

# Lebanon's leaders in blame game over crisis

Author:

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BEIRUT: Tensions between Lebanon's president and former prime minister have flared after they accused each other of being to blame for the turmoil engulfing the country.

A recession, massive street protests and a political crisis have created financial and security chaos.

Lebanon has had a caretaker government since Oct. 29, when Saad Hariri resigned as prime minister after nearly two weeks of protests.

He has clashed with President Michel Aoun about the leadership and composition of a new administration.

"The problem with the president is that he is acting as if nothing has happened in the country, and he is trying to act smart by endorsing the demands of the revolution, and my stance is clear, I will not be represented in this government and I will not nominate anyone, nor will I give it a confidence vote," said Hariri.

"Now they are targeting the political legacy of the Hariri family, and they will try to hold it responsible for all the calamities that have befallen the country, but whoever tries to bury Hariri's legacy will be as if he would be burying himself. Let us see who really stole from the country. I will not cover anyone, and they should do the same thing."

Aoun responded to Hariri by saying: "Does he envy me for my resilience and calmness in trying to control the situation, or does he want me to act foolishly and badly? We waited for 100 days for him (Hariri) and nothing came out. We waited for someone who kept hesitating. I want, and I do not want, as if someone was playing with a daisy. A government cannot be formed in this manner."

Dr. Hassan Diab, a university professor and former education minister, has been nominated to replace Hariri and has started consulting with parliamentary blocs to discuss the shape of a future government.

But he faces significant hurdles, including a boycott by influential political blocs that refused to nominate him because of the backing he received from the Free Patriotic Movement, Hezbollah, the Amal party and their allies.

Bechara Al-Rahi, the Maronite Patriarch, on Sunday urged all political parties to cooperate with Diab and facilitate the formation of a rescue emergency government.

Protesters have demonstrated in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon against Diab, saying he should abandon the post because he is a member of the ruling elite. Demonstrators blame the ruling elite for widespread corruption and mismanagement in Lebanon.



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## [Turkey readying to give Libya military support](#)

Thu, 2019-12-26 01:04

ANKARA: Turkey is ready to give Libya military support, a spokesman for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, with the country's Parliament readying to authorize troop deployment.

Turkey backs the government of Fayeza Al-Serraj in Libya, which has been split into rival political and military factions since 2011 when ruler Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed.

Al-Serraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) has been battling the forces of veteran eastern commander Khalifa Haftar, who launched an offensive to seize Tripoli from fighters loyal to the GNA.

Turkey and Libya recently signed a military cooperation deal. It includes provisions for a quick reaction force if requested by Tripoli.

"We will continue to support the internationally recognized Libyan government. This support may be in terms of military training, or other areas, such as political support," presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said after Omer Celik, a spokesman for the ruling Justice and Development Party, said the country would use hard power instruments to protect its national interests if necessary.

The military cooperation deal has been criticized by the Turkish opposition, which said further military supplies to the GNA breach a UN arms embargo.

But Erdogan pledged Sunday to intensify military backing to Libya along with ground, air and marine options. Some Turkish media have reported that the government may establish a military base in Libya to support its operations.

"It is important not to confuse Erdogan's rhetoric and the physical reality of the actions he has taken lately," Jalel Harchaoui, a Libya expert at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, told Arab News. "Those are two very different things."

He recalled that Turkey sent around 60 national intelligence officers to operate combat drones in Libya during the summer, in violation of the arms embargo.

## **HIGHLIGHT**

The Turkish opposition has criticized military cooperation deal, saying military supplies to the Tripoli administration breach a UN arms embargo.

He said that the operation, although clandestine, helped the GNA to survive. "However, that Turkish mission stopped almost entirely in the second half of October. After the defense accord was signed on November 27, the mission has been partially resumed. But it is now a much more timid, much smaller version of summer's operation. Very few airstrikes are being carried out by the Turks on behalf of Libya's internationally recognized government."

Ankara was only talking about possibly sending government troops, he said, but none of it had happened.

"Turkey's intervention right now is much smaller than three or four months ago. And even back then, the Turkish military intervention was remarkably smaller than the Emiratis' own military intervention, which now involves airstrikes conducted using fighter jets on a routine basis. Overall, since April, the total number of Emirati drone strikes has been three times as



large as the Turkish drone strikes in Libya.”

Harchaoui said that Ankara seemed “deeply interested” in attempting some sort of diplomatic entente, particularly with Russia.

Russia has said it is concerned about the possibility of Turkey deploying troops in Libya. Russian President Vladimir Putin is visiting Turkey next month, with the two nations expected to launch an important Libya initiative.

Erdogan said Wednesday he had discussed with his Tunisian counterpart, President Kais Saied, possible steps and cooperation to establish a cease-fire in Libya.

In a news conference alongside Saied, Erdogan said he believed Tunisia would have “valuable and constructive” contributions to establishing stability in Libya.



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Turkey's Erdogan says discussed Libya ceasefire with Tunisian president  
Libya war leaves thousands homeless in Tripoli

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# Syria missile strike kills 5 pro-Iran fighters: monitor

Author:

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BEIRUT: Five pro-Iranian fighters were killed by unidentified missiles on Wednesday evening in Syria's eastern province of Deir Ezzor, a war monitor said.

"Missiles of unidentified origin targeted the headquarters of the 47th Brigade of pro-Iranian militias in the town of Albu Kamal, in the east of Deir Ezzor province, killing five fighters," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Observatory chief Rami Abdul Rahman said drones may have been responsible for the strikes, which caused "loud blasts."

Iran and militias it supports, along with fighters from Iraq and elsewhere, have backed the regime of President Bashar Assad in Syria's eight-year war. Israel has vowed to prevent its regional arch-rival Iran from gaining a foothold in the country and has carried out hundreds of strikes against Iranian targets.

The vast desert province of Deir Ezzor, which neighbors Iraq, hosts several actors in the Syrian conflict besides pro-regime forces.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-dominated armed group backed by the United States, was instrumental in destroying the self-declared "caliphate" of the Daesh group.

Five pro-Iranian fighters were killed in similar raids on the outskirts of Albu Kamal on December 8, the Observatory said.

In September, 28 pro-Iranian fighters including at least 10 Iraqis were killed in similar strikes.

The Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah blamed Israel for that attack, quoting a "security source in Syria."

In June 2018, strikes in far eastern Syria were also attributed to Israel by an American official, on condition of anonymity. The Observatory said they killed 55 pro-regime forces.

Syria's complex, multi-faceted conflict has left more than 370,000 people dead and displaced millions since it began in 2011 with anti-government demonstrations that were brutally repressed.





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Displaced Syrian grows mushrooms to feed family

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## [How Iran's influence turned into seething discontent](#)

Wed, 2019-12-25 23:15

BEIRUT: The outbreak of protests in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran has shaken the political establishment in Tehran. For decades, the theocracy has thrived on the doctrine of velayat-e faqih, which aimed to mobilize Shiite support across the Middle East under a single Iranian religious and political leadership.

But exporting the Iranian brand of Shiism and expanding the country's geopolitical influence has proven a persistent, uphill battle, and culminated in a huge backlash.

The explosion of anger and frustration in Iran and Iran-influenced countries is the latest and, perhaps, gravest crisis that Tehran has confronted in

recent years.

Brian Hook, the US State Department's Iran envoy, has described its nationwide protests as "the worst political crisis the regime has faced in its 40 years."

Hundreds of protesters were reportedly killed and thousands more arrested, while the government imposed nationwide internet blackouts to prevent media coverage, which drew strong international condemnation.

Over the past decade, the Iranian regime has gained an advantage over its geopolitical rivals in projecting power across a number of countries with religiously mixed populations, notably Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.

In order to export its ideology and consolidate its strategic gains, Iran has had to forge alliances with non-Sunni minorities, such as the Alawites in Syria, Zaydis in Yemen, Ibadis in Oman, Christians in Lebanon and Ismailis elsewhere in the region.

The objective was not only to disrupt the regional balance of power, but also to swing it in its favor, against the Sunni-majority powers. The realignment of the regional order – in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen – was so sharp that it prompted Ali Riza Zakani, an Iranian member of parliament, to boast that Iran had finally captured their capitals.

But now, after benefiting from four decades of revolutionary fervor, Iran's rulers are confronting the challenge of governing the "captured territories." Chief among them is accommodating these countries' ethnic and sectarian diversities.

This reality check has forced Iran-backed Shiite parties in Iraq and Lebanon to pursue a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic model of governance, allowing Iran to cobble together cross-sectarian coalitions and maintain the regional upper hand.

In 2006, Hezbollah forged an alliance with the Christian Maronite party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Together they comprised the March 8 alliance, which included other sectarian political parties.

Both groups aimed to undermine Sunni and Saudi political influence in Lebanon. Their efforts culminated in the imposition of Michael Aoun, the FPM leader, on the country as its president and securing a parliamentary majority in 2018, an electoral victory that followed the gerrymandering of districts and the adoption of an electoral law that primarily favored the FPM.

Likewise in Iraq, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a step that coincided with other Iran-sponsored groups dropping their demands for an Islamic theocracy in Baghdad. Former revolutionaries soon became partners in Iraq's multi-ethnic and confessional power-sharing arrangements.

Tehran's problems have been compounded by the actions of its local political

allies, who have adopted unabashed sectarian rhetoric, maintained their allegiance to the velayat-e faqih and used state resources to advance their political objectives.

In both Iraq and Lebanon, state resources have proven vulnerable to predatory political abuse. Government ministries have been distributed without consideration for merit, while services and contracts have been handed out to party loyalists and politically connected candidates.

The result has been a fragmented and unaccountable elite, members of which have divided the spoils of power generously among themselves.

In 2018, the Fragile State Index measured the stability of more than 178 countries; it placed Lebanon among the “warning states” and Iraq among the “alert states.” Both countries’ elites ranked among the world’s “most fragmented.” Transparency International has also ranked the perception of corruption in both countries as among the highest globally.

Despite the reluctance of the Shiite political parties to embrace the Iranian theocratic model wholesale, both Iraq and Lebanon have proven vulnerable to the velayat-e faqih’s strategy of spawning a state within the state.

The success of Hezbollah and Hashd Al-Shaabi is most evident in their ability to replicate the Iranian-style “duality of power” model by penetrating and subduing their home country’s state institutions whose ethnic and sectarian diversity posed an obstacle of sorts.

Consequently, the governments in Iraq and Lebanon have been denied sole monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force, and forced to accept a parallel system of informal, armed and unaccountable Iran-sponsored institutions.

To be sure, the hardening of US sanctions against Iran and its allies as well as the relative decline of oil prices over the past decade has taken a direct toll on Iran’s economy. The sanctions have additionally put a crimp in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp’s (IRGC) maneuverability in regional battlefields.

Most alarmingly from Tehran’s standpoint, the US moves have opened up a chasm between the economic interests of these countries and the political interests of their Iran-aligned leaders. While the people seek market normalization, integration, and investment, their governments see such measures as the keys to their own demise.





In Lebanon, Hezbollah has long overwhelmed Lebanese government institutions. Its success stems from the ability of its informal military and social welfare networks to secure the loyalty of its sectarian constituents. Its security institutions have overcome the challenge posed by the multi-sectarian make-up of Lebanese society through threats of violence and civil war.

Successive governments have been forced to recognize Hezbollah's right to keep its weapons and stand idly by every time it has chosen to exercise power within the country or entered into a conflict.

In 2008 and 2016, Hezbollah's political dominance enabled it to impose its own presidential nominees, overruling parliamentary majorities. And in 2018, its decisive electoral victory ensured full control over the government.

But Lebanon's dollar-dependent economic system runs broadly counter to that established by velayat-e faqih. Its free market remains tied to Arab states and critically linked to Western support and assistance. Arab oil-generated remittances, deposits and investments have traditionally kept the economy ticking.

In late 2019, Lebanon found itself on the edge of an abyss as its entire economic system faced collapse. Protesters took to the streets to demand the government's resignation and the formation of a government of technocrats.

Hezbollah and its allies went on the defensive as they found the spontaneous public uprising – "Al-Thawra" or revolution – a direct threat to the dual power structure that serves their political objectives so well.

In Iraq, a similar dual power structure encompassing political rivals is to blame for the unraveling of the economy and the administration's dysfunctional state.

Iran's outside influence is seen by large sections of Iraq's population as preventing Baghdad from forging an independent oil strategy or economic policy founded on national interest.

A case in point is the Iraqi government's bungling of a \$53 billion Exxon

deal that aimed to help Iraq boost its oil output in the southern fields. The outcome is seen by ordinary Iraqis as a result of Tehran's dogged opposition to an economic partnership between Iraq and the US.

Meanwhile, Iraqis are resentful over their dependence on Iran for electricity supplies and other commodities. The full extent of their frustration became evident when protesters stormed the Iranian consulate in the southern city of Najaf, replaced the Iranian flag and set fire to the building.

In retrospect, even as Iran succeeded, through its local proxies, to disrupt the balance of political power and marginalize Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, it unwittingly sowed the seeds of sectarian and ethnic discontent in the four predominantly Arab countries. Now it is reaping the whirlwind.



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# Displaced Syrian grows mushrooms to feed family

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HAAREM: In a camp for the displaced in northern Syria, Nasrallah scatters mushroom spores into a bag of wet hay, hoping they will sprout and feed his family.

"Mushrooms have become the main alternative to meat, as it's so expensive," says the 43-year-old.

After the civil war erupted in Syria eight years ago, Nasrallah started growing the fungi in his home province of Hama.

"We'd eat some, give some away to friends," explains the father of three, who used to work for the local council in the town of Qalaat Al-Madiq.

But earlier this year, increased regime bombardment on the Hama region forced his family to flee north toward the Turkish border.

They found refuge in a camp in the town of Haarem in the northwestern province of Idlib, but jobs there are scarce.

With money tight to support his wife and children, he planted some mushrooms.

"We eat some and we sell a little to provide for ourselves," he says.

Before planting the fungi, Nasrallah sterilizes hay by stirring it in boiling water over a wood fire.

He then layers the wet straw into a bag, sprinkling five to ten grams of mushroom spores between each coating.

Sealing the bag with a tight knot, he lugs it into a dark, warm room and leaves it for around 20 days.

Once the bag has turned white, he transfers it to a slightly brighter room, opens it up, and mists the top regularly until mushrooms sprout out.

"Not many people grow mushrooms, though people – especially in camps – are increasingly turning to them," he says.

Mushrooms are commonly viewed as an alternative to meat in dishes, although they are different in nutritional value. They contain far less protein, but more minerals and vitamins.

Syrians in other parts of the country have also grown them during the war, most notably in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta when it was under a five-year government siege.

Around 6.5 million people in Syria are food insecure, or lack access to sufficient nutritious food.

Many of them have been displaced from their homes by the conflict, the World Food Programme says.

Today, Nasrallah buys a kilo of spores from Turkey for the equivalent of \$10, hoping they will generate 20 kilos of food.

But he spreads out his yield, picking no more than five kilos a week.

Each kilo sells for a little under the equivalent of \$3, far less than the average \$13 per kilo for meat.



Inside the brighter cultivation room, his nine-year-old son, Saeed, watches as Nasrallah carves off a huge sprout of creamy oyster mushrooms from a sack. In the street outside, 65-year-old Umm Khaled takes a quick look at the merchandise and picks it up for a few bank notes. Inside her modest mudbrick home, she chops the mushrooms up and cooks them over a camping stove with some onions and ghee. "To be honest, chicken and meat are better, but we can't afford them," says the elderly woman, who cooks for her son and grandchildren. Gathering around the dishes, she and her family rip up flat bread and dip it into the vegetables instead.







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