

Lebanon's 'scandalous' appointments spark criticism

Fri, 2020-06-12 00:42

BEIRUT: The Lebanese government has been criticized for making "scandalous" appointments to key administrative and financial roles.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab took office in January and pledged that his government would be made up of independent technocrats and specialists who could deal with the country's crippling and economic financial crisis.

But an announcement on Wednesday, revealing who was being appointed to senior roles, has triggered accusations that Diab has backtracked on that pledge.

The positions up for grabs were deputy governor of the Lebanese Central Bank, the government representative at the Central Bank, the Capital Markets Authority and the Special Investigation Commission, the president of the Civil Service Council, the director-general of the Ministry of Economy, and the director-general for investment at the Ministry of Energy and Water.

"The government of Hassan Diab, since assuming power, was a quota government that culminated its practices with appointments that could be considered as scandalous," Dr. Jad Chaaban, associate professor of economics at the American University of Beirut, told Arab News. "It said that it wanted to abide by the criteria of qualifications in choosing candidates to vacant positions, but it exhibited a catastrophic failure in yesterday's appointments. The scandals included appointing a former private bank employee as government representative at the Central Bank. How could she monitor the banks' performance if she is affiliated with the banking sector?"

Dr. Nasser Yassin, professor of development affairs at AUB, said that Diab's government had returned to the practices of previous decades in Lebanon. "There is no other interpretation," he told Arab News. "For how could you justify the appointment of a physical therapist as director-general of the Ministry of Economy?"

Dr. Nadim Al-Mulla, economic adviser to former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, said that Diab's declarations had collapsed. "I advise him to admit that he is part of the ruling political class aiming for his share in power," he told Arab News. "And it seems that he subjected himself to the will of the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement Gebran Bassil, who considered that he achieved victory through these appointments."

Chaaban warned that donor countries were monitoring government performance and that political developments could affect bailout negotiations with the IMF. AUB graduates who work at the IMF have contacted their former professors, telling them that the atmosphere is not positive regarding negotiations after more than 11 sessions between the two sides.

“The IMF impression is that Lebanon does not take the negotiations seriously and it does not intend to put its reform plan into effect,” he added. “They said they wanted to install capital control but they backed down. Everything that gets proposed depends on particular political and economic interests at the expense of the state’s interests. For example it is forbidden to impose taxes on the money of big depositors. It seems that the negotiations are controlled by politicians.”

Adding to the government’s woes are recommendations from the US Republican Study Committee to impose maximum sanctions on Iran and its allies in the region, and to issue legislation that sanctions Hezbollah supporters including the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament Nabih Berri, the president of the Free Patriotic Movement Bassil, Hezbollah ministers in the government, and those presenting themselves as independents who support Hezbollah. The recommendations also called for a halt on US aid to the Lebanese army.



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Lebanon to reopen airport in July and send public sector employees back to work

Turkish opposition claims official unemployment statistics are false

Thu, 2020-06-11 20:41

ANKARA: Opposition MPs in Turkey are questioning the veracity of recently released economic data from the state-run Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), claiming the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has exerted an unfair influence over the institute.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently dismissed 10 of TUIK's regional chiefs and, in late May, appointed the husband of his wife's private secretary as president of the institute.

In a statement to the press, Ali Babacan, Turkey's former economy tsar and an ex-ally of Erdogan, questioned the reliability of the statistics.

"There is a problem of trust over the official data in Turkey," he said. "It is a fact that there is political pressure on TUIK (as there is on) all other independent institutions. There is a difference between the figures released by the government and (those) felt and experienced by the citizens."

Wolfgang Piccoli, a co-president at Teneo Intelligence in London, agreed with Babacan. "TUIK has been undermined for a long time, just like most of the supposedly independent regulatory bodies and authorities," he told Arab News. "Merit has not been the criteria for appointing people in the administration – regardless of the seniority of the job – for a long time. It is all about partisanship. Turkey's strong institutional capacity was something that positively differentiated it from other emerging markets. That is no longer the case."

According to TUIK's data, the unemployment level in Turkey dropped to 13.2 percent in March – down 573,000 year-on-year to 3.97 million. But critics are skeptical, particularly because the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic was, by March, making an impact on the country's already deteriorating labor market, especially in the construction and industry sectors.

Babacan – who founded the breakaway Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) in early March – highlighted the fact that TUIK's data is not consistent since it claims that there was a significant decrease in both employment and unemployment simultaneously.

He also criticized the data for not including those he classifies as "desperate job seekers" – people who either have not applied to the Employment Agency or have withdrawn their applications and are therefore not registered as being unemployed. He claimed there are 3.7 million such people and added that the figures also fail to cover those who have lost their jobs in the country's vast informal sector.

TUIK's figures also do not cover those who have been shifted to part-time work or have been put on unpaid leave during the pandemic, something that applies to many employees in the aviation and tourism sectors.

"TUIK takes a narrow approach when preparing these figures and does not include those who are ready to work but who ... have lost hope of finding a job," Babacan said.

In a new report, the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK) also disputed the official unemployment rates and claimed that only those officially recognized as looking for a job in the relevant four-week period have been designated as unemployed in the numbers. DISK claimed that Turkey's actual unemployment figure stands at 39 percent, with 13.3 million people out of work – not the 3.9 million mentioned in TUIK's data.

Ibrahim Halil Canakci, former administrator at Turkey's Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency and now DEVA's Economics and Finance Policy Director, emphasized the importance of non-partisan statistical agencies for the economic landscape in an exclusive interview with Arab News.

"The independence of TUIK is more important than all other agencies, because if people cannot (access accurate) data, there is no way to develop policies to tackle unemployment," Canakci said.



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US embassy: Syrian regime will face further sanctions if political solution is not reached

Wed, 2020-06-10 22:13

LONDON: The Syrian regime must take irreversible steps to implement a political solution in the country or face further targeted sanctions and isolation, the US embassy in Syria said on Wednesday.

The embassy added that the US will continue targeted sanctions and increased economic pressure on the Assad regime until there is irreversible progress on the political process, including a nationwide ceasefire.

President Bashar Al-Assad is responsible for Syria's economic meltdown and he is squandering "tens of millions of dollars each month to fund a needless war against the Syrian people instead of providing for their basic needs," the embassy added.



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North Syria clashes leaves dozens of fighters dead Turkish military visit raises fears of Syrian operation

[UN says Libya's warring sides engaged in 'productive' talks](#)

Wed, 2020-06-10 20:59

CAIRO: The United Nations on Wednesday said Libya's warring sides were "fully" engaged in military talks aimed at ending the fighting in the country's west, calling the virtual meetings "productive."

The U.N. support mission in Libya, UNSMIL, said it convened a meeting with a delegation from military commander Khalifa Haftar's eastern-based forces on June 3, and another meeting Tuesday with a delegation from the U.N.-supported

government.

“Both meetings – which were conducted virtually – were productive and enabled UNSMIL to discuss with the delegations the latest developments on the ground,” the mission said.

Libya has been in turmoil since 2011 when a civil war toppled long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi, who was later killed. The country has since split between rival administrations in the east and the west, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

The chaos in the oil-rich country has steadily worsened as foreign backers increasingly intervened, despite pledges to the contrary, at a high-profile peace summit in Berlin earlier this year.

UNSMIL is pleased to announce that both, Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) delegations, are fully engaged in the third round of talks of the (5+5) Joint Military Commission (JMC). <https://t.co/C134zriaT9pic.twitter.com/7ulZnwSr5U>

– UNSMIL (@UNSMILibya) [June 10, 2020](#)

The Tripoli-based forces, backed by Turkey, gained the upper hand last week after retaking the capital’s airport, all main entrance and exit points to the city and a string of key towns near Tripoli. That forced Haftar’s fighters to withdraw, in a tactical measure to give the U.N.-backed peace process a chance.

UNSMIL said it received both sides’ comments on a draft cease-fire deal presented by the mission Feb. 23. It did not elaborate on details of the draft, or the warring sides’ comments.

Airstrikes and grad rockets killed at least 19 civilians, including three women and five children, between June 5-8 outside the strategic coastal city of Sirte. The city is a former stronghold of Daesh that Haftar’s forces captured in January, the mission said. At least 12 others were wounded, it said.

Libyan fighters allied with the Tripoli-based government earlier this week pressed their advance toward Sirte, the gateway to oil facilities in Libya’s south. But they faced intensive airstrikes from Haftar’s Libyan Arab Armed Forces, that forced them to retreat.

The mission said it was “particularly concerned” by reports of escalation and mobilization around Sirte.



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Trump welcomes Egyptian proposal for Libya ceasefire
Pompeo demands Iran release US detainees, urges Libya ceasefire

[Trump welcomes Egyptian proposal for Libya ceasefire](#)

Wed, 2020-06-10 19:15

LONDON: US President Donald Trump welcomed Egypt's proposal for a ceasefire in Libya on Wednesday during a phonecall with President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

Egypt called for a truce starting on Monday, as part of an initiative which also proposed an elected leadership council for Libya.

Earlier on Wednesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo welcomed the resumption of talks led by the United Nations between Libya's warring sides and urged speedy negotiations to achieve a ceasefire.

"The agreement between the GNA and LNA to re-enter UN security talks was a good first step, very positive," Pompeo said in a news conference, referring to the Government of National Accord and Libyan National Army, led by eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

"Quick and good-faith negotiations are now required to implement a ceasefire and relaunch the UN-led intra-Libyan political talks," Pompeo said. The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) on June 2 said Libya's warring parties had agreed to restart ceasefire talks.

(With Reuters)



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Egypt announces new Libya plan after collapse of Haftar offensive Saudi Arabia welcomes Egypt's new initiative for Libya