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Russia backs Field Marshal Al-Sisi's Egypt presidential bid
The Russian president Vladimir Putin says he will support army chief Field Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in his bid for presidency. His comments came during meetings held in Moscow between Putin, Al-Sisi and Egypt Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy
www.meed.com/3189401.article

Iran economy set to return to growth next year in 2014/15
The Washington-based IMF has predicted Iran's economy will expand by 1-2 per cent in the 2014/15 Iranian calendar year, after two years of decline, but warns that wide-ranging reforms will be needed to bring economic stability.
www.meed.com/3189433.article

Little progress made as Syria Geneva 2 peace talks end
The second Geneva 2 conference on Syria ended with little progress made. UN mediator Lakhdar Brahimi called for a meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to ease tensions.
www.meed.com/3189408.article

Iran meets world powers for nuclear talks in Vienna
Iran and the P5+1 world powers have met in Vienna for the first round of talks aimed at reaching a permanent solution to the stand-off over Tehran's nuclear programme. The two sides aim to find a long-term deal to follow the interim deal signed in November
www.meed.com/3189504.article

GOVERNMENT **LEBANON**

Coalition government ends 10-month political stalemate

Cabinet is split equally between the country's two main factions

MELISSA SONG LOONG
The formation of Lebanon's coalition cabinet puts an end to a 10-month stalemate, but its impact is not expected to be far-reaching.
The cabinet, which is split equally between the country's two main factions – the Hezbollah-led, pro-Syria 8 March movement and the Western-backed 14 March coalition led by the Future Movement – as well as several centrist figures, is likely to do little to address Lebanon's main problems.

"They will be stuck doing one thing – working on the presidential elections," says Sami Atallah, director at the Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies. "Unfortunately, I don't see them doing anything about Lebanon's socio-economic problems. They don't have the appetite, capability or willingness."

While the cabinet is also tasked with working on the creation of a new election law and prepare for general elections, which were delayed in June 2013, the responsibilities are likely to be rolled over to its next incarnation.

It is set to dissolve once a successor to President Michel Suleiman has been found, after which a new cabinet will be formed.

A presidential election is planned for 25 May, although a lack of consensus between Lebanon's major parties could lead to that being pushed further away.

The long process leading up to the announcement of the cabinet, to be headed by Prime Minister Tammam Salam, was an attestation of how little cohesion there is among Lebanon's political groups.

Each major faction supports a different side of the Syrian war –



Together: Factions form new cabinet

while 8 March's Hezbollah has sent fighters to support the Syrian regime, 14 March is aligned with the Syrian opposition, with some groups providing aid to rebels.

The political tensions led to the resignation of Salam's predecessor Najib Mikati in April 2013. Slow progress since then prompted Salam to propose the creation of a fait accompli government, which would be formed of those willing to work together. In light of that, the establishment of a coalition cabinet is seen as a positive step, as significant compromises were made to come to an agreement.

Key changes

Political leaders argued over portfolio swaps until the final hours of the cabinet formation, but in the end were able to agree on some key changes, including the former minister of energy being assigned to the foreign ministry portfolio and the former interior minister being given the justice portfolio.

"[The political parties] can actually work together if they wish to, and showed they can take down conditions that at one point seemed irreconcilable. [That is] if they are in one cabinet that provides room

to talk to each other rather than resolving the conflict on the street," says Atallah.

The announcement of a new cabinet came just months after Future Movement leader Saad Hariri had declared he would not accept the inclusion of Hezbollah unless it decided to withdraw its military presence from Syria. Hezbollah, which had strongly been against the inclusion of two appointed cabinet members, managed to get over its strong disliking of these ministers.

But while compromises were made, none of the parties are happy, says Hilal Khashan, professor of political studies at the American University of Beirut.

"As soon as a new government is formed by parliament, when it holds its first meeting, conflicts will arise again," he says. "I think the reason the cabinet was formed, was simply because regional powers finally authorised it."

Iran, which backs the Shia Hezbollah, and Saudi Arabia, which backs the Sunni Future Movement, could both have forced local actors to back down. Both countries are cautious to make any major moves as the US engages with Iran on its nuclear programme.

"There is no political horizon in Lebanon, the situation is contingent to regional developments intertwined with events in Syria. The country is run by remote control," Khashan says.

Lebanon's political groups, which represent 18 different religions and sects, are heavily influenced by backers in the region as well as internationally. That makes it difficult to operate a political system, stifling economic growth.

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