

Hezbollah, Gebran Bassil under fire over Lebanese government paralysis

Author:

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BEIRUT: Frustration mounted in Lebanon on Sunday amid continuing paralysis in the formation of a new government, with fingers pointed at the Iran-backed Hezbollah group and Free Patriotic Movement leader Gebran Bassil as the source of the blockage.

Eleven days after former prime minister Saad Hariri was asked to resume office and assemble an administration of non-party technocrats, no date has even been set for a meeting with President Michel Aoun.

"We do not know if the obstructing parties actually want to form a government. It is about party quotas again, regarding the number of ministers and the rotation of portfolios," senior Hariri adviser Hussein Al-Wajh told Arab News.

Dr. Mustafa Alloush, a leading figure in Hariri's Future Movement, told Arab News: "The main obstacle to forming a government is Gebran Bassil, who has returned to his old demands."

Hariri resigned as prime minister in October 2019 amid a wave of public protests over financial corruption, government ineptitude and a collapsing economy. Neither of his successors, Hassan Diab and Mustapha Adib, was able to restore stability, and Lebanon has been without a government since September.

At the prompting of French President Emmanuel Macron, Hariri offered to lead a technocratic Cabinet in an initiative seen as opening the door to desperately needed international aid and a bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

Former minister Ahmed Fatfat told Arab News: "Hariri's project is a mini-government of specialists, which would not be against anyone or against the country, but Hezbollah stands behind the play of Gebran Bassil."

Health chiefs fear the government stalemate is compromising Lebanon's ability to combat the spread of the coronavirus, which has infected more than 80,000 people and killed 637. Caretaker Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmy on Sunday rejected a recommendation by the government's National Health Committee for a national lockdown, and instead imposed restrictions in 115 towns.

The head of the Doctors Syndicate, Sharaf Abu Sharaf, called for a "complete shutdown similar to the one that took place at the beginning of the virus outbreak."

He said: "The capacity of hospitals to absorb patients has reached its limit, and the health, recovery and financial situation is very poor. The medical

and nursing sector is witnessing a large migration out of Lebanon, and there are no incentives to persuade them to stay.”



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[Crammed into camps, displaced Syrians fear spread of coronavirus](#)

Mon, 2020-11-02 00:41

QAH/SYRIA: Hassan Sweidat is terrified he will catch COVID-19 in the overcrowded displacement camp in northwest Syria he calls home, even more so as medical staff in the region have become sick.

Humanitarian workers fear any further rise in novel coronavirus cases would be disastrous in northwest Syria, where almost 1.5 million people live in overcrowded camps or shelters, often with poor access to running water. In an informal settlement in Idlib, the country's last major rebel stronghold, Sweidat said he and other displaced Syrians did not stand much chance against the disease.

"We live in a camp all crammed in together. If someone talks to his family, all the neighbors can hear it," said Sweidat, who is in his forties and has an existing health condition.

If someone gets sick, "it's hardly the disease's fault," the father of six added.

In the encampment in Qah, a few makeshift solar panels shimmer on the canvas roofs of endless tiny breeze-block rooms where families have settled after being uprooted by war.

Resting after helping a friend build a small room to serve as a shop, Sweidat said he hopes he does not have to take anyone in his family to the local hospital.

"Hospitals are overcrowded. People have started to be scared of doctors and nurses, who they think might be infected, with all the sick people going to them."

Sweidat, who fled his home seven years ago, especially fears catching the Covid-19 disease as he suffers from a chronic liver condition.

"One of my relatives got it a while back, and I'm really scared because I have no immunity," he said. The Idlib bastion – now dominated by a group led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate – has been battered by years of war. Local and international humanitarian workers are working to contain the virus, but cases are still on the rise.

NUMBER

1.5m people live in overcrowded camps or shelters in northwest Syria, often with poor access to running water.

"In the northwest, confirmed cases have increased six-fold over the last month, with cases also rising in displacement camps and settlements," Mark Lowcock, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, told the UN Security Council on Tuesday. The health authorities in northwest Syria have officially announced 5,075 cases of Covid-19 so far, including 42 deaths. Of those, more than 860 cases have been recorded among health care staff and almost 330 people in the camps, figures showed on Wednesday.

Seated cross-legged on the floor, as she crushed small green olives one by one with a brick, 80-year-old Ghatwa Al-Mohammad said she and her family felt like sitting ducks.

"We're scared of the disease but we don't dare leave," she added. "We're so confused about what we should do. If only God would have us die and end our misery."

Of the 3 million people living in Idlib, around half live in makeshift homes and tents after escaping the fighting during Syria's nine-year civil war. The latest Russia-backed regime offensive on the region last winter killed around 500 civilians and forced nearly one million people to flee their towns and villages.

Since a cease-fire brokered by Moscow and rebel-backer Ankara came into force in March, only around 200,000 people have returned home.

At the Idlib health directorate, doctor Yahya Naameh said they had asked residents to observe social distancing.

But he admitted that was "near impossible" in the hundreds of informal settlements dotting the region. Few in the camps wear masks.

Many cannot afford to buy face coverings, or to change them regularly, let

alone disinfectant hand gels. For most, food, water, medicine and school supplies are far more important. “The regime and Russian forces are responsible for displacing these people and for the disastrous conditions in which they now live,” Naameh said.

Back in the camp, Mohammad Al-Omar, 40, agreed that asking people to self-isolate in a tent city was not realistic.

“They tell us, ‘Don’t go out. Don’t cause overcrowding’. But we live in tents barely half a meter (yard) apart,” said the father of four, who was displaced by the conflict eight years ago. “They give all of us who are older than five one mask as if that were enough. But it’s not.”

Omar, who works as the driver of a water truck, said he cannot stay inside the camp as he needs to earn money. “If I stay put in my tent, how will I live? How will I eat?”



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[Coronavirus disrupts lives of Middle East's children with special needs](#)

Sun, 2020-11-01 21:51

DUBAI: These days, social media is full of images and videos of children in various postures of remote learning, ranging from sleeping soundly on the study table to turning desks and chairs into makeshift swings. After months of navigating the social complexities of the pandemic, even adults are feeling the mental strain of lockdowns and safety measures. As the “new normal” drags on, many complain that the supply of patience and energy is depleting.

For children with special needs, the effects are far more pronounced. “It has affected them psychologically because they’re not used to so many months of home confinement, sometimes without electricity or water,” Mohammed Dawoud told Arab News from Gaza, where he cares for his brothers Haytham and Hamza. Both have cerebral palsy.

Long weeks spent indoors have made his usually unflappable brothers much angrier, Dawoud said, adding: “I noticed it when talking to them and by seeing how they shout at each other.”

People with special needs are often deeply attached to consistent daily routines, which have been turned upside down by lockdown measures.



Children with special needs attend a class at a rehabilitation center in Iraq’s northern city of Mosul on March 4, 2020. (AFP/Zaid Al-Obeidi)

“I think a lot of them thrive in environments that they’re used to. They also have a certain schedule, a certain structure,” said Alba Quadros, a special educational needs and teaching expert based in Dubai. “Because of the lockdown, this has completely crashed.”

The closure of public spaces and schools, as well as limitations on social functions, to help curb the spread of coronavirus have also affected socializing with their peers.

“The challenge mainly was not being able to meet friends,” Suneeta Ramakrishnan told Arab News from Dubai, describing the impact of the lockdown

on her son Siddharth.

“He used to go to the nearby shops to buy basic groceries, and to his Special Needs Future Development Center independently, which got stopped.”

Gina Rasmi, who lives in Egypt, said she has tried everything to help break the monotony of life under lockdown for her 14-year-old son Marc.

“It was very hard. Sitting at home made him angry, so I used to take him on car rides and drive around for an hour or two. At least he feels happy that he went out,” Rasmi added.

Although many governments have adopted distance education to overcome gaps in the learning process, some special-needs children in Lebanon are missing out.

INNUMBERS

- 68.9% – Illiteracy rate among over-15 males with disabilities in Palestine’s rural areas.
- 1.7 million – Persons with reported disabilities in Morocco in 2014.
- 677,492 Persons with reported disabilities in Iraq in 2013.
- 4x – Difference in proportion of persons without disabilities having attained some form of education and persons with disabilities in Oman.
- Source: WHO

“A lot of children didn’t benefit from online learning due to parents’ inability to help their children and the constant disruptions in electricity and the internet,” said Kamal Nasr, administrator of the Robouana Social Charitable Association in Lebanon.

Some parents are not familiar with the technology or the special curriculum designed to help their children, while others simply cannot afford a home computer, Nasr added.

Moreover, not all special-needs people respond the same way to distance learning, with many preferring in-person sessions.

Through her initiative Determined and Dramatic, Quadros is working with special-needs children in Dubai to produce a virtual play about the effects of the pandemic on their daily lives.

“I have a couple of actors who respond much better to face-to-face instructions,” she said. “I had to make sure they learned their lines, but how to deliver them is something I was only able to do once the lockdown was lifted.”

On top of all this is the strain that COVID-19 has placed on the global economy, which has burdened households with additional financial worries. Half a billion people are expected to be pushed into poverty by the pandemic’s economic fallout.

An estimated 400 million jobs have already been lost, and the International Labour Organization estimates that more than 430 million small enterprises are at risk.

Across the Middle East, families are being pushed into poverty. “I had a mum who’d just recently lost her job. She comes from a middle-class family and yet she didn’t have wi-fi at home, so it was very difficult to rehearse with her son online,” Quadros said.



Children with special needs are participate in a 'Let's walk the Walk Together' race in Jeddah. They are among the estimated 450,000 people with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia. (Supplied)

Providing even the barest of essentials is becoming a struggle for many households. "Prices have doubled. I stopped buying vitamins and fresh fruits," said Dawoud.

"I try as much as possible to buy groceries, but public transport has stopped and the money isn't enough. There are eight months of rent which I haven't paid yet."

Hopes that some kind of assistance from the government or charities in Gaza would be forthcoming were quickly dashed. "No one has bothered," Dawoud said. Families in Lebanon face similar difficulties. "The (special-needs) associations used to cover part of the expenses," providing children in their care with snacks and three meals a day, Nasr said.

But government funding, which was barely enough to cover expenses, salaries and fuel for heaters before the crisis, has not been paid since 2019, he added.

Since Middle East governments began easing lockdown measures, populations have been forced to adapt to the new normal. Parents are now faced with the challenge of explaining safety measures to their children.

At the Hope Academy in Egypt, where Rasmi's son Marc is a pupil, teachers and parents are doing their best to educate the children without scaring them. "We shouldn't scare them and make them feel like life has now become bad. We should just tell them, 'It's a phase and it'll pass, but during that time we have to protect ourselves so we don't get sick'," Rasmi said.



Hamza Dawoud, right, and his brother Haytham, who both have cerebral palsy, have found it hard to cope with being confined to home. (Supplied)

Parents and staff have taught their children to wash their hands regularly, to wear a face mask and to follow social distancing rules.

"A lot of the children can follow (the safety measures), and those who can't we make sure we wash their hands and take care of the other instructions," Rasmi said.

Other schools have started house visits to check on the students and their families, said Nasr of the Robouana Social Charitable Association.

"We also organized a one-day event to teach them about coronavirus, its symptoms and precaution methods through a small performance and some games," he added.

Some parents, such as Siddharth's mum Ramakrishnan, have used this period of isolation to teach their children how to use voice-messaging and online shopping apps.

"He has made a time schedule to get in touch with his friends, grandparents and other family members by learning how to use these apps. This has helped him learn about 'turn taking' while talking," Ramakrishnan said.

Although the pandemic has placed immense strains on households, Quadros sees a silver lining for children with special needs: More time with mum and dad. "They were able to have their parents around and to have them fully," she said. "I feel like they were able to cope because there was a lot of family time."





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Sun, 2020-11-01 13:45

ANKARA: Turkey has extending research activities of its Oruc Reis seismic research vessel in the disputed waters of the eastern Mediterranean until Nov. 14.

The move is likely to re-ignite regional tensions after the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that hit Turkey and Greece last week, which was expected to lead to a period of earthquake diplomacy, as happened in 1999.

The new navigational alert (Navtex) issued by Turkey covers sea surveys 16 nautical miles off the Greek island of Rhodes and 50 nautical miles from the island of Kastellorizo.

The Greek Foreign Ministry condemned the Turkish move.

"This action creates further tension in a vulnerable region in which attention is now focused on the provision of assistance and on expressions of support and solidarity," it said in a press release.

"These actions show once again that Turkey is continuing to act in defiance of the appeals of the international community, including the conclusions of the October meeting of the European Council, which called on Turkey to cease these actions," it added.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias is to inform the country's allies and partners about the latest developments.

EU leaders agreed on Oct. 2 to give Turkey until early December to reconsider its moves in eastern Mediterranean before considering economic sanctions.

Evangelos D. Kokkinos, an Athens-based geopolitical expert, thinks Turkey issued its Navtex to take advantage Europe's inability to impose sanctions.

"Most European nations are expected to 'condemn' Turkish aggression, but sanctions are out of the question. So, Turkey extending its research activities in the region is another example of ignoring international law and Greek sovereignty," he told Arab News.

As to what regional tensions it might trigger, Kokkinos thinks that Turkey is already causing serious problems for most of its neighbors, but since both Greece and Turkey are NATO member countries, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's strategy is to provoke Athens into starting a military conflict, so that NATO supports Turkey.

"This is why the tension will remain in what seems like the Mediterranean Cold War," he said.

According to Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, "the renewal of a provocative Navtex is the latest crisis pushed by Ankara."

"It had already declared a Navtex in early October. Greece and European

countries have condemned the use of these navigational notifications,” he told Arab News.

Frantzman thinks that Turkey uses the Navtex as a way to challenge Greece at sea, which is an abuse of the concept of the Navtex.

“Turkey has done it numerous times in the past several months, shifting from one crisis to another each time. Now Turkey is moving on from having incited against France and Armenia to attacking Greece,” he said, and added:

“It is made even more shameful by the recent earthquake where Greece and others had offered Turkey aid and Ankara’s response is a naval provocation and threat.”

The maritime dispute escalated in August when Turkey first sent its Oruc Reis vessel into waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus. Ankara then withdrew its drilling vessel last month to allow more room for diplomacy ahead of an Oct. 2 European Union summit, where Cyprus and Greece demanded for tough sanctions against Turkey.

Insisting on its rights in the energy-rich Mediterranean region, Turkey dispatched its vessel again on Oct. 12, inciting reaction from the international community. It sparked concerns about a potential military conflict between the two neighbors who argue over the extent of their continental shelves and claims about regional hydrocarbon resources.



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[Algeria referendum: A vote to halt protest movement](#)

Mon, 2020-11-02 00:59

ALGIERS: Polls opened in Algeria on Sunday for a vote on a revised constitution the regime hopes will neutralize a protest movement which at its peak last year swept long-time President Abdelaziz Bouteflika from power. Bouteflika's successor Abdelmadjid Tebboune, currently hospitalized overseas, has pitched the text as meeting the demands of the Hirak, a youth-led movement that staged vast weekly demonstrations for more than a year until the coronavirus pandemic stopped rallies.

But despite a determined government media campaign for a resounding "yes" vote to usher in a "new Algeria," observers say the document offers little new.

"Nothing has changed. The ultra-presidential regime will stay," said Massena's Cherbi, a constitutional expert at Sciences Po university in Paris. Tebboune has placed Sunday's referendum at the forefront of efforts to turn the page on the Hirak movement.

And after a campaign that saw the "yes" camp dominate state-backed media coverage and supporters of a "no" vote banned from holding meetings, few observers doubt that the text will pass. "I voted 'yes' so my country doesn't collapse," said Djillali Bouazza, a 78-year-old retiree. The key question is how many people will vote.

Tebboune said Saturday that Algerians will once again "have a rendezvous with history" to bring in a "new era capable of fulfilling the hopes of the nation and the aspirations of our people for a strong, modern and democratic state." The 74-year-old president is hospitalized in Germany amid reports of Covid-19 cases among his staff, and few details have been released on his condition. Seen by opponents as an old-school regime insider, Tebboune came to power following a December 2019 presidential poll marred by record abstentionism. The Hirak movement led calls for a boycott of that election, and even official data put the turnout at less than 40 percent.

Experts say the referendum is partly a bid by Tebboune for a more convincing validation at the ballot box.

HIGHLIGHT

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has pitched the revised constitution text as

meeting the demands of the Hirak, a youth-led movement that staged vast weekly demonstrations for more than a year.

Rather than attacking the Hirak, Tebboune has ostensibly reached out to it, describing it as a “blessed, authentic popular movement” and arguing that the revised constitution meets its demands.

But despite his conciliatory language, many observers are skeptical, especially given how the document was written.

“The drafting and consultation process was highly controlled by the state,” said Zaid Al-Ali, a senior adviser on constitution building at International Idea. “It’s hard to argue that the Hirak’s demands for a fully inclusive debate on the state’s constitution was respected.”

And while the new text lists purported guarantees of social and economic rights, Ali says these promises are hollow.

“The constitution’s social and economic rights are not directly enforceable, which means that they are only aspirational,” he said.

The Hirak, for its part, has rejected the document “in substance and form,” calling it a “change of facade” and urging voters to boycott the poll.

Social media posts showed dozens of activists holding isolated demonstrations and ripping up campaign posters, particularly in the traditionally restive Kabylie region where local media reported that several booths were unable to open.

Algeria, with a population of 44 million and vast oil reserves, has been battered by low crude prices and the coronavirus pandemic, further hurting a young population already suffering from spiralling unemployment.

To limit the spread of Covid-19, authorities restricted entry to polling stations to three people at a time, made mask-wearing mandatory and had curtains removed from booths to prevent voters from touching them.

While many have expressed apathy over Sunday’s vote, government spokesman and Communications Minister Ammar Belhimer has predicted that people will “flock” to the polls “to lay a new stone in the process of nation-building and check the maneuvers of Algeria’s enemies.”

That rhetoric has been accompanied by a campaign of arrests against pro-Hirak activists, bloggers and journalists, with around 90 currently behind bars, according to the CNLD, a prisoners’ support group.

Prominent Algerian journalist Akram Belkaid said the regime wanted to prevent Hirak militants “from relaunching the movement in the street once the health situation improves.”

“The repression currently underway also aims to prevent a large-scale boycott of the referendum,” he wrote in a blog post.

Polling stations opened at 8 a.m. and were set to close at 7 p.m.



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Algeria votes on new constitution amid opposition boycott
Saudi's King Salman, Crown Prince send letters to COVID-positive Algerian president