

Lebanon expects deal with World Bank on food security

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BEIRUT: Lebanon is close to reaching an agreement with the World Bank in which the international agency would give the crisis-hit country a \$150 million loan for food security and to stabilize bread prices for the next six months, the economy minister said Tuesday.

Amin Salam said talks with the International Monetary Fund were progressing in a positive way.

"Work is ongoing and the train is moving. I am optimistic," Salam said in an interview with The Associated Press. He said the IMF is focusing on three sectors that are improving – electricity, transportation and high-speed Internet – because they can help reactivate the whole economy.

Salam said the government does not have immediate plans to lift bread subsidies, especially for flour used in making flat Arabic bread, the main staple in Lebanon.

Lebanon is in the grip of a devastating economic crisis that has been described as one of the worst in modern history. It imports most of its wheat and has faced shortages over the past weeks as the war in Ukraine leads to increases in prices of oil and food products around the world.

There have also been concerns that the government might lift wheat subsidies as foreign currency reserves drop to critical levels at the central bank. Any lifting of subsidies would sharply increase the price of bread affecting the poor in the Mediterranean nation where more than three quarters of its 6 million people, including 1 million Syrian refugees, now live in poverty.

"We are working with the World Bank to keep market stability for the next six months by getting \$150 million," Salam said. He added that the deal with the World Bank will stabilize the price of bread and wheat until a ration card policy is in force so that people in need can benefit.

Salam added that subsidies cannot continue forever, especially for flour that is used for making pastries and sweets. He said that such policies were implemented in Egypt and other countries where subsidies were lifted for wheat used in some products and left for the bread.

Salam said meetings were scheduled with officials from the World Bank on Wednesday, after which Lebanon will propose final recommendations to the bank's board. Salam said there is tentative approval from the Lebanese state and the World Bank, adding that it could be effective in three weeks to a month.

He said that the war in Ukraine is forcing Lebanon to find new sources of wheat that are far away and more expensive.

Earlier this month, Lebanon and the IMF reached a tentative agreement for comprehensive economic policies that could eventually pave the way for some relief for the country after Beirut implements wide-ranging reforms.

Salam, who is part of the Lebanese negotiating team with the IMF, said the government, parliament and all Lebanese officials are fully aware that if Lebanon does not fully abide by the IMF program, conditions "will become very difficult because there is no alternative plan."

He said the banking sector has to be restructured because without a banking sector it is impossible to move forward with economic growth. Salam added that during the talks with the IMF the Lebanese side worked to make "the banking sector carry some of the losses without destroying the banking sector."

He said whenever a final deal with the IMF is reached and there is political intention for success by authorities, Lebanon can start achieving tangible results in the next two to three years. And in five years "Lebanon can be in a very good place."

The Lebanese pound, which has lost more than 90 percent of its value since the economic meltdown began in October 2019, can become more stable, he said. The staff level agreement that Lebanon reached with the IMF on April 7 lists five "key pillars" that should be implemented, including restructuring the financial sector, implementing fiscal reforms, and the proposed restructuring of external public debt, anti-corruption and anti-money laundering efforts. Salam said the country's 14 largest banks will be held up as a standard to work on restructuring the sector since they control about 80 percent of the market. The smaller banks that have problems should be taken over by bigger lenders. He said most likely people with deposits of up to \$100,000 will eventually get their money back while those with much bigger balances will end up either getting treasury bills or become shareholders in banks or state institutions.

"The 100,000 figure will be a number that will be protected for everyone," he said.

Breaking with the position of the prime minister, he suggested that central bank Gov. Riad Salameh should go.

"His situation has become tenuous," Salam said, saying it will be difficult for future governments in Lebanon to work with him.

Salameh, who has been in the job since 1993, is facing investigations in Lebanon and several European countries into possible cases of money laundering and embezzlement. The governor is protected by several top officials, including the prime minister and parliament speaker.

"I'm all for change," Salam said. "No one is irreplaceable."



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[Protests held in Beirut against draft capital control law](#)

Tue, 2022-04-19 19:41

BEIRUT: Protests were held in Beirut on Tuesday against a draft capital control law, even as parliamentary committees discussed the proposed legislation.

Formal capital controls are an International Monetary Fund policy recommendation, and Lebanon hopes to secure an IMF aid package after the country's financial system imploded in 2019, paralyzing the banking system

and freezing depositors out of their US dollar accounts.

Depositors gathered in the vicinity of parliament to prevent MPs from attending the session. Members of the Free Professions Syndicates also held sit-ins at their headquarters in protest against the draft law.

They said it was unjust on depositors who they believed were being forced to bear the consequences of the country's economic crisis and corruption.

Nader Kaspar, head of the Beirut Bar Association, said: "One of the most immoral issues in Lebanon is depositors' money. It is a national, humanitarian, and social issue par excellence. We lost our entire life savings and now, after over two years, they want to talk about capital control.

"The banks did not shut down, and the owners still have their private jets and luxurious villas. Now they want to talk about distributing losses without any concrete plans?

"We will escalate our action. A strike is not enough. There is a constitution that must be respected and we will not accept laws that legitimize taking over people's money."

The Federation of Syndicates of Bank Employees in Lebanon said: "Touching depositors' money is forbidden. The federation will join in every action to confront those trying to take over people's money."

The Lebanese Press Editors Syndicate also objected to the attempt to pass a capital control bill, along with the continued restrictions on union deposits and funds, and banking restrictions.

Syndicate head Joseph Kossaifi said: "The unions have deposits in banks and there are mutual funds that deposit large sums in banks, which are subscriptions and donations to ensure people's pensions. Does this mean that the money of about a million people has evaporated?"

In a letter to Prime Minister Najib Mikati, the Association of Banks in Lebanon said: "The IMF's proposal to make banks bear the losses is unfair, just as the proposal to charge a large part of these losses to depositors means exempting the state and the Banque du Liban from debt and losses.

"If this were to happen, banks, shareholders, and depositors would file lawsuits against the state and BDL, which benefited from the funds of the banks and depositors and still refuse to find satisfactory solutions to solve the issue."

Mikati told an ABL delegation on Tuesday: "One of the government's priorities in the economic process is to preserve the rights of depositors. The recovery plan gives priority to preserving people's rights, reactivating the various productive sectors, and preserving the banking sector."

With the government insisting on its amendments to the draft law and demanding that parliament approve it quickly having signed a staff-level agreement with the IMF, the head of the Administration and Justice Committee, MP George Adwan, said after the parliamentary committee meetings: "The government did not present any recovery plan. We have removed some articles of the draft so no one can say that parliament does not want the Capital Control Law."

Adwan added that Mikati's claims about not wasting people's deposits were "mere words without any concrete action."

Meanwhile, pharmacies across Lebanon closed on Tuesday in protest against the country's security turmoil and the killing of a pharmacist at her workplace on Monday in the town of Mrouj in Mount Lebanon.

Leila Rizk was found dead in the pharmacy toilet on Monday evening. Rizk, a mother of three, had been working as a pharmacist for 20 years. Joe Salloum, head of the Pharmacists Syndicate, condemned the crime and demanded that the security forces protect pharmacies in light of the “ongoing security chaos.”

While the preliminary investigation did not reveal the reasons for the crime, information suggested that the crime was not about stealing money or drugs. President Michel Aoun called Salloum and assured him that instructions had been given to the security services to “pursue and arrest” the perpetrators. On Tuesday, Aoun met Lebanon’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia Fawzi Kabbara before he left for the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Lebanon, Walid Bukhari, returned to Beirut last week.

“The president’s directives have always been to ensure the best relations between Lebanon and the brotherly Arab countries in general, and the Gulf states in particular, especially Saudi Arabia,” Kabbara said.



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Turkey begins large-scale operation in northern Iraq against Kurdish militants

Author:

Mon, 2022-04-18 22:42

ANKARA: Turkey has begun the new week with the launch of a large-scale ground and aerial cross-border offensive against Kurdish militants in northern Iraq.

Alongside artillery, T129B helicopters, drones and F-16 fighters, Turkey's Special Forces and elite commando units were also deployed as part of the campaign that reportedly struck targets of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in northern Iraq's Metina, Zap and Avashin-Basyan regions.

The cross-border action, named Operation Claw Lock, came a day after Turkey's Minister of Interior Suleyman Soylu said: "We will save Syria and Iraq from the hands of the US and Europe, and bring peace there."

For Zaed Ismail, member of the scientific committee of the Istanbul-based Academy of International Relations, the operation is related to increased missile strikes against the Turkish base in Zilikan in Nineveh, and the PKK's expansion in northern Iraq deep into Sinjar. It is also linked to recent political contact between Ankara and Irbil.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently met with Masrour Barzani, the prime minister of Iraq's Kurdistan regional government in Irbil.

Experts have noted that Sinjar is turning into an alternative headquarters for the PKK.

"The military operations began about a week after the visit of Barzani to Ankara and it clearly indicated the existence of security coordination between Irbil and Ankara to launch the military operation," Ismail said.

Ismail said the PKK "began posing an increased existential threat to the political stability of the entire geography of northern Iraq, with repeated missile attacks on Irbil Airport."

The offensive was carried out in coordination with Turkey's "friends and allies," the Defense Ministry stated.

But, for Ismail, it is difficult to resolve the battle through airstrikes, unless the international conditions are created for a broad ground operation.

The operation, which began at midnight, was launched as Russia showed no letup in its invasion of Ukraine, while Turkey's mediation role was welcomed

by Western partners.

Both the US and the EU have already designated the PKK as a terror group.

Tuna Aygun, an Iraq expert at Ankara-based think tank ORSAM, said the latest operation took place as part of a previous offensive, but this time Turkey was targeting runaway elements of the PKK from the eastern and western parts of the region.

"The operation area (had been) a shelter for the PKK militants for some time. Especially since 2017, (the) PKK mostly concentrated its logistical and military strength in Iraq to hit targets in Turkey," he told Arab News.

"By establishing temporary military bases, Turkey aims at establishing its control on the transit routes of the militants according to the geographical characteristics of the territory," said Aygun.

However, it is still unclear how long the military operation will endure and whether the movements of the PKK militants will be restricted.

"It will not be a one-day operation. But with the increased use of armed drones during such offensives, these moves do not depend any longer on the clim(atic) conditions," Aygun said. He added that Turkey's latest operation has the support of Baghdad and Irbil because it is being seen as a way to stabilize a region where thousands of civilians were displaced in recent years due to the PKK's presence.

Ahead of the upcoming elections next year, this operation is also likely to have domestic repercussions in Turkish politics in the eyes of nationalist voters, and used as a trump card against the opposition pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party.

Yerevan Saeed, research associate at the Arab Gulf Institute in Washington, said Turkey has been seeking to build a security zone inside the Kurdistan region for a number of years.

"The military operation appears to be deeper and more intense this year," he told Arab News.

Its objectives are likely to include seizing control of strategic areas of Afashin, Matin, Khukuk and Zab. "(The) Turkish military has failed to control them in the past," he added.

"If successful, Ankara will be able to separate Qandil mountains where PKK bases are located from (the) Rojava and Sinjar areas, (restricting the) PKK's movements."

Ali Semin, an expert on Iraqi politics from Nisantasi University in Istanbul, said the offensive is part of a series of operations since 2019 to create a buffer zone between its border with Northern Iraq and PKK-dominated areas.

"Ankara seems to seize the best political opportunity to expand its operation," he told Arab News.

"The leadership in Baghdad and Irbil consider the latest activities of the PKK as an intervention (to) their political presence," said Semin.

"Unlike the past operations of Turkey that were criticized by Iraqi authorities as a violation of their territorial sovereignty, Turkey's current operation mostly (have) their backing," said the expert.

Over the last three decades, Semin said, about 250 villages had been evacuated in northern Iraq. This was also where fighting in the past few years has intensified between Peshmerga forces loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the PKK.

According to Noah Ringler, an expert from Georgetown University, the offensive has received military support from the Turkish-aligned KDP Peshmerga and comes amid ongoing challenges with government formations in Baghdad, where Turkish officials now believe they have broad support from political parties for the operation.

"The goals of the operation likely include new Turkish operations posts closer to the PKK's strategic strongholds near Qandil mountains, which holds political significance in Turkey, as well as disruption of PKK operations and influence in the region, and the strengthening of Kurdish and Iraqi political actors aligned with Turkey," he told Arab News.

Experts also note that the success of such operations will also influence local dynamics in Syria.

"(The) Kurdish People's Protection Units are mostly supported logistically and militarily by the PKK bases in Sinjar," Semin said.

Baghdad and Irbil reached a security and administrative agreement on Sinjar on Oct. 9, 2020.

However, the agreement that called for the removal of PKK forces in the region has not been implemented yet.

"Turkey, together with Baghdad and Irbil, can be a facilitator to execute this agreement and turn the region into a secure zone where the Iraqi authorities regain control," Semin said.



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Turkey says its warplanes hit Kurdish militant targets in northern Iraq
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[Anger in Beirut's southern suburbs over increased thefts and shootings](#)

Author:

Mon, 2022-04-18 22:35

BEIRUT: The lack of security in Beirut's southern suburbs has led to an increasing number of complaints and outcries from people, with armed robberies taking place in broad daylight also on the rise.

A security source linked "the poor security conditions in Beirut's southern suburbs to the deepening of the economic crisis."

However, the source told Arab News that the main reason for these crimes was the loss of the state's reputation.

A security source said there were armed robberies of motorcycles every day

after robbers previously used to steal them at night.

Saleh said he was going to work in Haret Hreik and had parked his motorcycle on the side of the road due to heavy traffic. Someone pointed a knife at him, forcing him to leave his vehicle, before fleeing the area.

Thieves and gunmen have become bolder in carrying out their armed operations without any concern for security or party officials in Beirut's southern suburbs, which are a Hezbollah stronghold and centers for the Amal Movement.

The suburbs have had security checkpoints since the 2014 attacks by Daesh suicide bombers.

People hear armed clashes every night without knowing the reasons or the identity of the shooters. They only know what happens through unsubstantiated information circulating on social media.

Reports from the Internal Security Forces showed that, after each raid by thieves or gunmen in these suburbs, most perpetrators were "wanted with some of them committing their crime because of dealing or using drugs."

According to unofficial figures, the region is home to more than a million Lebanese citizens. Some migrated from the countryside to the capital in the second half of the 20th century.

Some are residents of towns included in Beirut's southern suburbs, while others moved there due to apartments having cheaper rents than in the capital.

Hayy Al-Sullom is one of the poorest neighborhoods and is home to the marginalized and wanted individuals who use political parties for protection.

But having influence also extends to the owners of electric generators, internet providers, and owners of cable television. In March, armed clashes between two groups took place in Bi'r al-Abed due to one encroaching on the other's areas of influence.

Two weeks earlier, there were clashes in Laylaki at night due to fights between electric generator owners over clients. A month earlier, there were armed clashes between internet providers in Choueifat.

In the past few days, the drawing and firing of weapons have become easier. A fight broke out between two groups during a suhoor meal and shisha.

Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, concerned by public complaints ahead of upcoming elections, issued a joint statement recently about the increase of thefts, armed robberies, and breaches of security in different areas of Beirut's southern suburbs to the "extent of spiraling out of control and posing a threat to life and safety."

They asked representatives from security and military agencies to "strictly handle all people breaching security," stressing that they would not defend anyone implicated.

The security source stressed: "Official security agencies are present in the southern suburbs, pursuing the wanted people and, in some cases, Hezbollah facilitates our mission and might lead us to the hiding place of a wanted person. While in some others, we do not inform Hezbollah that we will raid a specific place in the southern suburbs."

Political agreements have given Hezbollah's security committees the last word in the southern suburbs in all security-related matters.

On whether this meant that Hezbollah was protecting wanted people when it knew their hiding places, the source said: "Those thugs have reached a level of carelessness. They no longer fear Hezbollah."

"Those thugs do not read or respond to statements," the source added, when asked about the night-time shootings and daytime thefts despite Hezbollah and the Amal Movement's decision to stop covering for anyone involved.

Zeinab, who lives in Al-Mureijah near Hayy Al-Sullom, said she feared her children would be unsafe if they wanted to leave the house at night and come back late.

She said machine guns – and even rockets – were used during clashes that erupted over trivial matters sometimes.

Two weeks ago, two armed robberies took place in the afternoon. The first was in a store for money transfers. Two people on a motorcycle broke into the shop and stole \$8,000 from a client before fleeing. It was revealed they had been previously watching him.

Another gunman entered a smartphone store during the day and stole a client's purse, then shot the shop's owner for trying to stop him, injuring his hand.



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Lebanon risks missing IMF preconditions for EFF owing to weak governance:
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[Jordan launches diplomatic drive to end Al-Aqsa Ramadan tensions](#)

Mon, 2022-04-18 20:10

RAMALLAH: King Abdullah II of Jordan has intensified efforts to end Israeli measures against Palestinian worshipers at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem during Ramadan.

On Monday, he contacted Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Egyptian President Abdul-Fattah El-Sisi, European Council President Charles Michel, Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

During the talks, he stressed the need for Israel to end all actions in the mosque.

The king's efforts came amid growing concerns that provocative behavior by Israel around the Al-Aqsa Mosque could undermine the chances of achieving peace.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said that Jordan had summoned the Israeli ambassador to inform him of his Amman's condemnation of Israeli measures, and on Monday said it summoned the Israeli charge d'affaires.

"We summoned the Israeli ambassador, and we will summon the charge d'affaires to inform him of our strict and clear message in which we condemn the Israeli actions," said the minister.

He added that Jordan would host a meeting of the Arab League committee next Thursday to confront "illegal Israeli measures" in Jerusalem's holy sites.

Al-Safadi warned that if Israel did not stop "these illegal measures and their violations," it would bear responsibility for increasing tensions.

Foreign ministry spokesperson Haitham Abul Ful said the Israeli charge d'affaires was handed a letter, carrying Jordan's rejection of the "illegal and provocative" measures in Jerusalem and its assaults against worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque – Islam's third holiest shrine.

Abul Ful said that Jordan also demanded Israel respect the freedom of worship and "immediately" cease its assaults and attempts to change the historical and legal status quo at the Al-Aqsa Mosque / Al-Haram Al-Sharif.

"The Israeli actions are a serious escalation and a violation of the international law and Israel's obligations as the occupying power," the spokesperson said.

The decision to summon the Israeli ambassador comes as national groups in Jordan continue their solidarity with worshippers in Al-Aqsa and their massive demonstrations until the end of Ramadan.

Israel reacted with concern to Jordan summoning its ambassador in Amman on Monday.

Palestinians make up a large percentage of Jordan's population. Tens of thousands live in refugees camps on the outskirts of Amman and their protests in solidarity with Al-Aqsa may pose a challenge to security and stability.

Although Egypt and Qatar had mediated between Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Israel to prevent further security escalations, Palestinians still believe that only Jordanian pressure can stop further Israeli restrictions in Al-Aqsa during Ramadan.

Israel had asked King Abdullah to mediate with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas before Ramadan so that there would be no tension in Jerusalem during the holy month.

King Abdullah visited Ramallah on March 28 to meet Abbas. They agreed to work to calm the situation on the eve of the start of Ramadan.

Before the meeting, he received Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid in Amman and in the same week Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz and the Israeli President Isaac Herzog in an attempt to prevent the deterioration of the security situation during the holy month.

Sheikh Azzam Al-Khatib, director of the Islamic Awqaf in Jerusalem, a department affiliated with the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in Amman that employs 800 people who guard Al-Aqsa, said in an interview with Arab News that the Israeli policy toward Al-Aqsa is "very dangerous."

He added: "Any Israeli violation will be met with a protest and a strong Jordanian stance from King Abdullah II, because the religious and legal position is that Al-Aqsa Mosque does not accept division or partnership and is the property of Muslims, and any prejudice to that means a violation of the principles on which King Abdullah II was brought up, on the importance of preserving Islamic and Christian sanctities in Jerusalem," he told Arab News.

Palestinians are concerned that Israeli authorities will divide Al-Aqsa Mosque between Muslims and Jews, as they did several years ago in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron.

Israel meanwhile closed the Ibrahimi Mosque on Monday and Tuesday in front of Muslim worshipers, in order to enable Jewish worshipers to perform Passover prayers.

Palestinians angry over the Israeli police actions last Friday appealed to Jordan to intervene and questioned King Abdullah's position on protecting Al-Aqsa.

A number of them wrote posts on social media. One said: "Al-Aqsa Mosque does not need to be carpeted, but rather needs the protection of those who lead it to pray in Ramadan."

The Hashemites have been the guardians of Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem for 100 years. Even after the 1967 war, during which Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the Jordanian guardianship of Al-Aqsa remained in place. The position was consolidated during the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty – better known as Wadi Araba – that was signed between the late King Hussein bin Talal and the then Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.

"It is natural to summon the Israeli ambassador in Amman and protest to him, and it is important for the Israeli people to know that there are extremist right-wing Jewish parties that are working to offend them by leading a religious war against Muslims in this country," said Al-Khattib.

He added: "Any violation of the sanctity of Al-Aqsa Mosque concerns the whole world, especially King Abdullah."

The said added: "We want peace to prevail in this region. It does not harm

the sanctities from any side, and that the specter of religious war is kept away from it.”

The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly criticized its Israeli counterpart and refuted Israel’s claim to support freedom of worship.

It said in statement that the Israeli Foreign Ministry “continues to manufacture lies and misinformation about the occupation state’s keenness on freedom of worship in occupied Jerusalem.”

It also noted that “hundreds of videos” had documented cases of worshipers being forced to leave the Al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as cases of “repression and abuse.”



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Palestinians on edge as Israeli radicals threaten to storm Al-Aqsa