

Egyptian delegation seeks to defuse tensions in Gaza

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-14 01:36

GAZA CITY: Since US President Donald Trump announced his Israel-Palestine peace plan on Jan. 28 – which he referred to as the “Deal of the Century” – tension in the Gaza Strip has escalated rapidly, with the Gazan side firing rockets and releasing incendiary balloons across the border, and Israel shelling Gaza by night.

Over the past few days, Israel has escalated its threats against factions in Gaza, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Neftali Bennett warning Hamas that Israel would launch a full military assault unless the rockets and balloons sent from Gaza stopped.

Many observers believe that Hamas is seeking to pressure Netanyahu – who is preparing for elections early next month – into easing the siege imposed on Gaza 13 years ago. At the moment, that tactic does not appear to be working, however.

At the beginning of this month, Israel stopped the entry of cement into Gaza, reduced the number of permits available to Palestinian merchants to enter the West Bank and Israel, and shrunk Gaza’s fishing zone from 15 nautical miles to 10.

In an attempt to prevent further escalation of the situation – potentially into a fourth Intifada – an Egyptian security delegation, headed by the director of the Palestinian Department in Egyptian Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Ahmed Abdel Khaliq, visited the enclave on Monday to meet with Hamas and major Palestinian forces.

A Palestinian leader who participated in the meeting told Arab News, on condition of anonymity, that the delegation carried several “Israeli messages,” the main one being the threat of a broad military operation unless the rockets and balloons stopped.

In return, the source said, the delegation pledged that it would pressure Israel to follow up cease-fire conditions agreed with Hamas earlier – through Egyptian mediation – to ease the blockade, allow some goods to enter Gaza, increase the availability of fuel for the power station, and widen the fishing zone.

Talal Abu Zarifa, a member of the Political Bureau of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, told Arab News, “The resistance factions were the ones who passed a message via the Egyptian delegation stipulating the necessity to lift the siege on Gaza and stop all forms of aggression against our people in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Jerusalem, and that more aggression will push the region to escalate.”

Since the Egyptian visit, there has been a marked decrease in the number of balloons and rockets fired from Gaza into Israel, although it has not stopped completely.

Abu Zarifa said that Egypt is "aware of the suffering" of 2 million Palestinians in Gaza, and is keen not to see the situation deteriorate.

Rami Abu Zubaydah, a military-affairs researcher, said, "(Israel) makes various threats regarding the launch of a broad military operation against Gaza. The intervention of the Egyptian mediator may contribute to containing the situation a little, especially since the factions and the occupation do not want to enter into a comprehensive confrontation now, if it is possible to reach an agreement ending the siege of Gaza, realizing that Netanyahu cannot implement any comprehensive agreement in light of the upcoming elections."

Likewise, Tayseer Mohaisen, a professor of political science at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, said he did not believe the situation in Gaza would develop into all-out war, despite growing Israeli threats, because Israeli politicians are focused on the upcoming elections, and would not sanction any unpredictable military action at the moment.

Mohaisen added that he views the rocket and balloon launches from Gaza as "a limited wave of escalation aimed at demonstrating public protest against Israel's failure to comply with the ceasefire understandings, and forcing Israel to ease the blockade.

"The Israeli army is targeting empty fields and sites in Gaza (while attempting to fool) the Israeli public into thinking they have targeted the infrastructure of Hamas," Mohaisen told Arab News. "This means (Israel) does not want to break its security relationship with Hamas, as any war will hinder the achievement of its strategic goals."

Commentators expect that the Egyptian security delegation will succeed in its mission, and that Israel will retract its recent measures and introduce further measures to ease the blockade.



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[Attack on economist fuels anger over Beirut capital controls](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-14 01:29

BEIRUT: Lebanese economist Mohammed Zbib, who joined a campaign criticizing the Lebanese central bank's economic measures, was attacked on Wednesday night by unidentified persons after he left the campus of the American University in Beirut (AUB), where he was taking part in an economic seminar.

Zbib told Arab News that he "filed a complaint before the public prosecutor against two unknown persons, even though the attackers' faces were exposed, and there were security cameras that recorded the incident. The attackers didn't utter a word, they only beat me for a few minutes and then fled the scene."

He said: "I have no personal differences with anyone. My economic stances are the reason behind the assault. Nothing scares us; the assault might be to prevent me from carrying out seminars and activities."

The economist added: "If the government decides to pay the Eurobonds' entitlement, Lebanon will be driven toward an even worse crisis. The central bank must inform us of its assets before taking any step. What is the use of breaking the assets if we do not have enough money to meet the citizens' needs? What is required is to stop paying and negotiate with the creditors."

"No one will tell us that we are facing a tight deadline, nor that the creditors will seize Lebanon's assets abroad in the event of nonpayment. Lebanon has no properties abroad, but the central bank does."

Zbib considered the discussion regarding the capital control law to be "misleading, because its application will include all depositors. We revealed, by numbers, that \$27 billion was withdrawn from banks in 2019."

Several media professionals stood in solidarity with Zbib. The Skeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom called for conducting "the necessary investigations and revealing the attackers' identities as well as the identity of whoever ordered them to carry out the assault, no matter how important they are, and strongly hold them accountable."

The Reporters for Freedom center described the attack on Zbib as "organized," while the Syndicate of Editors condemned it as a "cowardly act."

The hashtag #Mohammad_Zbib topped the list of Lebanon trends on Twitter.

"This is the ruling mafia," said activist Lucien Bourjeily, while writer Ahmad Baydoun Zbib described him as a "strident voice against looters."

University professor Wissam Saadeh said: "The aggression of capital thugs against Zbib requires that classes be more organized from now on."

In a statement reported by the French Embassy, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on Lebanon to "proceed quickly to meet the economic, social and political aspirations that the Lebanese have expressed for several months, especially economic transparency, as well as economic and financial sustainability, combating corruption, and the judiciary system's independence."



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[Roosevelt's grandson says US president and King Abdul Aziz built legacy of friendship](#)

Fri, 2020-02-14 00:30

DUBAI: Policy experts have debated for 75 years about the underlying motive for the historic meeting in 1945 between US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and Saudi King Abdul Aziz on board the USS Quincy. Was it about oil? Was it about Palestine? Was it about sales of defense equipment?

But Hall Delano Roosevelt speaks with an ancestral authority on the subject, at least from the American side. "It was about creating a relationship and a friendship with this new King, who had just spent quite some time, and resources, and blood, and effort to unite the Arabian Peninsula for the purpose of being a productive part of the world," he told Arab News.

As FDR's grandson, he should know. "Del," as he is called in Washington DC, has devoted a significant part of his career to promoting US-Saudi partnerships, in business, commerce and finance, and spent many years in the Kingdom and the Arabian Gulf with his wife Jan.

Since last year he has been chief executive of the US-Saudi Arabian Business Council, the not-for-profit organization which aims to promote commercial ties between the two countries.

Roosevelt family folklore has an interesting tale about how the Quincy meeting came about. "We were told that His Majesty had met several Americans, but was still curious about their leader. Does he want to colonize us? Does he believe in God? So he wanted to meet with my grandfather for himself, before he met with Winston Churchill, and FDR jumped at that opportunity," Roosevelt said.

The rendezvous left an abiding impression. "In my humble opinion, what endures now between the US and Saudi Arabia was really just a natural growth from the conversation that took place that day. Sure they spoke about oil, but they also talked about agriculture, and about industry and manufacturing," he said.



Saudi Arabia's first airliner was a Douglas DC-3 that was given to Saudi King Abdul Aziz as a gift by then US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. (Getty Images)

Another tangible legacy of the meeting was the Saudi aviation industry, Roosevelt pointed out, after FDR gifted a DC-3 aircraft to the King – the first plane of the fleet that later became Saudia. "FDR was always trying to

expedite processes and to keep government out of the way, so he had the aircraft boxed up in huge crates marked 'agricultural machinery.'

"What endures today is the legacy of a bridge built between the two men, based on friendship, that resulted in business. FDR realized that here was a culture based on relationships, not strictly on numbers and commerce. If you build it on trust, commerce will follow," he said.

The commercial imperative is still in place today, he believes, keeping things stable while governments try to deal with the political differences that may occasionally arise. "I'm a firm believer in peace through commerce. It's the initial trust that allows for the friendship to grow. Even when one of them behaves poorly, the other one understands it and they work through it, just like you would in a marriage," Roosevelt said.

Some analysts believe that the changing dynamics of the oil industry have fundamentally altered the US-Saudi relationship. In 1945, the US was the pre-eminent oil producer in the world, while the Kingdom had not yet fully tapped its vast reserves.

That situation reversed towards the end of the last century, when Riyadh became the leading exporter, only to flip back again in the past decade as the US shale revolution made America effectively self-sufficient in oil once more.

Roosevelt takes a long-term, market-oriented view. The new situation allows Saudi Arabia to sell its product to other markets, he said, and in any case it could all change again very quickly. "We're feeling 10-feet tall now, but every four years we have a presidential election, and everything can change with a simple pen stroke. I just hope the people in the Beltway (Washington DC) get it right in 2020," he said.

Roosevelt also hopes that another business proposition – the possible listing of shares in Saudi Aramco on a US stock exchange – does not fall prey to political chicanery. "This is an incredibly volatile year, tensions are running high, and things like this (a US listing for Aramco) can get caught up in the maelstrom of US politics," he said.

Opinion

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

But in any case, he insisted, the US-Saudi Business Council is not a political organization, and he has no idea how the presidential election will go. "For the first time in my life, and despite all the political DNA in my body, I have no clue," he said.

The council exists to promote business ties, but surely there have been times when the complex geopolitics of the Middle East have deterred American businessmen from potential deals in the region?

"I've never had difficulty explaining to people here the case for expanding in the region. They all get the fact that there is a tremendous business opportunity.

"But in those conversations, usually after 10 or 15 minutes, they ask: 'You've been there Del, you've lived there with Jan and your children have visited – is it safe?' I know that question is coming," he said.

"And I tell them truthfully that in all the years I've been in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and other places, I have never experienced one moment of 'attitude.' I feel safer walking around there than in any major city in the West. There are no gangs, no drive-bys, no home invasions. You're more likely to be assaulted by curiosity – are you from America or the UK? – and generosity," he said.

He worked for years as the director of new business for the Alireza Group, one of the Kingdom's oldest and biggest conglomerates, which taught him some big lessons in how to do business in the Kingdom and the region. "Work backwards. Don't waste time bringing US companies to the Kingdom to see what gaps they might fill. First find the gaps, and then go to the US to fill that gap," he said.

"So many business conversations end in a handshake, and then there is no follow-up. That is how I see the council's job – to be with you all the time until you make the sell. It's no use doing business long distance either – you've got to put boots on the ground and make a commitment. So many US groups think it's about planting the flag and walking away with a bucket of cash. Well, that does not happen," he added.

Nonetheless, there are big opportunities, Roosevelt believes, under the Vision 2030 diversification strategy. He highlighted the tourism and leisure sectors as areas where American firms can bring expertise and commitment to Saudi Arabia, like the Qiddiya resort that's being built outside Riyadh. "It's twice the size of Disney World – amazing," he said.

And, much like his grandfather 75 years ago, he gives a vote of confidence in the current generation of Saudi leadership to see through the strategy.

"I believe that they will achieve the Vision 2030, because they have a king who understands traditional society and a young crown prince who is the driving force with the new generation. Alhamdulillah," he said.



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What happened when Saudi King Abdul Aziz met US President Roosevelt? How Aramco fueled Saudi-US ties

[US ship in Arabian Sea seizes suspected Iranian weapons, likely on their way to Houthis in Yemen](#)

Author:

Reuters

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WASHINGTON: A US Navy warship seized weapons believed to be of Iranian “design and manufacture” in the Arabian Sea, including more than 150 anti-

tank guided missiles and three Iranian surface-to-air missiles, the US military said in a statement on Thursday.

The US military said the USS Normandy boarded a dhow in the Arabian Sea on Sunday.

“The weapons seized include 150 ‘Dehlavieh’ anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM), which are Iranian-manufactured copies of Russian Kornet ATGMs,” the statement said.

“Other weapons components seized aboard the dhow were of Iranian design and manufacture and included three Iranian surface-to-air missiles, Iranian thermal imaging weapon scopes, and Iranian components for unmanned aerial and surface vessels” it added. It did not say what kind of surface-to-air missiles were seized.



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[UN special envoy for Libya warns: 'We are in a race against time'](#)

Wed, 2020-02-12 23:35

PARIS: Special Representative for the UN Support Mission in Libya Ghassan Salamé told Arab News it would not be useful for Libyan military commander Khalifa Haftar and Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj to meet without carrying out the necessary preparatory work for an agreement.

“It will not solve the problem,” he said, reiterating that several leaders – including Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – had all tried it, but in vain.

“You need to address the big issues that allow these two to sell whatever agreement they reach to their own constituencies. If this preparatory work is not done, nothing will happen,” he said.

In an exclusive interview in Paris, Salamé – a former Lebanese minister – said that while the members of the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission had agreed at their meeting in Geneva early this month to confirm the truce, to begin the process of disarming the militias, and to meet again soon, foreign interference in Libya was still high. He confirmed that Turkey had sent foreign fighters and equipment to Libya after the Berlin summit in January, adding that other countries are also sending equipment and fighters in support of Haftar.

On the fragility of the ceasefire, he said: “We still have a situation that is very blurred. They keep telling us that they respect the truce, but we have counted more than 130 violations since Jan. 12.”

Militias, he said, are on the payroll of the regular army and, according to the central bank, the army is paid on both sides of the divide – east and west – as are all civil servants.

On the current state of the deal between the two sides, he said: “We agreed on many issues; we agreed that the foreign fighters need to depart the country within three months of the ceasefire agreement. We agreed on the beginning of the process of disarming the militias; and we also agreed on the attempt to reunify the struggle against terrorist groups. There were, however, two or three sticking points we did not agree upon.”

Commenting on President Macron’s accusation that Turkey violated the Berlin commitment by sending arms and Syrian mercenaries to fight in Libya to help Al-Sarraj, Salamé said that both sides had violated the commitments undertaken at the Berlin summit.

That is why, he said, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the situation a “scandal.”

“There are commitments and there is a resolution but nobody is respecting them,” Salamé said. “We are therefore now in a race against time. We have launched these three tracks and I am happy the economic and financial tracks are going very well. At least 28 representatives from all the political groups and from various economic institutions in Libya met in Cairo on Feb. 9 and 10, and the next meeting will be in the first week of March.”

Regarding the oil terminals, which Haftar has blocked, Salamé said the UN-led economic dialogue in Cairo had explored a mechanism for the fair distribution of oil revenues, since Haftar believes that they are not currently equally distributed.

“Oil is often weaponized,” he said. “It happened at least twice on my watch.” Oil production is now mainly being carried out offshore, he added. “As with the two oil problems that were solved, I came to the conclusion that without a strong position (being taken) by the international community, we cannot do it on our own.

The Americans have been very much involved in the two preceding oil crises. This time I am using international pressure and I have been talking to tribal

leaders in Zuwetina.

“More importantly, we put the question of redistribution of oil revenues at the top of the agenda of the economic meeting in Cairo,” he continued. “We are trying to come up with a mechanism that is satisfactory to everybody and we pushing as hard as we can.”

In response to Haftar’s complaint that oil revenues were not equally distributed, Salamé said: “This is an old issue and you have two different things here: You have the idea in the east and the south that these two provinces, even under Muammar Qaddafi, were not fairly treated by Tripoli, and that the west – where the majority of the population lives – is taking more than its fair share of the oil revenues and has been more vocal in the past few months.

On the other hand, Haftar believes that after his deployment in the south and in the west, he is, to a large extent, in control of most of the oil, but the central bank in Tripoli is the one which decides on the oil revenues. The Libyans have to understand that the National Oil Company (NOC) is not taking a penny from the revenues – we are trying to explain that the NOC is different from the central bank: The oil revenues go to the Libyan exterior bank, which gives them directly to the central bank in Tripoli.

Therefore, Haftar believes that the central bank in Tripoli is not treating him and his troops fairly. Thus, you have two combined requests: The old one from the south and east that they were never treated properly, and now Haftar saying his army is not treated properly. So for that you need a mechanism, and a number of Libyan experts on Monday created a special committee to come up with a solution for the fair distribution of oil revenues in the next few days.”

When asked why he thinks Turkey is interfering in Libya, Salamé said: “Iran is interfering in Arab countries in the eastern Arab world and Turkey is doing the same in the western part. Unfortunately, now the situation in the Arab world is very polarized ... There is a combination of factors that have allowed some seven or eight countries to interfere directly – by allowing mercenaries to come, or by sending private military firms, or by sending equipment.”

The UN representative said he hoped that the escalating tension between Russia and Turkey in Syria’s Idlib region would not cause foreign fighters to enter Libya, adding that the two countries had agreed a truce in Berlin, which he described as “a positive development.”

His main concern, Salamé said, is that there are a number of parties who benefit from turmoil in Libya – and have no interest in helping to find a solution.

“What worries me in Libya is that there are groups, traders, financial people, arms dealers taking advantage of the situation and who are not in a hurry to find a solution,” he said. “A solution to Lebanon’s 1975 civil war was possible as early as 1983, but we took six extra years and lost 50,000

lives – just because we were (obstructed).

“I think time is now working against the Libyans. In the past few months, the level of foreign interference in their affairs has reached a point where they are losing their sovereignty little by little, day by day,” he continued.

“I wish they would open their eyes and see that they are becoming not only a threat to themselves but a threat to security in the entire region of the Mediterranean and the Sahel.”



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talks end with no formal truce deal