

Lebanese leaders agree new government breaking months of deadlock

Thu, 2019-01-31 19:06

BEIRUT: Lebanese leaders reached a deal on Thursday to set up a new unity government ending months of wrangling that has added to concerns for the heavily indebted state.

Prime Minister-designate Saad Al-Hariri now faces a big challenge in delivering reforms needed to address the dire public finances and unlock billions of dollars in pledged aid and loans to boost low growth.

The new government will include most of Lebanon's rival factions, who have been negotiating over the make-up of the cabinet since a May 6 election in which allies of the Iran-backed Hezbollah group gained ground.

The government will be announced on Thursday, the sources said, as Hariri met President Michel Aoun at the presidential palace in Baabda. Media reports said he was later joined by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

A senior official said Ali Hassan Khalil will stay on as finance minister, and a source familiar with the government formation talks said Hezbollah had chosen doctor Jamil Jabak, who is not a member of the group, as health minister.

By picking the health minister, the heavily armed Hezbollah will be moving beyond the more marginal role it has played in past governments: the ministry has the fourth-biggest budget in the state apparatus, the outgoing minister has said.

The United States regards Hezbollah as a terrorist organization and has put new sanctions on the group as part of a campaign against Iran.

Since the election, Hariri's last government, appointed in late 2016, has continued in a caretaker capacity.

Hariri lost more than a third of his lawmakers in the election but kept his status as the leading Sunni Muslim and so returns as premier, a position reserved for his sect under Lebanon's sectarian system of rule.

But the election produced a parliament tilted in favor of Hezbollah thanks to gains by groups and individuals that support its possession of a major arsenal. Together, they won more than 70 of the 128 seats.

While Lebanon's economy and financial system have shown resilience during previous periods of political paralysis, investor concerns have been reflected of late in bond prices and the costs of insuring against debt default.

Hariri, speaking earlier on Thursday, said the new government would be forced to "take difficult decisions" to reduce spending.



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Lebanese minister's tweet suggests formation of new govtLebanon urges return of refugees to Syria

[Arab coalition to use “calibrated force” to drive Houthis out of Hodeidah: Gargash](#)

Author:

daniel fountain

ID:

1548880618930498200

Wed, 2019-01-30 23:46

DUBAI: The Arab coalition is prepared to use “calibrated force” to push the Iranian-backed Houthi militia to withdraw from Yemen’s Hodeidah port city under a UN-sponsored deal, the UAE’s minister for foreign affairs said on Wednesday.

Yemen’s warring parties have failed to pull troops from the country’s main port under a month-old truce, reviving the threat of an all-out assault on Hodeidah that could unleash further famine.

The Houthis control Hodeidah while Yemeni government factions backed by the coalition trying to restore the internationally recognized government are massed on its outskirts.

Gargash said the coalition struck 10 Houthi training camps outside Hodeidah governorate on Wednesday.

“The Coalition us prepared to use more calibrated force to prod Houthi compliance with Stockholm Agreement,” he tweeted.

“To preserve cease-fire & any hope for political process, UN and international community must press Houthis to stop violations, facilitate aid convoys, and move forward on withdrawal from Hodaida city & ports as agreed,” he added.

UN envoy Martin Griffiths has been shuttling between the parties to rescue the deal, the first major diplomatic breakthrough of the nearly four-year-old war that has killed tens of thousands of people and pushed Yemen to the verge of starvation.

Gargash tweeted: “Houthi militia hinder the mission of observers and are preventing relief ships from entering the port.”



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[US security aid to Palestinians ends today; envoys seek workaround](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-30 22:29

RAMALLAH: US security aid for the Palestinian Authority was set to dry up on Thursday after it declined the money over concerns it could increase its exposure to US anti-terrorism lawsuits.

The loss of the some \$60 million in annual funding would mark another tear in ties between the Trump administration and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and potentially undermines his security cooperation with Israel in the occupied West Bank.

Diplomatic sources said Palestinian, US and Israeli officials were seeking a way to keep the money flowing despite Abbas’s decision to turn it down as of a Jan. 31 deadline set by Congress’ Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA) of

2018.

The Act empowers Americans to sue foreign aid recipients in US courts over alleged complicity in "acts of war."

Abbas's administration, long accused by Israel of stoking Palestinian militant attacks, worries about such legal exposure. It denies encouraging any such acts.

"We do not want to receive financial aid, including aid provided to the security forces, so as not to be subject to the anti-terrorism law approved by Congress," one Palestinian official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

"The US administration was surprised by the Palestinian decision, and said it wanted to find a solution in order to continue aid to the Palestinian security services."

Such a solution may include finding alternative funds within the CIA budget or amending US legislation, he said. Israeli officials declined to confirm or deny there were workaround talks.

But sought to offer reassurance that Israel could manage security in the West Bank, which it captured in the 1967 Middle East War, even without Palestinian help.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may also be disinclined to signal worries about the West Bank ahead of his bid to stay in office in an election in April as the Palestinians' goal of an independent state is rejected by many of his fellow Israeli rightists.

"Israel cannot save the failing leadership of the Palestinian Authority," Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely told Reshet Channel 13 TV when asked about the cut in US funding.

"The most we can do is say to them, 'since this is our land, if you cannot govern, then we can.'"

The Palestinian Authority is an interim self-government body set up following the 1993 Oslo peace accords. The peace process, aimed at finding a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has been stalled for several years.

The Palestinians have also been boycotting the US since it recognized disputed Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017.

The Trump administration has cut hundreds of millions of dollars to humanitarian organizations and UN agencies which aid the Palestinians as it seeks to pressure Abbas to come back to the negotiating table.



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US aid cuts hit Palestinians, further dimming hope for peace
Palestinians: US aid cut looks to pressure Jerusalem stance

[3 Iraqi refugees arrested in Germany over attack plot](#)

Wed, 2019-01-30 21:35

BERLIN: German authorities arrested three Iraqi refugees on Wednesday on allegations they were planning an extremist bombing attack, and searched properties in three states in connection with their investigation.

Federal prosecutors said Shahin F. and Hersh F., both 23, and Rauf S., 36, were taken into custody in an early morning raid by a police SWAT team in the area of Dithmarschen, near the border with Denmark.

The suspects, who had refugee status in Germany, had been under surveillance for some time by a task force of around 200 investigators, said Holger Muench, the head of Germany's federal police.

The case shows that the threat of radical terrorism is still present, Muench told reporters.

It was not immediately clear when the suspects came to Germany.

More than 1 million asylum-seekers entered Germany in 2015-16, most from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The involvement of several asylum-seekers in extremist attacks or plots has helped boost support for the anti-migrant Alternative for Germany party.

Searches were carried out at other residences in northern and southwestern Germany of people linked to the three main suspects but not currently to the bomb plot.

The two younger men are suspected of preparing a bomb attack and violating weapons laws, and the older one is alleged to have aided them. Their last names were not given in line with German privacy laws.

The men appear to have been in the early stages of planning, said Frauke Koehler, a spokeswoman for the Federal Prosecutors Office.

"We believe that Shahin F. and Hersh F. were firmly committed to carrying out an attack," she told reporters. "But ... according to our information the concrete target and timing of the attack weren't determined yet."

Prosecutors allege the two men decided in late 2018 to carry out an attack motivated by extremism in Germany. There are indications that they sympathized with Daesh, but Koehler said there was no evidence so far the men were members of, or directed by, the group.

In December, Shahin F. downloaded "various instructions" on how to build a bomb, and ordered a detonator from a contact person in Britain, prosecutors said. Its delivery, however, was stopped by British law enforcement agencies.

At the same time, the two carried out tests using around 250 grams of gunpowder extracted from New Year's fireworks, and asked Rauf S. to procure a firearm, prosecutors said.

He is alleged to have contacted Walid Khaled Y.Y., also an Iraqi, who offered them a Russian semi-automatic Makarov 9mm pistol, prosecutors said. But the seller wanted at least €1,200 (\$1,370) for the weapon, which was considered too expensive so it was not purchased.

Y.Y.'s home in the Schwerin area was searched as part of Wednesday's operation, and he is being investigated for alleged weapons and drug violations, prosecutors in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania told The Associated Press.

In preparation for the possibility of using a vehicle in the attack, Shahin F. started taking driving lessons, federal prosecutors said. All three appear before federal judges late on Wednesday to decide whether they should be kept in custody while the investigation continues.

Koehler said authorities received a tip about the alleged plot in late 2018 from Germany's domestic intelligence service, but did not say how the agency started tracking the suspects.

In the only mass casualty extremist attack in Germany, Tunisian asylum-seeker Anis Amri hijacked a truck in 2016 and drove it into a crowded Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people and wounding dozens. Daesh later claimed responsibility.

Since that attack, Muench said police had foiled seven planned attacks.



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[**Ethiopian Israelis rally in Tel Aviv**](#)

against police violence

Author:

AP

ID:

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Thu, 2019-01-31 (All day)

JERUSALEM: Thousands of Ethiopian-Israelis are protesting in Tel Aviv against alleged police brutality after an officer killed an Ethiopian man two weeks ago.

Demonstrators blocked a major highway in Tel Aviv on Wednesday and paraded through major avenues of the city protesting what they consider to be systemic police mistreatment of the minority group. They carried signs saying "police are killing Beita Yisrael," a Hebrew term for the Ethiopian Jewish community.

Earlier this month, a policeman shot dead 24-year-old Yehuda Biadga, a mentally distressed man wielding a knife, in the Tel Aviv suburb of Bat Yam. Israel's Justice Ministry is investigating the incident.

Biadga's family accused police of excessive force, and protest organizers called the incident "the straw that broke the camel's back" after years of perceived discrimination by Israeli authorities.

Israel's Ethiopian community now numbers around 140,000 people, including more than 50,000 born in the Jewish state.

Most of them are descendants of communities cut off from the Jewish world for centuries, and were belatedly recognized as Jews by Israeli religious authorities.

The community has consistently alleged institutionalized racism in recent years.



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