

UN hosts renewed talks on contested Yemeni port city

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-18 22:41

SANAA: Yemen's warring parties have renewed talks on how to implement a year-old truce in the contested port city of Hodeidah.

The two days of meetings are taking place on a boat off the coast of the city, according to a statement by the United Nations mission tasked with supporting the agreement. Previous negotiations between the Iran-backed Houthi militia and the Arab coalition fighting in support of the internationally recognized government have repeatedly collapsed. The war is five years old.

The warring sides signed a UN-brokered agreement last December in Sweden that included a cease-fire for Hodeidah and an exchange of more than 15,000 prisoners. But the deal was never fully implemented.

This week's talks are centered on how both sides will redeploy forces from strategic areas in Hodeidah, which has seen some of the war's worst fighting, and on who will oversee administration of the country's most important shipping port. They come amid a renewed push for peace.

The UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, was also in the Houthi-held capital of Sanaa for meetings with Houthi officials on Monday.

Last week, several international aid groups warned that Hodeidah remains the most dangerous place in the war-torn, impoverished Arab country. Since December of last year, the groups said in a statement that the port city and surrounding province has seen 799 civilians killed and wounded, the highest toll nationwide.

Yemen's conflict began in 2014, when the Iran-backed Shiite militia known as Houthis overran the capital, Sanaa, and much of the north. They pushed out Yemen's internationally recognized government and ushered in the civil war that has killed tens of thousands of people.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Yemen government condemns Iran over Houthi weapon supplies Arab coalition releases 200 Houthi prisoners to support peace deal

[Iraqi parties debate PM candidates, already rejected by the street](#)

Author:

Ali Choukeir | AFP

ID:

1576696078500668400

Wed, 2019-12-18 18:54

BAGHDAD: The day before the deadline to designate a new Iraqi prime minister, political parties were wrangling Wednesday over three candidates: all insiders and all rejected by a months-old anti-government protest movement. President Barham Saleh has until midnight Thursday to appoint a replacement for outgoing premier Adel Abdel Mahdi, who resigned after two months of unprecedented demonstrations that have rocked the capital Baghdad and Shiite-majority south.

The protests continue to push for the overhaul of the political system in place since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, defying

violence that has left around 460 dead and 25,000 wounded.

As candidates' names were leaked in recent weeks, giant posters of them with their faces crossed out in red quickly appeared in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, epicenter of the protests since October 1.

On Wednesday, three names appeared to remain on the table after many meetings of party heads and other leaders of parliamentary groups.

Qusay Al-Suhail, outgoing higher education minister, has for several weeks been presented by officials as the candidate of Iran.

Iran wields growing clout in Iraq, with its emissary Major General Qasem Soleimani presiding over the negotiations.

A former key member of Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr's movement, Suhail rejoined the Rule of Law Alliance of former prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki – close to Iran and enemy of Sadr – and seems to become the favorite for the premiership.

But the Iraqi political machine can be fickle.

Earlier Wednesday, the front-runner was Mohammed Al-Soudani, 49, former minister and ex-governor of a southern province now in the grip of protests and violence.

His demotion is due to his not having been received by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani – longtime kingmaker in Iraqi politics – when he presented himself to be endorsed in Najaf a few days ago, according to sources in the Shiite shrine city.

The 89-year-old cleric, the highest religious authority for the majority of Iraqi Shiites, had already said – for the first time – that he did not want to be involved in the formation of the new government.

A third candidate is intelligence chief Moustafa Al-Kazemi, a shadowy figure seen as backed by the US.

If parliament does not approve a candidate who has emerged from inter-party negotiations, then the president has the constitutional right to appoint the premier himself.

"He's betting on a last-minute intervention," one political official told AFP.

Another possible twist: no candidate is approved, the post of prime minister will be vacant from Thursday at midnight. Under the constitution, that would place Saleh in the post himself.

Formally, the "largest coalition" in parliament should present a candidate to the president, who then submits his name to a vote.

But so far, neither the president nor parliament has said which coalition is the largest.

Adding to the uncertainty, on Wednesday an outspoken liberal lawmaker critical of Iraq's endemic corruption threw his hat into the ring.

Fayeq Al-Sheikh Ali presented his "candidacy to... form a professional and non-partisan government," in a letter to Saleh which he also shared with his more than 285,000 Twitter followers.

Head of a secular alliance, Sheikh Ali won a parliamentary seat last year after promising to counter Islamists' efforts to ban alcohol in the country. He was stripped of his immunity from prosecution in September following accusations he praised Saddam Hussein's Baath party, despite his long history of opposing the executed dictator.

But he has already generated enthusiasm in the street and on social media, with protesters saying he would be a sign of change.

“The government only exchanges positions between the same people, as if it was playing a game of chess,” said 23-year-old protester Hussein Ali in Tahrir Square.

“Neither Soudani nor Suhail represent us. I reject them and so does the whole of Tahrir Square.”

Umm Mohammed, a protester in her 50s, said she was fed up with the political class.

“We have already tested them and we no longer want them,” she said.

“We want a prime minister who comes from the people, someone who is protesting here with us.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq protests](#)

Iraqi lawmaker gets six years for corruption
Iraqi state forces ‘complicit’ in massacre of Baghdad protesters

[Egypt’s sovereign fund to revamp](#)

historic area under citadel

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1576694746150538700

Wed, 2019-12-18 18:37

CAIRO: Egypt approved a plan on Wednesday to turn over an abandoned historic area under Cairo's towering 12th-century Islamic citadel to its new sovereign wealth fund to develop for tourism and culture, a cabinet statement said.

The 56,000-square-meter Bab Al-Azab area lies within the citadel's walls behind the ornate Azab gate, built in 1754. It contains early-19th-century warehouses, some with traditional wind scoops for cooling ventilation, built by the Ottoman ruler of Egypt at the time, Mohamed Ali.

"The aim of the project is to revive the area so that visitors find fun and entertainment by creating a mixed-use cultural center," the statement quoted Antiquities Minister Khaled Al-Anani as saying.

The area, controlled by the Antiquities Ministry, will be leased to the fund to develop and operate under a 49-year concession. Final approval depended on a more detailed plan, including finances, Anani said.

The preliminary proposal includes spaces for a museum, a spice market, a plaza for traditional foods, a crafts market, hotels, shops, a performances and events center and a hammam.

The citadel was built by Salah Al-Din, also known as Saladin, a Muslim warrior who wrested control of Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the late 12th century.

An ancient path through the concessionary area, from Bab Al-Azab to the citadel, was the site of a famous massacre in 1811 of Mamluk officers by Mohamed Ali that allowed him to consolidate his control of Egypt.

Ayman Soliman, CEO of the Sovereign Fund of Egypt, told Reuters last week that the fund was looking to Egyptian businessman Samih Sawiris, chairman of Orascom Development Holding, to help develop the area. Between them they plan to invest 2 billion Egyptian pounds (\$125 million) in the project.

"It is a very old and neglected area. It has been used for storage, Islamic art storage, military museum storage," Soliman said. "They've erected ugly warehouse buildings there so it impacts lots of land. So now we're going to clean it up."

He said they would remove the modern construction and restore what remains of the historical buildings and walls.

The new sovereign fund says it plans to take control of some of the government's most promising assets in industries such as power and real estate, to bring in private investors to develop them.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Egypt](#)

[Cairo](#)

[Bab Al-Azab](#)

For \$250,000 you, too, can be an Egyptian Egyptian officials unveil new archaeological finds

[Saad Hariri rules out returning as Lebanon's PM](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1576672675828785800

Wed, 2019-12-18 12:26

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Saad Al-Hariri said on Wednesday he was not a candidate to be prime minister of a new government, leaving no obvious alternative to head a cabinet that must tackle the worst economic crisis since the 1975-90 civil

war.

Hariri, the outgoing prime minister and Lebanon's leading Sunni politician, made the statement on the eve of formal consultations to designate the new prime minister, a post reserved for a Sunni in Lebanon's sectarian system. The consultations have been postponed twice already.

"I announce that I will not be a candidate to form the coming government," Hariri said in a statement.

"I am heading tomorrow to take part in the consultations ... on this basis, insisting that they not be delayed for any reason," he said.

Hariri did not say who he would nominate for the post in the consultations which President Michel Aoun is due to host on Thursday. Aoun, a Maronite Christian, is required to designate the candidate with the most support among Lebanon's 128 MPs.

The only candidate with the support of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim religious establishment, Hariri had appeared the only candidate for the job earlier this week despite political tension with adversaries including Aoun.

But the picture was complicated when the Christian Lebanese Forces said it would name neither Hariri nor anyone else in the consultations, meaning his candidacy would not enjoy the support of either of Lebanon's two main Christian parties.

Hariri resigned as prime minister on Oct. 29, prompted by protests against a political elite accused of overseeing rampant state corruption.

Meanwhile, Lebanon increased security around protest centers in central Beirut Wednesday, after several nights of violence disrupted two months of largely peaceful anti-government demonstrations.

Barricades were erected overnight to block or control access to protest sites in the capital where counter demonstrators have previously tried to attack protesters, AFP journalists said.

An officer who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity said the concrete barriers were intended to help security forces better control the sites and prevent further clashes.

After violence between protesters and security forces in Beirut on Saturday and Sunday night, and between counter demonstrators and police on Monday night, the capital remained calm on Tuesday.

But tensions were recorded elsewhere in the country, as Lebanon awaits scheduled parliamentary meetings to name a new premier on Thursday, a required step to form a cabinet.

The unprecedented protests started on Oct. 17 against a political elite deemed inept and corrupt. Protesters demand a complete overhaul of the ruling class and a new government formed of independent experts.

On Tuesday night, young supporters of the Shiite Amal movement threw stones at anti-government protesters in the southern Shiite stronghold of Nabatieh, a witness said.

Unknown perpetrators set fire to a Christmas tree in the northern city of Tripoli, an AFP correspondent said.

On Monday night, dozens of supporters of the country's two main Shiite political parties set fire to cars and clashed with security forces trying to prevent them from reaching Beirut's main protest square.

Pressure to form a new government is compounded by the near collapse of the economy, already weakened by years of political deadlock and the impact of the eight-year-old war in neighboring Syria.

The World Bank estimates that Lebanon is in recession, and has warned that the number living in poverty could increase from a third to half the population.

(With AFP and Reuters)



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Saad Al-Hariri](#)

[Saad Hariri](#)

[Lebanon protests](#)

New protests in Lebanon as probe begins into 10-hour 'battle of Beirut'54 injured as Lebanese security forces and Hezbollah supporters clash in central Beirut

[UN Security Council set for showdown over Syria cross-border aid deliveries](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1576663128378179200

Tue, 2019-12-17 23:55

UNITED NATIONS: For the past six years the United Nations and other aid groups have been crossing into Syria from Turkey, Iraq and Jordan at four places authorized by the UN Security Council to deliver humanitarian assistance to millions of people.

The 15-member council is aiming to extend approval for those operations this week, which UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres describes as essential. Russia, however, wants to cut the number of border crossings in half.

A resolution drafted by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany proposes increasing the authorized border crossings to five – by adding a third from Turkey – but Russia has put forward a rival text that would only approve current operations at two Turkish crossings.

When asked on Tuesday if Russia could veto the draft resolution by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany, Russian UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia described that text as “unacceptable and inviable.”

“If it so happens that our draft does not pass, this will mean that the mechanism that we have proposed to extend will not be extended,” he told reporters.

A resolution needs nine votes to pass and no vetoes by Russia, China, the United States, France or Britain. Last year Russia and China abstained in the council vote to extend approval for the cross-border humanitarian aid deliveries.

Russia has vetoed 13 council resolutions on Syria since a crackdown by Syrian President Bashar Assad on pro-democracy protesters in 2011 led to civil war. Daesh militants then used the chaos to seize territory in Syria and Iraq. In a joint statement on Tuesday, Belgium, Kuwait and Germany and their seven elected counterparts on the Security Council expressed support for their draft resolution.

“The consequences of a non-renewal of the mechanism would be disastrous,” the 10 Security Council members, who are each serving two year terms, said. “This is a mechanism that enables life-saving assistance to reach 4 million people in Syria.”

In a Dec. 16 report to the Council, Guterres urged members to extend authorization of the cross-border aid deliveries.

“This aid has staved off an even larger humanitarian crisis inside Syria,” Guterres wrote.

“While I welcome ongoing efforts to scale up humanitarian assistance delivered from inside the Syrian Arab Republic, I reiterate that the United Nations does not have an alternative means of reaching people in the areas in which cross-border assistance is being provided,” he said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[UN Security Council](#)

[United Nations](#)

[UN](#)

[Syria](#)

Russia, Syrian regime enter troubled waters of East MedRussia to invest \$500m in Syrian port, build grain hub -Interfax