

Hariri and Aoun trade blame as PM candidate's withdrawal plunges Lebanon further into crisis

Sun, 2019-11-17 17:10

BEIRUT: Lebanon's outgoing prime minister blasted the party of the country's president on Sunday after the withdrawal of a top candidate to replace him plunged the country into further turmoil.

Mohammad Safadi, a former finance minister, withdrew his candidacy late on Saturday, saying it was too difficult to form a "harmonious" government with broad political support.

Safadi was the first candidate who had appeared to win some consensus among Lebanon's fractious sectarian-based parties since Saad Hariri quit as prime minister on Oct. 29, pushed out by sweeping protests against the ruling elite

Opinion

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

The withdrawal of Safadi narrowed the chances of creating a government needed to enact urgent reforms.

Reflecting the brittle political climate, President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) accused Hariri of undermining Safadi's bid in order to keep the job for himself.

"Saad (al-Hariri) is delaying things with the goal of burning all the names and emerging as the saviour," said a source familiar with the FPM's view.

A statement by Hariri's office rejected the FPM assertion as an irresponsible attempt to "score points" despite Lebanon's "major national crisis".

Faced by the worst financial strains since a 1975-1990 civil war, Lebanon has pledged urgent reforms it hopes will convince donors to disburse some \$11 billion pledged last year.

The unrest has kept banks shut for most of the last month. They have imposed controls on transfers abroad and US dollar withdrawals, and the pegged Lebanese pound is under pressure on an informal market.

Safadi became the presumed front-runner for prime minister after a meeting between Hariri, a Sunni politician, and Shiite groups Hezbollah and Amal, according to political sources and Lebanese media, but no political force later endorsed him.

Lebanon's prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, according to its sectarian power-sharing system.

Protesters who have filled the streets since Oct. 17 hit out at the choice of Safadi, a prominent businessman and longtime politician they said was part of the elite they sought to oust.

"We are in a deadlock now. I don't know when it will move again. It is not easy," said a senior political source. "The financial situation doesn't tolerate any delay."

A second political source described efforts to form a new government as "back to square one."

Safadi's withdrawal leaves the powerful, Iran-backed Hezbollah and its allies with even fewer options unless they push for a close Sunni ally, a scenario that would likely reduce the chances of Lebanon winning international support. Hezbollah is classified as a terrorist group by the United States and many other countries.

Hezbollah and Amal, along with Aoun, a Maronite Christian, have sought for Hariri to return as premier while including both technocrats and politicians in a new cabinet.

But Hariri, who is aligned with Gulf Arab states and the West, has said he will only return as prime minister if he is able to form a cabinet composed entirely of specialists capable of attracting the international support.

Global ratings agency S&P flashed the latest warning on Lebanon's debt-saddled economy on Friday, lowering its foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings deeper into junk territory to 'CCC/C' from 'B-/B'.

Lebanon's bank staff said they would continue a nationwide strike on Monday that has kept banks shut. The strike is over safety fears as depositors demand access to their money. Union members are set to meet on Monday to discuss a security plan to keep branches safe.



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Artists take a stand in Lebanon's peaceful uprising
Medics protest economic crisis in Lebanon

[Khamenei dismisses deadly protests sweeping Iran, hundreds arrested in crackdown](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2019-11-17 11:43

TEHRAN: Iran's supreme leader on Sunday threw his support behind a decision

to hike petrol prices, a move that sparked nationwide unrest in which he said “some lost their lives.”

A policeman was killed in the western city of Kermanshah in a clash with armed “rioters”, the second confirmed death since protests erupted across Iran on Friday.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei blamed “hooligans” for damaging property despite widespread anger at the increases and as Iranians suffer from the country’s economic woes.

WATCH: Thousands of protesters march in Shiraz on Saturday as part of protests that erupted on Friday in response to a sharp increase in fuel prices [#IranProtests](https://t.co/9vI7rAU8IC) <https://t.co/9vI7rAU8IC>
[pic.twitter.com/gBRFi3N002](https://t.co/9vI7rAU8IC)

– Arab News (@arabnews) [November 17, 2019](https://t.co/9vI7rAU8IC)

Several people were also wounded and dozens arrested in two days of demonstrations that saw motorists block highways and others attack and set fire to public property.

In a speech aired on state television, Khamenei said “some lost their lives and some centres were damaged”.

The White House on Sunday condemned Iran for using “lethal force” against the demonstrators.

“The United States supports the Iranian people in their peaceful protests against the regime that is supposed to lead them,” White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said.

[#IranProtests](https://t.co/4oSuAUwzRp): University of Tehran. They are chanting: Oil income has been lost, [cuz] it has been spent on Basiji (Basij: The paramilitary arm of the IRGC) <https://t.co/4oSuAUwzRp>

– Bahman Kalbasi (@BahmanKalbasi) [November 17, 2019](https://t.co/4oSuAUwzRp)

State news agency IRNA said the protests struck more than 100 Iranian cities and towns. Iran’s semi-official Fars news agency said 1,000 protesters had

been arrested and 100 banks torched.

The protests flared hours after it was announced that the price of petrol would be raised by 50 percent for the first 60 litres (16 gallons) and by 300 percent for anything above that each month.

It is a rise many consumers can ill afford, given that Iran's economy has been battered since May last year when President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from a 2015 nuclear agreement and reimposed crippling sanctions.

The rial has plummeted, inflation is running at more than 40 percent and the International Monetary Fund expects Iran's economy to contract by 9.5 percent this year and stagnate in 2020.

The petrol pricing plan was agreed by the High Council of Economic Coordination made up of the president, parliament speaker and judiciary chief.

Confirmed: [#Iran](#) is now in the midst of a near-total national internet shutdown; realtime network data show connectivity at 7% of ordinary levels after twelve hours of progressive network disconnections as public protests continue [#IranProtests](#)

<https://t.co/1Al0DT8an1> pic.twitter.com/u6bVsfv00m

– NetBlocks.org (@netblocks) [November 16, 2019](#)

Khamenei said that “I am not an expert and there are different opinions but I had said that if the heads of the three branches make a decision I will support it.

“The heads of the branches made a decision with the backing of expert opinion and naturally it must be implemented,” he said.

“Some people would definitely get upset over this decision... but damaging and setting fire (to property) is not something (normal) people would do. It is hooligans.”

Opinion

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Following his speech, parliament cancelled a motion to reverse the price hike, semi-official news agency ISNA reported.

Some of the worst violence was in the central city of Sirjan, where acting governor Mohammad Mahmoudabadi said a civilian was killed and fuel stations were among the public property attacked and damaged.

In Kermanshah, a policeman died Sunday, a day after a "confrontation with a number of rioters and thugs," the provincial police chief told IRNA.

In Tehran on Saturday, protesters were seen shouting slogans and burning tyres on a street.

Similar scenes were witnessed in the cities of Shiraz, Isfahan and Bushehr, where security forces fired tear gas and water cannon at demonstrators.

Forty "disruptors" were arrested in the central city of Yazd after clashing with police, the province's public prosecutor told ISNA on Sunday. Most were not locals, he added.

Police said security forces would "not hesitate to confront those disrupting peace and security and will identify the ringleaders and field forces and confront them".

The intelligence ministry said those behind the unrest "have been identified" and that measures would be taken against them, according to ISNA.

Access to the internet has been restricted since the demonstrations broke out.

Netblocks, an internet monitoring website, said late Saturday the country was in the grip of a shutdown.

"Confirmed: Iran is now in the midst of a near-total national internet shutdown; realtime network data show connectivity at 7% of ordinary levels after twelve hours of progressive network disconnections," it said on Twitter.

It came after a decision by the Supreme National Security Council, according to a report by ISNA on Sunday.

"Upon the decision of the Security Council of Iran and communicated to internet operators, access to internet has been limited as of last night and for 24 hours," it said, quoting what it called an informed source at the information and communications technology ministry.



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Internet restricted in protest-hit Iran: report

[Artists take a stand in Lebanon's peaceful uprising](#)

Sat, 2019-11-16 22:59

BEIRUT: Cries were heard in the town of Khaldeh, south of Beirut, on the night of Nov. 12. They were different from the sounds that have become the background noise of the Lebanese Revolution.

A soldier had killed Alaa Abou Fakher, a local official from the Progressive Socialist Party headed by Walid Jumblatt, a political leader of Lebanon's Druze community, marking the third death in 27 consecutive days of protests.

The killing has escalated tensions that were already running high amid a nationwide protest movement that started off as a reaction to proposed new taxes before morphing into a veritable "people power" movement.

Protesters are demanding changes to Lebanon's sectarian system of government, calls that have prompted the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and will likely lead to more departures.

Meanwhile, what blankets the revolution's walls of Martyrs' Square; the ring (the tunnel linking west Beirut to east Beirut); the ESCWA (the UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia) boundary wall; the area next to Parliament; throughout Tripoli; and in countless other places is another form of protest: Art.

"The art we were trying to express has documented almost all the incidents of the revolution so far, day by day," said Said Fouad Mahmoud, a graffiti artist who has been practicing for 11 years. "Some people are good with speech, others with song, and we raise our voices with drawings. I drew pictures of the moments that affected me the most: The role of the female in the revolution; the guy cleaning with one leg; and the first day of the revolution, with the flag and the fire."



FARAHN.HAMDAN
INSPIRED BY
IVAN DEBS

فرح حمدان

Graffiti by Said Fouad Mahmoud. (Supplied)

Many of the progressive-graffiti-laden walls fall under the umbrella of Iman Nasreddine Assaf's Art of Change initiative, which she founded in May in partnership with local Beirut-based NGO Ahla Fawda and UK-based Where There's Walls.

"Our purpose is to promote urban art to more than just the graffiti scene in order to spread important messages throughout the community," said Assaf. "Our revolution walls are in support of, and part of, the demonstration and revolution. They are expressing people's pain and demands and the impact has been strong. Art is the international language that touches all."

Art has emerged as a favored medium of the revolutionaries to convey their political message. To this end, Art of Thawra (Art of Revolution), an Instagram page, is collecting and showcasing relevant artworks produced during the 2019 protests.

"There's been a drastic increase in street art during this revolution," said Mahmoud. "People are trying to send messages through their paintings. The art indicates how civilized people have been during the protests and how peaceful the revolution has been until now. I hope it will remain peaceful until the end. If it does, then it means art played a major role in this revolution because art is peace in itself."

Lebanon's contemporary art community has issued numerous statements regarding the closures of spaces, programs and exhibitions as artists, curators, and gallerists participate in protests for non-sectarian unity. Beirut's art community had just assembled for the Home Works event when the protests began on Oct. 17.

The message from the organizers, Ashkal Alwan, postponing the event stated: "Artistic and cultural institutions and initiatives are in no way isolated from broader civic, political, economic, and ideological context but rather shaped as a result of and in response to historical events and their repercussions."

On Oct. 25 the Beirut Art Center sent out a similar statement: "In solidarity with and participation in the popular uprisings taking place across Lebanon against the current systems of power, we the undersigned cultural organizations and structures collectively commit to Open Strike, and call for our colleagues in the cultural sector to join us."

Another artistic expression of solidarity is visible at leading Lebanese art dealer Saleh Barakat's space in the Clemenceau area of Beirut. On Nov. 8 he opened a show featuring an installation by Palestinian Beirut-based artist Abdul Rahman Katanani.



Graffiti by Said Fouad Mahmoud. (Supplied)

A series of temporary abodes made using painted scrap metal and wood, and surrounded by barbed wire – much like the surroundings of the Sabra refugee camp where the artist lives – were stationed throughout the gallery.

Katanani's immersive and precarious installation, on view until Jan. 4, asks the question: What future awaits Lebanon?

"Many are now trying to figure out a good balance between getting their work done and participating in the public upheaval," said Basel Dalloul, founder and director of the Dalloul Foundation. "Cultural production in all its forms can and will be one of the economic drivers of a future Lebanon."

Ayman Baalbaki, one of Lebanon's most recognized painters, "is not involved in creating art right now," said Barakat. "He is going to all of the protests and is completely involved in the need for political change."

The design duo David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem, whose studio goes by the name David/Nicolas, said in a statement: "What's happening today is very important for all of us Lebanese who would like a brighter and honest future where corruption is not surrounding us.

"We are trying to work but it is not easy. Right now we are focused on how we can help our country.

"On the other hand, creativity is stronger because the revolution gives you such a push.

"Most places are closed and open spontaneously. Thank goodness for social media, so that we can show what we are doing to the world."

Marwan Sahmarani, a Lebanese painter known for his bold abstract canvases replete with their gestural brushstrokes and vibrant coloring, noted the difficulty of working during a time of turmoil.

"It's a disturbing moment for everyone," he said. "There are many feelings, good and bad. I divide my time when needed between my studio and the street. But what do I paint that can be relevant now and not fall into a journalistic rendering of current events?"

Individuals in the creative scene have joined hands in camaraderie to produce several initiatives in solidarity with the protesters. One is Nour Al-Thawra, staged by Sara Beydoun, founder of Lebanese fashion house and social enterprise Sara's Bag, and her friend Mariana Wehbe.

On the evening of Nov. 6, a group of Lebanese women gathered in Martyrs' Square, each carrying a lighted candle. "Let's light a candle for the strength we have shown and the resilience that will never die," wrote Beydoun on her Instagram account. "Bring a candle and your peaceful prayer and let's combine all of our strengths to light up Martyrs' Square."

Beydoun told Arab News: "We all want one thing – the Lebanon we dream of."

Wehbe agreed. "Sarah and I have been on the ground since day one," she said. "Like every Lebanese woman from this revolution, each one of us is trying to find her way to help, support and move this forward."

The candle-bearing crowd of women, which the pair turned into a moving video that went viral, was driven by the need to create a "peaceful symbolic prayer."

"It was a prayer for our country, for our future, for unity, no matter where you come from and what your religious beliefs are," said Wehbe. "It is a symbol of unity and protection for love, compassion and for our home, Lebanon."







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[Egypt to reduce subsidised staple food prices](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2019-11-16 14:53

CAIRO: Egypt is to reduce the prices of subsidised food staples from next month, the supply ministry spokesman said Saturday, as the country's economy shows signs of recovery.

"Prices of cooking oil, sugar, rice and flour will be reduced starting the first of December," said spokesman Ahmed Kamal.

He said the measures aimed to make goods available "in suitable quantities and prices".

Last month, the government reinstated 1.8 million Egyptians to a food subsidy programme as instructed by President Abdel Fatah El-Sisi.

Also in October, fuel prices were cut by 25 piastres (0.015 US cents) a litre following several rounds of price hikes under a tough austerity programme that triggered popular discontent.

The measures came after rare and small-scale protests in September calling for El-Sisi's removal after an exiled Egyptian businessman accused the president and top military brass of corruption.

Harsh austerity measures introduced by El-Sisi's government since he took office in 2014 have hit poor and middle-class Egyptians.

Nearly one in three Egyptians lives below the poverty line, according to official figures released in July.

The tough reforms including subsidy cuts and a devaluation of the local currency were tied to a three-year \$12-billion bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund secured in 2016.

The IMF loan was disbursed in full earlier this year, in a boost for the economy.

Egypt's economy was sent into a downward spiral by the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak and has also been hit by extremist attacks that damaged its vital tourism sector.

But the official statistics agency said inflation fell to its lowest level in nearly a decade last month, easing to 2.4 percent compared with 17.5 percent a year earlier.



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Egyptian woman fights unequal inheritance laws UAE, Egypt plan \$20 bln spending on social, economic projects

[Lebanese police to boost security near banks amid unrest](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2019-11-16 11:43

BEIRUT: Lebanese security forces will boost measures near the country's banks that have been closed for more than a week over fears by employees for their safety amid nationwide unrest, police said Saturday.

Police said in a statement that there will be more patrols near banks and two policemen will be stationed outside every branch.

Lebanon's financial troubles have worsened since mass protests began on Oct. 17 over a plunging economy, and snowballed into calls for the entire political elite to step down.

An Interior Ministry statement said police commander Maj. Gen. Imad Othman met with banking officials and they agreed to take the measure "in order to guarantee the work of this vital sector."

Banks reopened Nov. 1 after a two-week closure because of the mass anti-government protests. But depositors have rushed to withdraw their money while lenders imposed varying capital controls, adding to the turmoil.

In some banks, customers insulted employees after they were told they cannot withdraw as much money as they want. The banks closed again on Nov. 9, and employees have been on strike since then.

Lebanon is passing through its worst economic and financial crisis in decades. The small Arab country is one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world and was already dealing with a severe fiscal crisis before the protests began, one rooted in years of heavy borrowing and expensive patronage networks run by entrenched political parties.

The Lebanese pound is trading at up to 1,900 to the dollar on the black market, a devaluation of nearly 30% from the official rate that has been fixed since 1997.

Confidence in the Lebanese economy received another blow late Friday night when Standard & Poor's downgraded the country's credit ratings to 'CCC/C' from 'B-/B'.

The agency said the outlook for Lebanon is negative in what "reflects the risk to the sovereign's creditworthiness from rising financial and monetary pressures tied to widespread protests and the resignation of the government." Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned his government on Oct. 29, meeting a key demand of the protesters. Since then President Michel Aoun has failed to call for consultations with heads of parliamentary blocs to name a new premier, raising concerns that the formation of a new Cabinet could be delayed.

"Recent temporary but prolonged bank closures and unofficial foreign currency transfer restrictions raise questions about the sustainability of the exchange rate regime, further eroding confidence," S&P warned.



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S&P downgrades protest-hit LebanonMedics protest economic crisis in Lebanon