

Retired Lebanese soldiers in tense standoff with army during benefit cuts protest

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BEIRUT: Retired Lebanese soldiers on Friday came close to clashing with the country's army when weeks of protests over planned benefit cuts reached boiling point in the capital Beirut.

Dressed in military uniforms, large numbers of veterans attempted to force their way through barricades set up to stop demonstrators reaching the city's parliament building where a final vote on a controversial draft austerity budget was taking place.

A military source told Arab News that the Lebanese army leadership had decided to block access to Najma Square, in Beirut's Central District, where Parliament members were sitting.

But former soldiers, joined by the parents of army martyrs and activists from the Sabaa and Communist parties, surrounded the building in nearby streets before attempting to push through barbed wire, concrete and metal barriers erected by the Lebanese army and the Internal Security Forces.

The protesters, waving Lebanese and army flags, got as far as the entrance to Maarad Street, on which Parliament is located, putting them in direct confrontation with the Lebanese troops.

Ten brigades of reinforcements were drafted in to help push back the veterans before protest leaders eased tensions by calling for a retreat to a nearby square to avoid any further clashes.

The meeting to vote on the 2019 draft budget came after a marathon three days of discussions. Before entering the parliamentary session, Lebanese Minister of Defense Elias Bou Saab said that "misleading the retired soldiers" would be "harmful to the image and demands of the protesters" and called on them to carry out "peaceful demonstrations." He added that there had been mixed and confused messages regarding benefit cuts.

However, retired Brig. Gen. Georges Nader had vowed that protesters would not back off until the vote on their benefits was dropped.

Discussing the protests in Parliament, Samy Gemayel, president of the Phalange party, objected to the reduction in the army budget, to which Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said: "This has been concluded on the bases of an understanding with the army and the military establishment."

MP Paula Yacoubian said that "retired soldiers are trying to storm Parliament," to which Berri said: "Those who want to storm Parliament have not yet been born."

The row had centered on a controversial article concerning amendments to the country's income tax act, and Lebanese Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil insisted on defending it. He said: "It does not cost the retired soldiers,

for instance, more than 3,000 Lebanese pounds (\$2) per month. This amount rises to 400,000 pounds for brigadiers.” He added: “Which country in the world gives a retiree 85 percent of his salary?” After a meeting between the minister and Nader in Parliament, the retired brigadier general went out to reassure the veterans that cuts from their salaries in respect of medicine and income tax would be reduced. Less intense protests continued for more than three hours before Parliament approved the relevant article in the budget. Meanwhile, Berri had started the Parliament session by reading a resignation submitted by Hezbollah MP Nawaf Musawi.







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Crackdown on thousands of Syrian refugees with illegal jobs in Lebanon
Don't ruin summer, Lebanon tourism minister pleads after shootout

[Iran seizes British tanker in Strait of Hormuz, UK government calls emergency meeting](#)

Fri, 2019-07-19 21:03

TEHRAN: Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps announced on Friday they had confiscated a British tanker in the strategic Strait of Hormuz for breaking "international maritime rules," while a US official told CNN that Iran had seized a second tanker, the British-owned, Liberian-flagged MV Mesdar, according to reports.

The Stena Impero tanker “was confiscated by the Revolutionary Guards at the request of Hormozgan Ports and Maritime Organisation when passing through the strait of Hormuz, for failing to respect international maritime rules,” the Guards’ official website Sepahnews announced.

The UK government convened an emergency COBRA meeting to formulate its response and a foreign ministry spokesperson said: “We are urgently seeking further information and assessing the situation following reports of an incident in the Gulf.”

Prime Minister Theresa May’s office declined to comment.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office relayed a statement from foreign minister Jeremy Hunt, in which he appeared to confirm the seizure of a second vessel. He said: “I’m extremely concerned by the seizure of two vessels by Iranian authorities in the Strait of Hormuz.

“I will shortly attend a COBRA meeting to review what we know and what we can do to swiftly secure the release of the two vessels – a British-flagged vessel and a Liberian-flagged vessel

“Their crews comprise a range of nationalities, but we understand there are no British citizens on board either ship.

“Our Ambassador in Tehran is in contact with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to resolve the situation and we are working closely with international partners.

“These seizures are unacceptable. It is essential that freedom of navigation is maintained and that all ships can move safely and freely in the region.”

Arab News contacted Col. Robert Stewart, Conservative MP and former UN commander in Bosnia, who said that the UK government would have to “look at all the options” in its response to Iran’s behaviour, adding that Iran’s actions were an escalation too far, “of course.”

Refinitiv data showed the Stena Impero was a British-flagged vessel owned by Stena Bulk. It showed the vessel’s destination as the Saudi port of Jubail on the Gulf.



A file photo of the Stena Impero from May 2019. (Basil M. Karatzas, Karatzas Images via AP)

The map tracking the ship's course showed it veering off course with a sharp turn north at about 15:17 GMT on Friday and heading towards the Iranian coast.

Meanwhile, the head of the UK Chamber of Shipping said on Friday that further protection must be provided for merchant vessels after the seizure.

"We condemn unreservedly the capture of Stena Impero as she transited the Strait of Hormuz earlier today," the Chamber's chief executive, Bob Sanguinetti, said in a statement.

"This incident represents an escalation. Whilst we call for measured response, it is also clear that further protection for merchant vessels must be forthcoming to ensure enhanced security to guarantee free flow of trade in the region."

The Stena company responsible for the ship also released a statement, which read: "Stena Bulk and Northern Marine Management can confirm that at approximately 1600 BST on 19th July, UK registered vessel Stena Impero (built 2018, 49,683 DWT) was approached by unidentified small crafts and a helicopter during transit of the Strait of Hormuz while the vessel was in international waters. We are presently unable to contact the vessel which is now heading north towards Iran.



"There are 23 seafarers aboard. There have been no reported injuries and their safety is of primary concern to both owners and managers. The priority of both vessel owner Stena Bulk and ship manager Northern Marine Management is the safety and welfare of the crew.

Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei earlier this month accused the UK of "piracy" after the Royal Marines and Gibraltar police seized a tanker believed to be carrying Iranian crude oil to Syria on July 5, and the Iranian government has demanded its immediate release.

The ship was detained on suspicion it was breaking European sanctions by taking oil to Syria.

(With Agencies)



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Gibraltar court extends detention of Iranian tanker for 30 days
Gibraltar had "positive" meeting with Iran over seized Grace 1 tanker

[Israel spyware firm can mine data from social media: FT](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-07-19 17:29

JERUSALEM: An Israeli spyware firm thought to have hacked WhatsApp in the past has told clients it can scoop user data from the world's top social media, the Financial Times reported Friday.

The London paper wrote that NSO group had "told buyers its technology can surreptitiously scrape all of an individual's data from the servers of Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft, according to people familiar with its sales pitch."

An NSO spokesperson, responding in a written statement to AFP's request for comment, denied the allegation.

"There is a fundamental misunderstanding of NSO, its services and technology," it said.

"NSO's products do not provide the type of collection capabilities and access to cloud applications, services, or infrastructure as listed and suggested in today's FT article."

In May, Facebook-owned WhatsApp said it had released an update to plug a security hole in its messaging app that allowed insertion of sophisticated spyware that could be used to spy on journalists, activists and others.

It said the attack bore "all the hallmarks of a private company that works with a number of governments around the world."

It did not name a suspect but Washington-based analyst Joseph Hall, chief technologist at the Center for Democracy and Technology, said at the time that the hack appeared related to the NSO's Pegasus software.

It is normally sold to law enforcement and intelligence services.

Friday's FT report, citing documents it had viewed and descriptions of a product demonstration, said the program had "evolved to capture the much greater trove of information stored beyond the phone in the cloud, such as a full history of a target's location data, archived messages or photos."

NSO says it does not operate the Pegasus system, only licensing it to closely vetted government users "for the sole purpose of preventing or investigating

serious crime including terrorism.”

The group came under the spotlight in 2016 when researchers accused it of helping spy on an activist in the United Arab Emirates.

NSO is based in the Israeli seaside hi-tech hub of Herzliya, near Tel Aviv. It says it employs 600 people in Israel and around the world.

Pegasus is a highly invasive tool that can reportedly switch on a target’s cell phone camera and microphone, and access data on it, effectively turning the phone into a pocket spy.

“Increasingly sophisticated terrorists and criminals are taking advantage of encrypted technologies to plan and conceal their crimes, leaving intelligence and law enforcement agencies in the dark and putting public safety and national security at risk,” the company statement said.

“NSO’s lawful interception products are designed to confront this challenge.”



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Israel touts air defense system to South Korea
Israeli court halts park entry ban deemed racist by Arab citizens

[Egypt: At least 20 killed in airstrikes in northern Sinai](#)

Fri, 2019-07-19 18:24

EL-ARISH: Egyptian security officials say airstrikes targeting militants are underway in the restive northern Sinai Peninsula, killing at least 20 insurgents.

Officials said that Egypt's air force on Friday hit more than 100 mountainous hideouts of militant groups in the city of El-Arish and the small town of Bir Al-Abd. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

The airstrikes come on the heels of a suicide bombing attack that left two killed, including a soldier and a civilian Thursday in the northern Sinai town of Sheikh Zuweid.

A day earlier, militants beheaded four people and kidnapped a fifth in Bir Al-Abd, after accusing them of cooperating with security forces.

Daesh claimed responsibility for both attacks.



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Daesh claims suicide bombing that killed 2 in Egypt's Sinai
Egypt officials say roadside bomb wounds 6 police in Sinai

US puts sanctions on Hezbollah leader suspected of masterminding Buenos Aires 1994 attack

Fri, 2019-07-19 17:00

WASHINGTON: The US on Friday imposed financial sanctions on a Hezbollah leader suspected of masterminding the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in Buenos Aires that killed 85 people.

The US Treasury sanctions freeze any assets of Salman Raouf Salman for acting for or on behalf of Hezbollah, while the State Department is offering a \$7 million reward for information on his location.

Salman "coordinated a devastating attack in Buenos Aires, Argentina against the largest Jewish center in South America 25 years ago and has directed terrorist operations in the Western Hemisphere for Hezbollah ever since," said Sigal Mandelker, the US Treasury's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.

The action by the Treasury Department falls on the 25th anniversary of an attack Salman is said to have coordinated on the center in Argentina's capital. The attack killed 85 people and wounded hundreds of others. The Treasury's action freezes all assets that Salman has within U.S. jurisdiction. The Treasury said Salman is also accused of planning other terror attacks abroad from a base in Lebanon.

On Thursday, Argentina's government branded Hezbollah a terrorist organization and froze its assets.



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Pence announces sanctions on Iranian-linked leaders in Iraq
Unidentified aircraft targets IRGC and Hezbollah military camp in Iraq