

Skiing in Lebanon too steep for most with currency in freefall

Author:

Sun, 2022-02-20 23:45

BEIRUT: Skiing in Lebanon has long been a luxury for the well-off, but the eastern Mediterranean country's financial meltdown has thrown most people into poverty and made taking to the slopes even more exclusive.

The Lebanese pound has lost more than 90 percent of its value since 2019.

"Skiing is a hobby for the dollar class, not for us," said Mohammad Atwi on a recent visit to the mountains. "We came here to sit and have shisha. The most we spend is 200,000 pounds (\$10)."

Prices for ski passes at the Mzaar ski resort, which boasts panoramic views over the Mediterranean, are listed in dollars in a country where the vast majority earn in pounds.

An all-day pass runs at \$35 on weekdays and \$50 at weekends, according to a website listing prices. That equates to between 700,000 and a million pounds – more than the current monthly minimum wage and a sizeable chunk of an average salary.

Lebanon is mired in its worst crisis since the 1975-90 civil war, with banks imposing tight restrictions on how much cash savers can withdraw, forcing even those with money to think more carefully before they spend.

Still, the slopes are packed at weekends with those who can afford it.

"Skiing has become expensive, especially if you have many kids, but at the end we want to live," said Delphine Markarian as she walked through the snow with skis strapped to her back.

"When the weather is nice like this, you ski with your children, they enjoy it and that is what we look for – an experience to be happy with our children. That's the most important thing."



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Lebanon's Arab Basketball Championship stars receive heroes welcome from fans in Beirut
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[Sudan's fate in the balance as democratic transition hits a bump](#)

Sun, 2022-02-20 22:49

DUBAI: Photographer and activist Lana Haroun, 34, was in Khartoum in 2019, at the epicenter of the revolution in Sudan. She helped to document the rage and optimism of the movement that brought an end to the 30-year rule of dictator Omar Bashir in April that year.

Like thousands of Sudanese people who had long dreamed of political change, Haroun was hopeful as the country subsequently began a difficult transition to democratic civilian rule. Those hopes soon turned to despair.

Abdalla Hamdok, a respected UN diplomat who was appointed prime minister in August 2019, offered a vision of peace and prosperity. But with the economy in crisis, Sudan soon began to run short of food, fuel and medicine.



Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. (AFP file photo)

He acknowledged the hardship arising from the austerity measures he had adopted, but expressed hope that their positive impact would be felt very soon.

However, as daily street protests became increasingly violent, Haroun decided it was time to leave the country. In November 2020, she and her family packed up and moved to Dubai, where she now works for a petroleum company.

“The economic situation was very bad in Sudan and there are many things I want to do in my life,” she told Arab News. “I had to leave.”

Sudan’s democratic transition stalled in October 2021 when military chief Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan staged a coup, toppling the civilian government and removing Hamdok from office.

In response to the international condemnation that followed, the military proposed a power-sharing deal and reinstated Hamdok as prime minister in November. The agreement proved unpopular with pro-democracy groups, however, leading Hamdok to resign on Jan. 2.

“No one knows what will happen now,” Haroun said. “Many people are leaving Sudan because they are afraid to lose their lives, not just because there is no food or money but because they are afraid of being killed.

“Sudan is now worse than in Bashir’s time. We don’t have what we need to live normal lives and more people are being killed than ever before.”

In a televised address following his resignation, Hamdok said the country was at a “dangerous turning point that threatens its whole survival.” This was no exaggeration; with rising inflation, shortages of basic goods, and deadly

unrest in Khartoum, the outlook has seldom been gloomier.

“Sudan has unfortunately fallen from the grace of being a rare positive story in the Horn of Africa into the hands of another military regime,” Mohamed Osman, a Sudanese former journalist and an independent specialist on the region, told Arab News.

“This is history repeating itself for the third time since the country’s independence. But this time it’s a poignant combination of tragedy and farce.”

One major challenge for international observers is the lack of reliable information from inside Sudan, in large part because of frequent internet blackouts.

FASTFACTS

A number of former govt. officials and activists have been detained by Sudan’s new military rulers.

Among those targeted are members of The Committee to Dismantle the Regime of June 30, 1989.

As a result, responsibility for the killings of protesters – whether the result of factional infighting, criminality or deliberate targeting by the feared Rapid Support Forces – is hard to ascertain.

“No one knows who is doing the killing in the streets,” said Haroun, who tries to follow the events as best she can from her self-imposed exile in Dubai.

“It’s crazy. But for sure this killing is from the military themselves because they are running the show in Sudan now.”

Since October, the value of the Sudanese pound has depreciated alarmingly, compounding inflationary pressure. Sudan’s removal from the US State Sponsors of Terrorism list in 2020 was expected to stimulate financial flows that could benefit growth. By all accounts, the advantage has been squandered.

“The economy was already struggling to recover,” said Osman. “Now this coup has worsened its situation, making life in Khartoum very hard. Many people are running out of money and trying to leave the country.”

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, about 14.3 million people in Sudan, almost one in three of the population, will need humanitarian assistance this year – about 0.8 million more than last year.

Further complicating matters, disputes over land, livestock, access to water and grazing since October 2021 have triggered a spike in tribal clashes,

lootings and rape in the vast, arid Darfur region.

The World Food Programme has suspended operations following looting at its warehouses in North Darfur state, an act which “robbed nearly two million people of the food and nutrition support they so desperately need,” the agency said.

Though the main Darfur conflict has subsided, the parts of Darfur bordering Chad are awash with guns and home to most of Sudan’s three million displaced people.

“The situation in the short-to-medium term is very bleak,” Rashid Abdi, a Horn of Africa analyst at Nairobi-based think tank Sahan Research, told Arab News. “The army, digging in, has refused all ideas about a resolution. They want a solution on their own terms.

“I think they understand that they are not going to continue the strategy of Bashir and hope that a military government will be acceptable in the long term.”

But Abdi believes the public in Sudan will not accept this status quo, so army chiefs probably want to install a civilian administration that is weak, that they can control. If that is the military’s game plan, he said, it is unlikely to fly with the Sudanese public.

“Their hope was that Hamdok would be the person to steer the country to better days,” he said. “I think he became trapped by the military and could not maneuver and did the decent thing, which was to resign.”

On Jan. 26, the splits in Sudanese society appeared to widen further when thousands of pro-military protesters gathered outside the Khartoum office of the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan demanding an end to “foreign interference” and for the UN’s special representative for Sudan, Volker Perthes, to “go back home.”

Perthes, who was appointed head of UNITAMS in January 2021, has been trying to bring Sudanese stakeholders to the negotiating table to discuss a peaceful political solution and get the democratic transition back on track.

He has said that the UN itself “is not coming up with any project, draft or vision for a solution.” But Sudan’s military-led government has rejected his efforts, arguing that he should be working as a “facilitator and not a mediator.”

Meanwhile, Sudan’s overwhelmingly young anti-coup protesters have continued to march in the streets of Khartoum, where they routinely clash with security forces amid a ferocious crackdown on dissent. Since the coup, at least 79 people have been killed and hundreds more injured.

The daunting task of restoring the democratic transition has fallen on a population fed up with unending internal conflict, displacement and impoverishment.

"The protests are not just in Khartoum but also in Darfur and other parts of the country," Erika Tovar Gonzalez, communication and prevention coordinator at the International Committee of the Red Cross, told Arab News from the Sudanese capital.

"There's a humanitarian crisis, there's armed and criminal violence and tribal clashes that continue to displace thousands of people. The youth are depressed. Some even have suicidal thoughts. They feel they have no future."

The result is two seemingly irreconcilable visions, with the nation's fate hanging in the balance.

"Even the Sudanese political parties that would have been willing to give Al-Burhan the benefit of the doubt for pragmatic reasons are more careful now," said Gonzalez.

"Because once they get into bed with the military, they damage their credibility and won't get any support from the public. Al-Burhan has become more toxic as an ally."

Analysts therefore believe it is unlikely that Al-Burhan and the military will be able to maintain their grip on power.

"I don't think the military (strategy) has clarity," said Abdi. "One speculation is that the military is aware that it is not going to be accepted but what they are trying to do is to buy more time to make good their promise of exit."

Osman thinks the military badly miscalculated how events would play out after it launched last October's coup.

"Who will give them money now?" he asked. "Western assistance is suspended. Gulf countries won't give them enough cash. You cannot stabilize a regime without money. The military shot itself in the foot. The economic situation can only get worse as they move forward with this coup."

Osman added: "There can be no hope for a political compromise unless the military stops its deadly crackdown on protests first."





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Sudanese man killed in crackdown on anti-coup protests as UN expert arrives
Over 100 Sudanese detainees, including high-profile politicians, start hunger strike

[Israel to admit unjabbed tourists as COVID-19 cases fall](#)

Author:
Sun, 2022-02-20 23:19

JERUSALEM: Israel will allow unvaccinated tourists entry for the first time since the pandemic began as infections and deaths caused by the coronavirus decline, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett announced on Sunday.

“We are seeing a consistent decline in morbidity data,” Bennett said.

Israel shut its borders to travelers in early 2020 as the coronavirus spread worldwide.

“It is time to gradually open what we were the first in the world to close,” the prime minister said.

The Jewish state was also an early trailblazer of a national vaccine rollout and among the first countries to demand a vaccination certificate, which it called the green pass, to enter a range of facilities.

Under new rules taking effect on March 1, tourists will need to take a PCR test before boarding a flight to Israel and a second one upon landing.

Israeli citizens will only be required to take the test upon arrival.

On Thursday, Bennett cited a decline in infections when he announced an end to the green pass. More than 10,000 new cases of Covid-19 were reported Sunday in Israel, down from a high of more than 85,000 daily cases in late January.

A total of 9,841 people have died from the illness, including seven reported Saturday.

An attempt to open the borders to vaccinated visitors last November foundered after just a few weeks because of the fast-spreading omicron coronavirus variant.



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Israeli PM: Iran nuke deal will bring 'more violent' Mideast
Israel to scrap COVID passport system as omicron wanes

[Islamists receive big blow in Jordan's Engineers Association elections](#)

Sun, 2022-02-20 20:14

AMMAN: Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood movement has received a huge setback after losing control over the Engineers Association in recent elections.

By losing in places such as Zarqa and Irbid on Friday, the Islamists have lost their last stronghold in Jordan.

Numo – which won Friday's governorate elections – represents a wide range of engineers who are "unhappy with the way the union worked after 25 years of Islamist influence," said long-time union activist Mutaz Shawareb.

Shawareb, a civil engineer, is a nominee on the winning Numo list.

"For years, we have been trying to change the election process to allow for proportional representation and to lower the age of nominees. Despite earlier agreements, the Islamists have rejected the reforms for as long as they have been in power."

Making accusations of electoral meddling and forgery, the Islamists announced on Saturday that they were withdrawing from elections for the engineering sectors, the office of the head of the union, and the secretariat of the union.

A leader from the Islamist Unified List claimed that Friday's elections included "the usurping of the will of the engineers as a result of external interventions, bad management, and lack of guarantees for the freedom, integrity, and secrecy of the polls."

Engineer Badi Rafia of the Unified List told Arab News that the withdrawal from any further participation was done as a protest against "blatant, rude and direct interventions."

Rafia, also a prominent leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, added: "What happened is a violation of the basic rights of freedom and secrecy of the elections.

"Therefore, we have decided to stay away from this farce comedy so as to keep our professional union independent and to protect the integrity of Jordanian engineers."

Rafia said that "unprecedented interference by all the parties in the elections led to the forgery of the will of the engineers and their free voices."

Veteran unionist Shawareb, however, scoffed at the accusations by the losing Islamists.

"Their reaction to the loss was withdrawal from the elections, and this is the kind of excuse that losers make when they are unable to win at the ballot box."

Zaid O. Nabulsi, a strong critic of Islamists in Jordan, told Arab News that their excuse for the loss was "laughable."

Nabulsi said: "They are objecting to the fact that their opponents lobbied and united against them."

He added: "Well, Islamists have been lobbying since the 1970s against us in mosques, schools, universities, and even on street corners.

"Now that they lost, they are playing the victim role, claiming – without proof – that others have forged the results."

Nabulsi said that the "Muslim Brotherhood are fighting for survival after they were exposed."

“Ironically, the only place in the region that they have found a foothold is inside the Israeli Knesset, where they have allied with the nastiest right-wing Zionist in the history of the entity,” Nabulsi said.

On Jan. 26, the Islamic Action Front, which is considered the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, announced withdrawal from participation in the local council elections planned for March 22.

Murad Adaileh, director-general of the Islamic Action Front, told Arab News that authorities had failed to take advantage of the “positive results of the recent royal commission for the modernization of political processes.”

A number of prominent Islamists were nominated to the commission, including the head of the fifth Shoura Council Hamzeh Mansour, the former leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Abdel Rahim Okor, and former MPs from the Islamic Action Front Dima Tahboub and Ibrahim Al-Izz.

“Although we agreed to some of the results of the royal commission and rejected others, there was premeditation in passing constitutional changes,” Adaileh said. “These changes aimed to transform the country into an absolute monarchy while weakening the authority of the government and instituting policies based on limited freedom, as has been demonstrated in action against a member of the Islamic Action Front in parliament and the arrest of protestors against normalization with the Zionist enemy.”

The Islamists were also sharply criticized by Omar Kullab in an op-ed on Sunday for the Jordanian daily Al-Rai: “What has led to the losses in the Engineers Association elections is a result of their attitude of denial – a refusal to admit the problems that they are facing.”



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Egypt, France, Germany and Jordan renew support for 2-state solution
Jordan's lower house passes 2022 budget bill after seven days of deliberations

[Israeli PM: Iran nuke deal will bring 'more violent' Mideast](#)

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Sun, 2022-02-20 12:32

JERUSALEM: Israel's prime minister on Sunday criticized an emerging deal over Iran's nuclear program, saying it would be weaker than a previous agreement and would create a "more violent, more volatile Middle East."

World powers have been negotiating in Vienna in a bid to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, which was left in tatters after the Trump administration, goaded by Israel, withdrew.

The original deal granted Iran relief from crippling economic sanctions in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. Israel vehemently opposed that accord and has urged negotiators to take a hard line against Iran in the current round of talks.

In a speech to Jewish American leaders Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned that Iran has used the interim period to march ahead with its enrichment of uranium to levels approaching weapons grade.

He also noted the 10-year limits on enrichment and other key aspects of Iran's nuclear program in the original deal are set to be lifted in 2025 – just two and a half years from now.

That “leaves Iran with a fast track to military-grade enrichment,” Bennett told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. In the meantime, he said that lifting sanctions right away will deliver billions of dollars to Iran to spend on hostile proxy groups along Israel's borders.

“For Israel and all the stability-seeking forces in the Middle East – the emerging deal as it seems is highly likely to create a more violent, more volatile Middle East,” he said.

Opinion

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

He repeated his pledge that Israel will not allow Iran to become a threshold state and said Israel would not be bound by a new deal. “We have a clear and un-negotiable red line: Israel will always maintain its freedom of action to defend itself,” he said.

Bennett delivered a similar message earlier in the day during the weekly meeting of his Cabinet.

Israel considers Iran to be its greatest enemy. It strongly opposed the 2015 deal and has watched with trepidation as the current talks have carried on. It says it wants an improved deal that places tighter restrictions on Iran's nuclear program and addresses Iran's long-range missile program and its support for hostile proxies along Israel's borders, like the Lebanese militant Hezbollah.

Israel also insisted that the negotiations must be accompanied by a “credible” military threat to ensure that Iran does not delay indefinitely. Under the strong encouragement of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Donald Trump withdrew from the original deal in 2018, causing it to unravel. Since then, Iran has stepped up its nuclear activities – amassing a stockpile of highly enriched uranium that goes well beyond the bounds of the accord.

Despite Israel's support for Trump's withdrawal, prominent voices in the country have said in retrospect that the move was a blunder.

In Iran, meanwhile, the Iranian parliament's news agency, ICANA, reported

that 250 lawmakers in a statement urged President Ebrahim Raisi and his negotiating team to obtain guarantees from the US and the three other European countries that they won't withdraw from the deal after it is renegotiated.

Iran's hard-line dominated parliament has the power to approve or reject any proposed agreement between Iran and the other parties in Vienna.

The United States has participated in the current talks indirectly because of its withdrawal from the original deal. President Joe Biden has signaled that he wants to rejoin the deal.

Under Trump, the US re-imposed heavy sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Tehran has responded by increasing the purity and amounts of uranium it enriches and stockpiles, in breach of the accord – formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

Iran long has insisted its nuclear program is peaceful. But the country's steps away from its obligations under the accord have alarmed its archenemy Israel and world powers.

Tehran has started enriching uranium up to 60 percent purity – a short technical step from the 90 percent needed to make an atomic bomb, and spinning far more advanced centrifuges than those permitted under the deal. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told participants at the annual Munich Security Conference on Saturday that the talks have come a long way over the past 10 months and "all elements for a conclusion of the negotiations are on the table." But he also criticized Iran for stepping up its enrichment and restricting inspections by monitors from the UN nuclear agency.

Iran's foreign minister said that it's up to Western countries to show flexibility and "the ball is now in their court."



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Israel shoots down Hezbollah drone, fails to intercept another