

Political tension escalates in Lebanon as insults and accusations fly

Author:

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BEIRUT: Tension is rising in Lebanon following disparaging comments made by former minister Wiam Wahhab about Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his late father, former Premier Rafik Hariri.

Wahhab, a Druze, is a member of the March 8 Alliance, which also includes Hezbollah and is aligned with the Syrian regime.

A video emerged a few days ago of a gathering at which Wahhab could be heard making personal insults against certain individuals. Although he did not specify whom he was targeting in the video, it is widely assumed that he was referring to the Hariris.

Wahhab also targeted the president of the Progressive Socialist Party, Walid Jumblatt.

Supporters of both sides have taken to the streets in recent days. Wahhab's supporters led motorcades to Moukhtara, the small town in which Jumblatt resides, on Thursday night. Jumblatt's response was that "Moukhtara is a red line, whatever the regional balance."

The Lebanese Army stated it had "seized 25 vehicles and arrested 57 of the people participating in the motorcades and confiscated their weapons and ammunition," adding that the detainees and the seized weapons and ammunition had been referred to the relevant judiciary, and an investigation had commenced.

Officials from the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) stated that Wahhab's rhetoric "is way out of line and resembles the campaigns that targeted former PM Rafik Hariri and (president of the PSP and leader of Lebanon's Druze Walid) Jumblatt prior to the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005."

Jumblatt suggested that Wahhab was "sending out orders" through his statements.

Allies of Hariri filed a lawsuit against Wahhab, accusing him of "stirring strife and risking civil peace," which was accepted on Friday by State Prosecutor Samir Hammoud.

Wahhab was referred to the Information Department of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) for investigation. Wahhab's lawyers refused to receive a summons for their client on Friday.

On Saturday afternoon, ISF officers went to Wahhab's residence in Jahlieh to bring him in for questioning. Wahhab was not there, but one of Wahhab's

aides, Mohammad Abou Diab, was shot in what the ISF claim was unilateral fire from “unidentified gunmen” after Wahhab’s supporters began firing “randomly.” The ISF claims its officers did not open fire. Abou Diab later died from his wounds.

In a televised statement, Wahhab accused Hariri, Hammoud and ISF director general Maj. Gen. Imad Osman, of “planning to assassinate him” and spoke of “an insult to his dignity.” He said: “Blood has been shed – who will bear responsibility for it?” Wahhab also warned Hariri that Lebanon is on the path to “war,” and said the prime minister should negotiate with Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah.

Jumblatt met with the prime minister on Saturday evening. Talking to the press afterwards, Jumblatt said that events had put “the dignity of Lebanese citizens” at risk.

“The state has done its duty and we support it. We cannot continue to tolerate this abnormal situation,” he said. “We stand by PM Saad Hariri and reject any attack against him or his position, just as we reject the use of insults, especially at this stage, which requires discretion and not offensive discourse.

“I hope the government can be formed without (violence) slipping into the streets,” he added, referring to Hariri’s struggle – ongoing since May 24 – to form Lebanon’s government.

A senior PSP official said Jumblatt was convinced Wahhab’s campaign against Hariri was part of a plot by the Syrian regime, adding that “an outside party” is hindering the formation of Lebanon’s government.

Moustafa Allouch, a member of the Future Movement’s political bureau, told Arab News: “The blood that was shed in Jahlieh is the responsibility of whoever caused it and used people as human shields.” He called on the ISF to conduct a criminal investigation to find out who had shot Abou Diab.

“What Wahhab has done is an offense that stirs sectarian strife, and what happened in Jahlieh is that Wahhab sold the life of his supporter to cover the charge against himself,” Allouch added. “Wahhab deserves to go to prison for a long time because he knew what the repercussions of his discourse would be.”

Another Future Movement member, Rola Tabash Jaroudi, told Arab News: “What happened reflects the low level of political discourse in Lebanon, and counts as an insult to the government, the prime minister and Lebanon as a whole,” adding that “the perpetrator must be held accountable.”

She also warned that the Lebanese people “can no longer tolerate this kind of pressure and provocation” and stressed the need for the government to be formed as quickly as possible, urging all parties to “withdraw unfair demands.”

UAE Ambassador to Lebanon Hamad Saeed Al-Shamsi, said, “We must stand by PM Saad Hariri, and all the people of Lebanon must understand that it is in

their country's interest to have the government formed, especially as (Lebanon hosts the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit in January). How can Lebanon participate effectively without a government?"



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A rearmed Hezbollah in Lebanon is top concern for Israel
A rearmed Hezbollah in Lebanon is top concern for Israel

[How Algeria's reforms are working](#)

Sun, 2018-12-02 22:37

ALGIERS: Despite being heavily dependent on its massive oil and gas reserves, Algeria's government seems to be handling rather well the broader economic effects of extremely volatile crude oil prices.

The slump in prices since the third quarter of 2014, from highs of over \$120 per barrel to around \$60 now, has seriously dented Algeria's economy over the

past four years.

A report last month by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said the country's struggle to plug its budget deficit in the face of lower oil revenues remains a significant challenge for the member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Over the past four years, the oil price slump has led to the evaporation of nearly half of Algeria's foreign currency reserves, a large fiscal and budgetary deficit, and higher inflation.

Yet the country seems to be far away from the catastrophic scenario that many had predicted when oil prices were flirting with the \$25 mark two years ago.

FASTFACT

2.38_m

The size, in square kilometers, of Algeria, the largest country in Africa and the Arab world.

10th

Algeria's rank on the list of world's proven reserves of natural gas.

60

The percentage of government revenues from hydrocarbons

Now, four years since the slump began, Algeria has not collapsed, defying predictions of a repeat of 1986, when it faced perhaps the worst economic crisis since its independence from France in 1962.

Buoyed by high oil prices in the early 1980s, Algeria was for many years a high-flying model for most of the world's developing nations.

It spent billions of dollars on rapid industrialization while heavily subsidizing food prices, winning a reputation as one of the Third World's few

welfare states.

But when prices crashed from \$40 per barrel to \$10, the economy collapsed as oil revenues accounted for nearly 97 percent of Algeria's exports at that time.

The crisis led to the country's entire foreign currency receipts being used to service the hefty external debt that it had stacked up, pushing the government toward an IMF bailout.

Severe austerity measures led to riots by thousands of young, unemployed Algerians angered by inflation rising to almost 100 percent and by a sharply contracting economy, with no jobs and a dramatic reduction in government subsidies that the country had become used to over the years. It took Algeria years to recover.

Eager to avoid making the same mistakes, in 2006 the current President Abdelaziz Bouteflika began using oil revenues to build a sovereign fund and dramatically cut foreign debt to below \$3 billion.

But the real safety valve for Algeria's economy was a fund that by June 2014, around when oil had peaked, was at almost \$47 billion, as well as a thick cushion of over \$200 billion in forex reserves.

Today these two weapons have come in very handy for the government to keep the economic impact of the oil price drop to a minimum.

Abdelmalek Sellal, who was prime minister from April 2014 to 2017, was stoic about the economy even as experts, foreign and domestic, expressed alarm that Algeria could be headed the way of Venezuela, another large oil producer whose economy lies in tatters today.

Algeria's government was cautious about bringing in dramatic changes to the welfare state economic model that the country had been following for decades.

Though Sellal recognized later that the situation was not easy to handle, he insisted that Algeria could handle it well, pretty much in line with Bouteflika's assessment that the country was resilient even though it needed to adopt a new economic paradigm.

The government clearly understands the need to diversify its economy and wean it off hydrocarbons, which still account for almost half the country's GDP, about 60 percent of government revenues and nearly 95 percent of exports.

Over the past four years, Algeria has been gently nudging its private sector to contribute more to the economy and reduce the over-reliance on hydrocarbons.

In 2016, Sellal launched an ambitious set of reforms aimed at diversifying away from oil and boosting sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, renewable energy, information and communications technology (ICT) and tourism.

He said his goal was that by 2019, the economy would have moved from “all oil” to “all industry.”

The government targeted 7 percent growth by 2019 and initiated reforms that continue to attract foreign investors in multiple sectors, leading to a modest jump of seven places in the global ranking of the World Bank’s “Ease of Doing Business” last year.

Algeria has also managed to attract several large European companies such as Renault and Volkswagen to set up plants, not only to cater to the domestic and African markets, but also to the more lucrative European markets.

To keep the current account deficit under check, the government has also curbed imports, which had climbed to almost \$60 billion in 2014 and have been declining since.



Algerian and Saudi flags are pictured ahead of the visit of Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Algiers. (Reuters)

Another measure was to push the economy from being largely informal to formal, by making checks mandatory for transactions higher than 1 million dinars (\$8,414.60).

The government also introduced an amnesty scheme for tax dodgers, which led to the recovery of nearly 40 billion dinars, according to some estimates.

For the first time since the crisis began four years ago, Algeria has accepted limited foreign debts to manage its economy, though only for select projects such as El-Hamdania port with Chinese financing of \$3.3 billion, and

a \$900 million contract from the African Development Bank to finance a plan to boost industrial and energy competitiveness, in which the government plans to inject \$78 billion in the next three years.

In September 2017, soon after taking charge as prime minister, Ahmed Ouyahia announced reforms that have earned the IMF's praise in its report, although it cautions that the fiscal and current account deficits remain large.

The IMF praised government efforts to diversify the economy, but called for sustained fiscal consolidation and wide-ranging structural reforms to facilitate a more diversified growth model and support private sector development.

To plug the deficit, the government has begun direct borrowing from the central bank instead of tapping international debt markets.

In his five-year plan, Ouyahia aims to balance the budget by 2022 and reverse a deficit that has cut foreign reserves by nearly half.

"If we turn to external debt, as the IMF suggests, we will need to borrow \$20 billion a year to repay the deficit, and within four years we will be unable to repay the debt," Ouyahia had said. "This is what made the government look at non-traditional financing."

But some experts warn that the government's measures are not adequate, and that if oil prices do not rebound soon, Algeria is likely to burn through its foreign exchange reserves by 2020.

Hence the urgent need for the government to continue with its reforms and diversify. The next few years could be decisive for Algeria's economy.



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[Pope lights candle to promote peace in Syria](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2018-12-02 (All day)

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis lit a candle decorated with the faces of Syrian children suffering from war from his balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square on Sunday, launching a global campaign calling for peace in the country "martyred by a war that has lasted for nearly eight years."

Francis told believers gathered in St. Peter's Square on the first Sunday of

the Advent season leading up to Christmas that “Advent is a time of hope.” Lifting the candle to the window, Francis prayed that “These flames, and many flames of hope, disperse the darkness of war.” “Let’s pray and help the Christians to remain in Syria and the Middle East as witnesses of mercy, of forgiveness and of reconciliation. May the flames of hope also reach those who are enduring conflict and war in these days in other parts of the world, near and far,” the pope said. He urged those who foment war and make arms for conflicts to have a change of heart. The lighting of the candle with the images of some 40 Syrian children, mostly from Aleppo, launched a global campaign for Syria, which the organization Aid to the Church in Need said involved over 50,000 children of different religions from war-torn Syrian cities.



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[Deadly fighting erupts again in Yemen's Hodeida](#)

Author:

Sat, 2018-12-01 19:31

DUBAI, ADEN: Renewed violence in Yemen's vital port city of Hodeida has left 10 fighters dead, despite a UN push for peace talks, an official and medical sources told AFP on Saturday.

An official with pro-government forces said fighting erupted in the east and south of the Red Sea city on Friday.

Intermittent clashes continued on Saturday, Hodeida residents told AFP by phone.

The violence follows a visit to the city last month by UN envoy Martin Griffiths to press for talks aimed at ending the war.

The Hodeida port is held by the Houthis and serves as the entry point for nearly all of the country's imports and humanitarian aid.

UN aid chief Mark Lowcock warned on Saturday that the country was "on the brink of a major catastrophe." His comments came after deadly clashes in the Red Sea port city of Hodeida, vital for the flow of humanitarian aid.

Yemen's internationally recognized government forces launched an assault to take Hodeida in June, but its forces had largely suspended the offensive amid intense diplomatic efforts.

Sporadic clashes have however continued since a fragile truce began on Nov. 13.

Medical sources on Saturday confirmed the bodies of eight militants had been transferred to hospitals. Two fighters with pro-government forces were also killed, according to a medical source at a hospital in an area held by the loyalists.

In a further sign of renewed tensions, Saudi Arabia said the Houthis launched a "military projectile" which hit a house in the Kingdom.

Two people were injured in the strike in Samtah governorate, Saudi state news agency SPA reported. It is the first confirmation by Riyadh of such a rocket attack since September.

The escalation comes just days ahead of proposed peace talks hosted by Sweden, which have been backed by both the coalition and militants.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, however, has played down the early December schedule and said he hoped talks would start "this year."

"But, as you know, there have been some setbacks," he said on Thursday. Riyadh has expressed concern over Houthi rocket attacks on Saudi territory, while the militants are seeking assurances their delegation will be able to safely leave and return to Yemen.

Previous talks planned for September in Geneva failed to get underway as the Houthi delegation never left the Yemeni capital Sanaa, arguing that the UN could not guarantee their safe return.

If conditions are met, all sides have in principle agreed to attend the talks in Sweden, including the government of Yemen's internationally recognized President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.



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Houthis to discuss 'handing over Hodeidah' to the UNUN ready to play role in Yemen's Hodeidah port

[1991 Gulf War looms large over Bush's Mideast legacy](#)

Author:

By HUSSAIN AL-QATARI and JON GAMBRELL | AP

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Sat, 2018-12-01 (All day)

AL-JAHRA, Kuwait: On the outskirts of Kuwait City, the love Kuwaitis have for former US President George H.W. Bush could be seen in 2016 on a billboard one Bedouin family put up to announce their son's wedding.

That son being Bush Al-Widhan, born in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War that saw US-led forces expel the occupying Iraqi troops of dictator Saddam Hussein.

"He was a real man, a lion," said Mubarak Al-Widhan, the father of the Kuwaiti Bush, of the American president. "He stood for our right for freedom, and he gave us back our country."

With Bush's death, his legacy across the Middle East takes root in that 100-hour ground war that routed Iraqi forces. That war gave birth to the network of military bases America now operates across the Arabian Gulf supporting troops in Afghanistan and forces fighting against Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

However, Bush ultimately would leave the Shiite and Kurdish insurgents he urged to rise up against Saddam in 1991 to face the dictator's wrath alone, leading to thousands of deaths. That mixed picture only extends to the presidency of his son, George W. Bush, who ordered the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq that overthrew Saddam, whom he once famously described as "the guy who tried to kill my dad one time."

"I feel tension in the stomach and in the neck ... but I also feel a certain calmness when we talk about these matters," the elder Bush once said about the 1991 Gulf War, according to biographer Jon Meacham. "I know I am doing the right thing."

Iraq invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990, angry that the tiny neighbor and the United Arab Emirates had ignored OPEC quotas, which Saddam claimed cost his nation \$14 billion. Saddam also accused Kuwait of stealing \$2.4 billion by pumping crude from a disputed oil field and demanded that Kuwait write off an estimated \$15 billion of debt that Iraq had accumulated during its 1980s war with Iran.

A World War II fighter pilot shot down fighting against the Japanese, Bush came to view Saddam as similar to Adolf Hitler, a madman who seized neighboring Kuwait and could plunge the world into conflict if he continued into Saudi Arabia. With Vietnam still a potent memory, Bush rallied together a coalition of nations to back the US as it deployed troops to the region and began bombing runs. He talked Israel out of retaliating for Iraqi Scud missiles attacks for fear of alienating Arab allies.

"This will not stand. This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait," Bush famously warned.

And it didn't.

On Feb. 24, 1991, US troops and their allies stormed into Kuwait. It ended 100 hours later. America suffered only 148 combat deaths during the whole campaign, while over 20,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed.

In the aftermath of the campaign, some called for Bush to continue into Iraq and topple Saddam. Bush in speeches encouraged Iraqis to rise up against the dictator, while privately hoping someone within his own military would depose him.

"To occupy Iraq would shatter our coalition, turning the whole Arab world against us, and make a broken tyrant into a latter-day Arab hero," Bush later said. "It would have taken us way beyond the imprimatur of international law, ... assigning young soldiers to a fruitless hunt for a securely entrenched dictator and condemning them to fight in what would be an unwinnable urban guerrilla war."

That hesitation allowed Saddam to regain the upper hand against insurgents and caused a refugee crisis in Iraq's northern Kurdish region. The dictator tauntingly installed a tile mosaic of a scowling likeness of the president at the door of Baghdad's Al-Rashid Hotel, which forced entering foreign dignitaries to often step on his face just above its "Bush is criminal" caption.

Even Iran, which hated Saddam for starting their 1980s war, remained suspicious of Bush despite his pledge of "good will begets good will." Iran leaned on Lebanon's Shiite militants to help win the release American hostages like Terry Anderson of The Associated Press, but relations went no further. One of Bush's last acts as president, pardoning former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and others for their role in the Iran-Contra scandal, an offshoot of that hostage crisis.

Still, Bush's decisions in the 1991 war and its aftermath echo even now. The Kurdish crisis gave birth to the US-imposed no-fly zone in northern Iraq that allowed the Kurds to flourish into the semi-autonomous region now demanding independence. Defense agreements with Gulf nations grew into a series of major military installations across the region.

His son would launch the 2003 invasion of Iraq after 9/11 and become so hated in the Arab world an Iraq journalist would even throw a shoe at him during a news conference. But the elder Bush remained beloved, perhaps nowhere more than Kuwait, where Americans even today can get hugged while walking down the street. A group of Kuwaiti officials including the country's National Assembly speaker met with the former president in October 2017 to wish him well.

The former president's Kuwaiti namesake Bush Al-Widhan ended up working in the country's National Guard. His name fascinated others.

"I went with my father to Cleveland, Ohio ... and the passport control clerk asked me about the name," Al-Widhan recounted. "I couldn't tell him the story. My English is bad. I said: 'George Bush, George Bush. Kuwait war.' Everyone thought it was a great name."



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Gulf states offer condolences over death of former US President George H.W. Bush
Former US President George H. W. Bush dies at age 94