

Lebanese won't miss 2019, have low hopes for 2020

Author:

Tue, 2019-12-31 01:56

BEIRUT: The Lebanese people know what awaits them in 2020; the political, economic, and social crises that erupted in the second half of 2019 will not be resolved on this year's last day.

The formation of the new government still faces obstacles.

The banking procedures, which saw the imposition of restrictions on US dollar transfers abroad, and on the withdrawal of deposits from banks, resulted in economic contraction, bankruptcy and the dismissal of employees.

These restrictions persist and may get tougher in the new year as long as there is no government to generate confidence.

As for the unprecedented demonstrations that erupted last October against the ruling class, the people participating in them are still worried and angry.

According to political and economic experts, the new government, if it ever sees light, will face the challenge of preventing total collapse, or alleviating its effects, under stressful circumstances, while protests might even overthrow it.

The new year's budget indicates that the state's revenues have decreased in large part due to the decline in tax collecting.

The draft 2020 budget, which was transferred to the Parliamentary Money Committee, expected that revenues would total 20 trillion lira (\$13.3 billion), but the Ministry of Finance adjusted this number in light of what was collected in 2019, and reduced the expected revenues to about 14 trillion lira.

The figures for the 2019 budget were disastrous, as public financial figures showed that revenues collected until last October were estimated at a little under 11.5 trillion lira, compared to an expected figure of 18.78 trillion.

People on the street are not optimistic about the near future. Hanadi Abdel-Al, a US resident back for the holidays, said: "The problem that people talk about is the difficulty in obtaining US dollars to run their businesses. But the Lebanese people who lived through wars are able to overcome this crisis as well. I envy them because they live day by day, and do not care about planning for the future."

Sahar Baghdadi, who lived abroad for 21 years and came back to Lebanon two years ago, expressed regret at returning, and said: "2019 is one of the worst years – there is no peace of mind, no security, no social justice, and our economic situation is declining. I live with my family in a state of anxiety

about what next year will bring to us. Will I be able to pay the tuition fees for my children's schools? If I have the opportunity to emigrate again, I will not hesitate."

Mohammed Afra, a lawyer, believes 2019 was "an extension of the year 1984 – the ruling class today is a continuation of the militias that controlled the country during the war and imposed their control over the people. Former militias acquired power and imposed a corrupt political class whose only concern is financial greed, control of state assets, and protection of banks' interests."

Afra noted that based on lawsuits in his office, he was witnessing "frightening failure situations."

Sales have decreased, and it is no longer people's priority to buy luxury items as purchasing power has decreased by 5%.

Hassan Chalhoub, Employee

He said: "Companies are filing for bankruptcy and we cannot collect the rights of employees who have been laid off as a result, which affects negatively the middle and poor classes. I am afraid that next year will not produce a government that fights corruption and gives autonomy to the judiciary. If this situation persists, we will see thefts of banks, pharmacies, and homes, then looting and chaos will prevail."

Hassan Chalhoub, an employee in a telephone sales company, expressed his concern over what next year would bring with it. "Sales have decreased, and it is no longer people's priority to buy luxury items as purchasing power has decreased by 5 percent. I will not immigrate as my family needs me here in Lebanon, and my demand is to provide job opportunities for talented people with disregards to their sectarian affiliations."

Marilyn Melhem said: "2019, was full of grief for me. My husband died. I work to support two sons, one of them is married, and I do not know whether I will be summarily expelled from my job due to a decline in the market. In this country, nothing guarantees my rights as a citizen. There is a great injustice."

Bernard Saqr, a florist, said that conditions in 2019 were "very difficult" and added: "I sell flowers and seedlings in Byblos region and distribute my products in Lebanon and Syria, but conditions retreated and roses became a secondary thing that can be dispensed off. At weddings, they resort to accessories that are less expensive than roses, and they keep looking for alternatives. If the situation continues, no one could survive."

He thinks sometimes of emigrating, yet he does not want to leave the country. He still hopes "that things improve," assuring that: "I will struggle with what is available despite everything, and I support the revolutionaries and the revolution to the fullest extent."

Economic expert Dr. Louis Hobeika said things could not continue in such a fashion, for the country would not be able to stand further delay in forming a government, and that he worried that the prime minister-designate, Dr. Hassan Diab, might back down on forming the government.

“The banks’ restrictions are a necessary measure because political prospects are not clear. What is required is a government of confidence, so that the crisis eases,” he said.



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Lebanese protesters defy capital controls in sit-ins as crisis hits, Lebanese businesses fight for survival

[**Erdogan in bid to drag Algeria into**](#)

Libyan war

Tue, 2019-12-31 01:49

ANKARA: The Turkish Navy is set to dispatch two frigates to Algeria to start joint maritime exercises.

With regional tensions simmering in the eastern Mediterranean, experts have drawn attention to the timing and objectives of the move considering Algeria neighbors war-torn Libya from the east.

The exercise not only coincides with the 500th year of commemoration of Oruc Reis, an Ottoman governor in North Africa who discovered the island of Djerba in Tunisia, but also Ankara's surprise introduction of visa-free travel for Algerians.

The two frigates are expected to be forwarded between Jan. 7 and 10. During the dispatch, Algerian naval forces will also receive training from their Turkish counterparts.

The Tunisian presidency recently denied claims that the country would join an alliance with Turkey and Algeria in resolving the Libyan crisis.

Last month, Turkey and Libya signed a military cooperation deal and another on the delimitation of maritime borders, under which Turkey got the green light to deploy its own troops at the request of Libya's government.

Syrian fighters were also dispatched to support Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli, to fight against General Khalifa Haftar's forces, which control the country's east.

Algeria's newly elected President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has recently chaired a top security meeting to discuss contingency plans for a possible Turkish military intervention in neighboring Libya.

A parliamentary vote in Turkey is expected for early January on deploying troops to Libya, including formation of an elite Libyan force to respond directly to threats, as well as allocation of weapons, conducting of joint exercises and exchange of counter-terror intelligence.

Yahia Zoubir, director of research in geopolitics at the Kedge Business School in Marseille and a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center in Qatar, said the situation in Libya is worrisome for Algeria.

"The naval exercise must have been planned earlier. While Oruc Reis is part of Algeria's history and pride, the Turkish military presence in Libya isn't welcome for Algerians because Ankara is a member of NATO," he told Arab News.

Zoubir said that Algerians see foreign presence in the region with suspicion and believe that it is part of a plan to destabilize the region for access to oil and gas.

“There is no doubt that the Algerian military is going to strengthen its borders with Libya and Tunisia, and will continue calling for a political, negotiated solution among Libyans,” he added.

Algerian citizens aged under 18 and over 65 were recently granted entry permits to Turkey with a presidential decree.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid a visit to Tunis on Dec. 25 for talks with his counterpart President Kais Saied.

Gallia Lindenstrauss, senior research fellow from the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said the Turkey-GNA maritime border delimitation agreement has made the survival of the GNA’s Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj critical for Turkey and Ankara is hoping for Tunisian and Algerian assistance to support him.

“Moreover, it seems that Erdogan’s surprise visit to Tunisia last week did not bring with it the desired result for Ankara in the context of Libya, so this potentially makes Algeria even more important for Turkey,” she told Arab News.



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Young Libyans train as pastry chefs as state jobs dry up Turkey mulls sending allied Syrian fighters to Libya

Al-Shabab militants claim huge Mogadishu bomb attack

Author:

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1577738301416813100

Mon, 2019-12-30 20:14

MOGADISHU: Al-Shabab Islamist militants have claimed responsibility for Saturday's massive car bomb in the Somali capital Mogadishu that killed 81 people, including two Turkish citizens.

Saturday's attack hit a busy checkpoint in the southwest of the city, killing 81 people, including a dozen university students, in the country's deadliest assault in two years.

Scores more were wounded in the blast that left surrounding vehicles charred and twisted in an area clogged with traffic because of the checkpoint and a tax office collecting fees from trucks and buses.

"..the mujahideen carried (out) an attack... targeting a convoy of Turkish mercenaries and apostate militia who were escorting them," Al-Shabab spokesman Sheik Ali Mohamud Rage said in an audio message.

Among the dead were 16 students from the private Banadir university whose bus was passing through the crossroads as the bomb detonated.

For the first time, Al-Shabab apologized to the civilian victims of the attack, which it justified as necessary in fight against the Somali State and its foreign backers.

"We are very sorry about the casualty that was inflicted on our Somali Muslim society, and we are extending our condolences to the Muslims who have lost their lives and or wounded and or had their property destroyed."

Al-Shabab do not usually claim attacks that cause such high casualty rates among the civilian population, for fear of losing the support they still enjoy with some Somalis.

The death toll increased to 81 on Monday after two victims died from their wounds, the Somali information ministry said.

Mogadishu is regularly hit by attacks by Al-Shabab, which has fought for more than a decade to topple the Somali government.

In 2010, Al-Shabab declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda. But its fighters fled positions they once held in the capital Mogadishu, and have since lost many strongholds.

They retain control of large rural swathes of the country and continue to wage a guerrilla war against the authorities, managing to inflict bloody attacks at home and abroad.



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Al-Shabab militants kill 50 soldiers in attack on Somalia military base

[Lebanese protesters defy capital controls in sit-in](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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1577733053416667000

Mon, 2019-12-30 16:00

BEIRUT: Lebanese protesters staged a sit-in inside a commercial bank in the capital Beirut on Monday, forcing tellers to give them more than the weekly limit for withdrawal amid a wave of protests against recent capital controls. Amid a spiraling financial crisis, Lebanese banks have imposed informal withdrawal limits of a maximum \$300 a week and totally halted transfers

abroad. Anti-government protesters, who largely blame the country's dire economy on corrupt politicians, say the limits are illegal and have turned their ire against bank officials and the financial sector.

The Association of Banks in Lebanon advised the capital controls to manage depleting foreign currency. Lebanon's economy depends heavily on US dollars. At least two dozen protesters sat on the floor of a branch of the Audi Bank in Beirut's Achrafieh district on Monday, chanting against Lebanese banking policies. They eventually forced the teller to cash a \$5,000 check for one protester while two others withdrew \$1,000 and \$2,000 from their accounts. The protesters waved the money at the cameras in celebration.

"We want the money," the protesters chanted, a number of them clients of the bank. They urged some of the customers in the bank to demand more of their money with the protesters' support. At least one tried, but didn't insist, said Roy Deeb, one of the protesters who cashed the \$5,000 check.

"We stayed and insisted and under pressure, they gave the money," Deeb said. Deeb said it is not legal for Lebanon's bank association to enforce withdrawal limits without parliamentary or government approval.

Over recent weeks, the local currency has taken a nose dive, losing more than 30% of its value after over 20 years of being pegged to the dollar.

Meanwhile, layoffs and salary cuts are becoming the norm while politicians have continued to bicker since late October over forming a new government.

An Audi bank spokesperson was unable to confirm that the money was withdrawn and said bank staff called for security back-up because of the protesters' "aggressive" action. The bank is the largest private bank in Lebanon.

"They are not clients. They are communists," the spokesperson told The Associated Press, declining to be identified in line with regulations. "They are calling for the fall of the banking system."

The doors to the bank were briefly closed while protesters and clients were locked inside, Deeb said. He denied protesters used violence. Security at one point formed a line between the tellers and the protesters. The standoff ended peacefully by the branch's regular closing time.

After nationwide protests erupted on Oct. 17 over Lebanon's plummeting economy, banks closed down for two weeks fearing anger and panic from depositors. When they re-opened, at least one armed security guard was added to each branch, in addition to the regular private security.

A spokesman for the Lebanese banks association said the capital controls are only a temporary measure to deal with the country's severe liquidity crunch. Georges Abi Saleh, director of communication for the association, said that there were strict orders to avoid clashing with depositors.

"The people are in a state of worry. We have to be understanding," he said, adding that it is unlikely such scenarios would be repeated in over 1,100 bank branches around Lebanon.



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Cash-strapped Lebanon to probe 'suspicious' capital flight

[Traders threaten strike in Houthi-controlled Yemen as rebels ban currency](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-12-30 18:55

AL-MUKALLA, Yemen: Traders in Houthi-controlled areas have called for an open strike starting on Wednesday to protest against the rebels' decision to ban trading with new currency notes issued by the internationally recognized government in Aden.

Workers at local exchange companies told Arab News on Monday that they would shutter businesses until Houthis revoked the decision or provided them with the old notes.

The strike would be the biggest act of civil disobedience against Houthi suppression since the Iran-backed rebels seized power in late 2014.

The Houthis recently banned people from using the newly printed notes, asking them to replace their notes with a virtual currency called the "electronic riyal." The move has caused widespread anger, with people leaving Houthi areas with their cash to avoid confiscation.

The Yemeni government in Aden has condemned the decision, calling it a pretext for ripping off people and warned against trading with the Houthi currency or handing over money to the Houthis. Several cabinet ministers did not respond to Arab News requests to comment on the decision.

Speaking to Arab News from inside Houthi-controlled areas, people expressed anger as many have kept their savings in the new notes. If they comply with the Houthis, they will be broke overnight.

"The people in the Houthi-controlled areas are experiencing a complex frustration," a Yemeni journalist who lives in a Houthi-controlled city told Arab News on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

"People face various security and economical troubles caused by the Houthis. They imposed the decision, indifferent to the already deteriorating humanitarian situation," he said, adding that a large number of people refused to hand over their new notes to the Houthis, fearing bankruptcy or hunger.

Residents say that the decision has created a black market where the new notes are changed with old ones at a lower price. Other residents have resorted to buying hard currencies from the black market at inflated rates. Some are smuggling themselves into government-controlled areas with bags of cash that they deposit into bank accounts or replace with old notes.

A trader in Sana'a who had 8,000,000 Yemeni riyals (\$32,000) in the new notes traveled to the central province of Marib to replace them with old notes.

In September 2016, Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi moved the central bank headquarters from Sana'a to the southern city of Aden to stop Houthis plundering its reserves. From its new headquarters, the bank printed new notes when the country was experiencing a severe cash crunch. The Houthis deemed the new notes illegal and accused the government of sinking the market with liquidity.

Experts say that the Houthi decision would have disastrous effects on the country's troubled economy, stabilization of the currency and people's lives.

"This decision is disastrous, improvizational and illogical and will have a wider negative impact on the economy," Mustafa Nasr, director of the Economic Media Center, told Arab News on Sunday, adding that the Houthis would fail to

impose their decision due to public mistrust.

“The Houthis cannot cancel a circulating currency or initiate another one in the same country mainly with the scarcity of the old notes,” he said, arguing that the Houthis are using the currency as leverage to pressure the Yemeni government in Aden to deal again with the central bank in Sana’a.

“The Houthi group would not be able to put into place their electronic riyal. They are using this as a pressure tool on the international community and the internationally recognized government (of Yemen) to restore the central bank in Sana’a.”

Shortly after the Houthis began confiscating the new notes, banks and exchange companies suffered cash problems, triggering them to increase remittance charges five times.

Nasr warned that the larger impact of the Houthi decision would be on the stabilization of the currency, affecting everyone in the country.

“It puts the country’s economy in the wind by undermining monetary policies that led to the stabilization of the riyal this year. It will stifle the private sector and force it into using under-the-table options,” he said.





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