

Lebanon 'an open door' to Syrian arms smugglers

Author:

Sun, 2020-08-30 00:54

BEIRUT: An attack on a Lebanese border patrol by two men trying to enter the country from Syria has raised questions about the scale of arms trafficking in Lebanon.

Four soldiers were hurt when an explosive device was thrown at the patrol during a confrontation near □□Marj Al-Tut on the Lebanese-Syrian border late on Friday.

One man, a Syrian, was arrested after the incident, which took place on a well-known smuggling route. A search is underway for the second man.

Four boxes containing more than 2,800 rounds of ammunition were seized by the patrol.

The incident has raised concerns about the growth in illegal arms trafficking between Syria and Lebanon.

A Lebanese military source told Arab News that the arrested man is being interrogated over the arms smuggling operation.

“Military patrols usually find goods and contraband, but this is the first time that smuggled ammunition from Syria to Lebanon has been detected,” the source said.

Firearms have been involved in several recent incidents in Lebanon, such as gunfire during the funerals of Beirut port explosion victims, and armed clashes between Hezbollah supporters and authorities in Khaldeh.

The military source said that smugglers are finding ways to evade controls, and security services have warned of a growing problem in regions that lack government authority.

“Two or three months ago, we noticed that weapons are being used to address individual problems. It seems there is a demand for weapons in Lebanon, and we received information about high prices due to growing demand,” he said.

An arms dealer in the Bekaa region bordering Syria told Arab News there were open smuggling routes between Lebanon and Syria that were protected by “many parties.”

The 40-year-old dealer, who declined to be named, said: “Most of this trade is focused on individual and light weapons, but some of the firearms can be turned into medium weapons.

“There is a carrier who we refer to as ‘Hammal,’ and he is Syrian in most

cases. The carriers transport the arms to Lebanese border areas and get paid in dollars, Syrian pounds or even Lebanese pounds, provided the pricing is based on the dollar value on the black market. Those who have bought the weapons display them later in their houses after customers contact them to choose what they wish to buy," he said.

The most popular weapons are Russian-made, but there are also requests for Syrian-made bullets.

He said that an ammunition box containing about 700 rounds costs 1.4 million Lebanese pounds, though the price was 300,000 Lebanese pounds before the currency crisis.

"Ammunition prices rose slightly two days ago due to the security situation in Lebanon. The dealers keep an eye on the situation and set prices accordingly," he added.

The dealer said the influx of weaponry into the country is unsurprising.

"People who have a million dollars at home need weapons to protect themselves and their money, and anyone who sees the tension in the street will rush to arm himself and defend his family.

"People buy individual weapons for personal protection, and Syria is open to all types of weapons. Its borders are out of control from all sides. It is easy to obtain weapons from people who want to make quick profits.

"The most wanted US weapons in Lebanon, the M16 and M4 rifles, cost \$1,500. The original, which is fully made in the US, costs about \$7,000. This is usually bought by drug dealers to show it off because it is excellent and has a rapid shooting speed."

The world of arms trafficking "is like any other trade," the Lebanese dealer said. "There are agents for arms manufacturing companies, and they don't mind bringing the weapons from another agent in Israel or anywhere else. Syria is a chaotic country in terms of security."



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Seven still missing after Beirut blast: Lebanon army UN extends Lebanon peace mission by one year but reduces troops

[Marib will not surrender to Houthis, governor says](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-08-29 22:15

AL-MUKALLA: The governor of Yemen's central province of Marib said that it would not surrender to the Iran-backed Houthis despite their relentless attacks.

"Marib will never be governed by Houthi militia," said the governor, Maj. Sultan Al-Aradah, adding that thousands of army troops and allied tribesmen were fighting off a Houthi ground offensive in the oil and gas-rich province.

The governor's renewed pledge to repel rebel attacks came shortly after a ballistic missile fired by the Houthis ripped through a mosque inside a military camp in the province, killing five soldiers and several others. The

governor said that the Houthi missile and drone attacks on warship sites and residential areas in the province was a testament to Houthi heavy losses on the battlefield and their failure to make significant advances toward Marib.

“This is an indication of failure and bankruptcy and evidence of (their) inability to achieve their goals and plots against Marib,” the governor said, speaking to a reporter near the shattered glass, windows and walls of the targeted mosque.

Vice-President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar strongly condemned the Houthi missile attack on the mosque during a telephone conversation with the governor of Marib, saying that the “bloody” Houthi movement violated morals and customs that venerated mosques and chapels.

Early this year, Houthis attacked a mosque with drones and missiles at a military camp in Marib, killing more than 110 soldiers and triggering heavy fighting that ended months of calm on the battlefield.

Despite international calls to cease their offensive on Marib, the Houthis have escalated their shelling of the city with drones and ballistics as their ground forces push to break through the Yemen army’s lines of defense. Yemeni army commanders say that more than 1,000 Houthis, including senior field commanders, have been killed in fighting on Marib’s border with Al-Bayda and in the province’s Serwah district.

Yemen’s Defense Ministry said on Friday that 614 Houthi militants have been killed and 1,254 wounded in heavy fighting with government forces or during Arab coalition airstrikes in the provinces of Jawf, Marib and Al-Bayda since early last week. Loyalists destroyed 59 military vehicles, seized 13 others and shot down five drones during the fighting.

Last week, British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron called on the Houthis to halt their military operations in Marib and heed local and international warnings that their continued push would undermine security and force thousands of people who took shelter in Marib after fleeing fighting in their home provinces to move again to safer places.

In the southern port of Aden, the new governor of Aden, Ahmed Lamli, said on Saturday that military and security officers in the city were working on a security plan aimed at restoring peace and security, putting an end to informal housing and reopening public institutions.

“Let’s say enough to infighting. We are all brothers and are in one court,” the governor said at a press conference in Aden, shortly after resuming his duties from his office.



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UK ambassador to Yemen urges Houthis to cease Marib operations, take UN envoy 'seriously' Hundreds of Houthis killed in fighting in central Yemen, officials say

[Thousands gather in Israel for anti-Netanyahu weekly rallies](#)

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1598733592863450900

Sat, 2020-08-29 20:13

JERUSALEM: Thousands of Israelis demonstrated Saturday in Jerusalem in a continuation of summer-long weekend rallies demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who faces a corruption trial and

accusations of mishandling the coronavirus crisis.

Smaller protests also took part in other parts in Israel, including overpasses and outside Netanyahu's private house in the upscale town of Caesaria.

At the main rally in Jerusalem, protesters gathered at the entrance of the city and marched to Netanyahu's official residence, holding Israeli flags and black flags symbolizing one of the protest movements. "Enough with Division!" and "This is not politics, this is crime" read some of the placards.

Netanyahu's governing coalition temporarily survived collapse this week after an agreement with "alternate prime minister" Benny Gantz, his rival and main coalition partner, to delay a budget vote until December. If the two coalition partners had failed to agree on delaying the budget's approval, the government would have collapsed and Israel would have gone to its fourth general elections in less than two years.

Netanyahu of the Likud party and Gantz' Blue and White formed the coalition in May after three inconclusive elections, but differences between the two remain.

The coronavirus crisis is fueling the protest movement. After controlling the virus in its first stages in the spring, Israel reopened the economy too fast in May, leading to a spike of cases. Israel is struggling with a number of confirmed infections exceeding 113,000 cases and the death toll is approaching 1,000.

Business owners, day-to-day workers and smaller, vulnerable entrepreneurs who were hard hit by the pandemic-triggered closures take part in anti-Netanyahu demonstrations. The unemployment rate is hovering over 20%.

Netanyahu's three corruption cases also have added momentum to the protests. Last year, he was charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Many protesters say Netanyahu should not serve as a prime minister at a time when he is on trial for serious charges.

In January, his trial will move to a witness phase with three sessions a week.



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Israeli demonstrators stage anti-Netanyahu protest Israel strikes Hamas in Gaza over rockets, fire balloons

[Egypt announces failure to reach draft on Renaissance Dam](#)

Sat, 2020-08-29 21:55

CAIRO: The Egyptian Ministry of Irrigation has announced the failure to reach a unified draft on the Renaissance dam negotiations.

This came after the end of the current round of negotiations between Ethiopia and the downstream countries of Egypt and Sudan, during which they discussed a consensual preliminary formula for an agreement that regulates the rules for filling and operating the dam.

The Egyptian Ministry of Water Resources said in a statement that a meeting was held on Saturday, based on the outcomes of the African mini-summit,

headed by the water ministers from the three countries under the auspices of the African Union (AU) and in the presence of observers from the member states of the AU Union Office, the US and the EU, and experts of the AU Commission, to discuss reaching an agreement.

The ministry stated that the incompatibility between the three countries continued on many legal and technical points regarding the initial compiled version of the draft prepared, as it had not yet lived up to its presentation to the AU office body headed by South Africa.

The ministry revealed that after a lengthy discussion, the water ministers agreed that each individual country would send a letter to the South African president that included its vision for the next stage of the negotiations.

The Sudanese Ministry of Irrigation stated that the current negotiating round ended without setting a new date for its resumption.

The ministry said: "There is a need for political will to reach an agreement. The continuation of the negotiations in their current form will not lead to achieving practical results."

Sudanese Minister of Irrigation Yasser Abbas announced that the merger of the proposals of Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia in one draft on the Renaissance Dam had stalled.

He added: "During the session, the experts of the three countries presented a report on the work of the committees in an attempt to come up with a unified draft agreement from the combined draft of the proposals submitted by the three countries."

"After a careful evaluation of the development of the negotiations and a review of the work of the expert teams over the past days, it became clear that the process of merging the three drafts had stalled," he said.

Former Minister of Irrigation Dr. Muhammad Nasruddin Allam said on Friday that the main differences between the three countries were about filling and operating the Renaissance Dam in periods of drought, the extent of the legal obligation of the agreement, the clause of dispute settlement, future Ethiopian projects and the rights of Addis Ababa in a water share from the Blue Nile.

He said: "It is clear that the technical disputes are limited compared to the legal and political disputes, and that the upcoming negotiations, if there is any intention to continue them, must be political with technical support, led by, for example, the minister of foreign affairs."

A member of the former Sudanese delegation to the negotiations, Dr. Ahmed Al-Mufti, said that his country should consider the Ethiopian intransigence and the storage of water without agreement, a violation of international law and the directives of the UN Security Council and the AU, and a threat to international peace and security, which gives Sudan the right to self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter.

He also called on Khartoum to demand that Ethiopia stop any activities related to the dam until an agreement was reached that satisfied the three parties, with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam being emptied of the water of the first, illegal filling, during the coming drought season.

Al-Mufti also requested that the UN Security Council nominate a UN delegate to oversee the negotiations, on the condition that Ethiopia did not return to any activity related to the Renaissance Dam until after the conclusion of a binding agreement that serves the interest of the three parties.

A US State Department official said on Friday, that “the work done by Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan during the past months shows the possibility of reaching a balanced and fair agreement regarding the Renaissance Dam, which takes the interests of the three countries into consideration.”

The official, who asked not to be named, said in statements carried by Sky News Arabia that “Washington is convinced that a solution can be reached through constructive dialogue and cooperation between the parties. The United States is committed to staying in contact with the three countries until an agreement is reached.”

A Pentagon official had previously refused to confirm the accuracy of the Foreign Policy magazine’s report that Washington had frozen aid to Addis Ababa worth \$130 million due to the Renaissance Dam crisis.



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Renaissance Dam meetings held to bridge negotiation gap
Sudan asks for delay in Renaissance Dam talks

[Libya unity government names new defense officials after protests](#)

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1598725660053050100

Sat, 2020-08-29 18:14

TRIPOLI: The head of Libya's unity government on Saturday appointed a new defense minister and army chief, after days of protests against poor public services and living conditions.

The decrees followed the announcement hours earlier by Libya's UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) that it had suspended its interior minister after militia gunmen fired on peaceful demonstrators last week. GNA chief Fayez Al-Sarraj promoted deputy and acting defense minister Salah Eddine Al-Namrush to the ministry's top job and appointed General Mohammad Ali Al-Haddad as head of the army.

Haddad hails from Misrata, 200 kilometers (125 miles) east of Tripoli, the home of powerful armed groups that have fought on the side of the GNA in the battle against eastern-based military strongman Khalifa Haftar, who tried to seize the capital last year.

The appointments come days after Sarraj announced a government reshuffle in response to growing popular discontent in Tripoli and other western Libyan cities under its control.

Hundreds of demonstrators staged rallies from Sunday in Tripoli against corruption and extended shortages of power, water and fuel in the oil-rich North African country. Gunmen fired on crowds on several occasions.

In response, the GNA said Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha "has been temporarily suspended" pending an inquiry "on his statements about the protests and incidents in Tripoli and other cities."

Bashagha, who was visiting the GNA's main backer Turkey, said in a statement posted on the interior ministry's Facebook page early on Saturday that he was ready to submit to an investigation.

But he demanded any hearing be broadcast live for the sake of transparency. He is set to return to Tripoli on Saturday evening.

Libya has endured almost a decade of violent chaos since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that toppled and killed veteran dictator Muammar Qaddafi, with the GNA and a Haftar-backed eastern administration now vying for power against a backdrop of dozens of local conflicts.



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UN expresses concern over 'dramatic turn' in Libya crisis
Rights group urges release of abducted Libyan protesters