officials in the past have strongly blasted the government decisions and vowed to confront "U.S.-Israeli policies" in the country.

But the organization has yet to officially react to the cabinet decision. Its top leadership was said to be holding consultations on what action to take, if any, considering that the opposition regards the government as "illegitimate" and has been ignoring its resolutions since the six ministers resigned 18 months ago.

Lebanese analysts warned that these latest government decisions have shaken the fine, de facto balance that has been maintained between the ruling majority and the opposition to prevent civil strife.

Both camps had refrained from "crossing the red lines" by not taking drastic measures to further aggravate the crisis.

The government, for example, did not replace the five Shiite ministers after their resignations. Also, the parliamentary March 14 majority had not resorted to voting for a president with a "half-plus-one," or an absolute majority.

In return, the opposition had not formed a parallel government to topple the incumbent one.

Independent political analyst Amin Kammouriyeh told the Middle East Times this is the first time since the eruption of the crisis that a "red line" has been violated, and the repercussions of dismissing a prominent Shiite security figure (from the airport) could trigger an angry reaction.

The two decisions are already being viewed by the opposition as a domestic implementation of the U.S.-Israeli agenda and campaign to pressure and weaken Hezbollah and its resistance, as well as to disparage Shiites in the country.

Kammouriyeh said he expects the crisis to escalate, because the "balance keeping the calm has been shaken," adding the political tension could spill into the streets between the followers of the two camps.

There have been street clashes in Lebanon's neighborhoods in recent days, and analysts say that while the supporters of both sides of the divide have been using no more than sticks and batons in the confrontations, any rise in tension could prompt people to resort to their guns to fight it out.

"There is no [political] decision for street clashes," Kammouriyeh said. "But the calm has been disturbed now a red line has been crossed. We don't know where it will lead. It depends on what happens tomorrow."

A general strike has been called for Wednesday to protest inflation and low wages. Opposition supporters might seal the streets leading to the airport to paralyze air traffic in a show of strength in protest of the latest government decisions.

Commentators say the ruling camp may be testing the waters to see how far it can get in implementing its decisions. Success could pave the way for parliament to try to vote in the election of a president by absolute majority.

But Lebanese pundits ruled out suggestions that the attempt to close down Hezbollah's fixed-line network was a prelude to trying to disarm the organization when electing a president is a priority.

"No one will dare touch this issue," Kammouriyeh argued. "Hezbollah can take over the country in one day if they try to take away their weapons."